

BUILDING LEADERSHIP CAPACITY IN GRADE-LEVEL CHAIRS

by

MERCEDES ELYSE DURDEN

(Under the Direction of Jami Berry)

ABSTRACT

High expectations of schools to produce positive results at the end of each school year continue evolving and often include rigorous accountability measures; however, the centuries-old structure of public education remains. Teacher and leader turnover continues rising while fewer professionals enter the field prepared to teach. School leaders are responsible for cultivating innovative and engaging classrooms while ensuring seamless operations and safety. Administrators must rely on teacher leaders to carry the vision and foster an impactful school setting every student deserves; therefore, an investment in grade-level or department chairs must occur. The purpose of this study was to identify how to increase the leadership capacity of teacher leaders, known as grade-level chairs, in an elementary setting. The following thematic findings emerged from the study: 1) Cultivate, 2) Facilitate, 3) Collaborate, 4) Empower, 5) Clarify, and 6) Enhance. The findings explain that identifying perceptions of the responsibilities of grade-level chairs reveals the impact of role ambiguity, the individual's need to develop leadership qualities within teacher leaders, and how administrators provide the environment for professional growth and vulnerability.

INDEX WORDS: teacher leadership, leadership capacity, collaboration, grade-level chair,
department chair, teacher leader, professional learning, professional
development, school improvement

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DEDICATION

To my husband, Alex, thank you for your continuous support and patience as I move from one dream to the next. You have always been by my side and cheering me on. You always know when I need a challenge and never stop me from trying. Thank you for the time and space to pursue this dream I never thought I would achieve. Somehow, you always knew, and I am so blessed for your encouragement. I love you!

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The magnifying glass focuses on public education, possibly more so in the post-pandemic climate. Schools under fire for improved academic outcomes also face inquiry and criticism for various other practices. The news and public forums, such as social media platforms, highlight the culture of distrust in educators and all they represent. Teachers and school leaders face obstacles both within and outside the building that detract from the purpose of education: teaching students to equip them for their futures.

The demands and expectations of schools to increase the academic outcomes for all students are all too familiar. Elgart (2017) supported schools striving toward continuous improvements and noted the importance of teachers and leaders collaboratively monitoring progress toward success. However, despite playing a central role in implementing practices intended to increase student achievement, directives often appear without input from teachers and school leaders. Good et al. (2017) concluded that the successful implementation of educational policies is "better when teachers are authentic partners in the design process" (p. 506). Although teachers serve on the front lines of delivering instruction to students, they frequently have no say in the policies impacting the daily work within their classrooms.

Although traditionally well-intended, policies enacted to develop greater accountability in schools to ensure learning for students have the opposite effect. Policies and laws written by politicians, such as the No Child Left Behind Act and Every Student Succeeds Act, contribute to what Adler-Greene (2019) identifies as "failing to meet the needs of students due to a lack of

knowledge and understanding of the issues that students, advocates, and teachers face on a daily basis" (p. 22). The No Child Left Behind Act sought to close the achievement gaps for all students with annual reading and math assessments in grades 3 through 8 and once in high school with a goal of 100 percent of students reaching proficiency by the 2013-2014 school year (Ladd, 2017).

According to the United States of America Department of Education's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (2020), the Every Student Succeeds Act replaced The No Child Left Behind Act and "extended more flexibility to States in education and laid out expectations of transparency for parents and for communities" (*What is the Every Student Succeeds Act?* 2020). Unfortunately, increased transparency when schools are ill-equipped to enact changes leads to heightened stress levels in educational environments.

The fear of retribution from state assessment results leads to a high turnover of teachers and leaders, particularly in communities serving populations with more significant needs, such as minority students, English Language Learners, and families with low socioeconomic statuses (Valli & Buese, 2007). Grissom et al. (2021) conducted two decades of research and found that principal turnover negatively affects student achievement, teacher retention, and school climate. Principals under extreme pressure due to accountability measures that determine the leadership impact and potential future career path often leave high-needs schools. They, therefore, continue the cycle of at-risk populations receiving less than their affluent peers.

Branch et al. (2013) found, "highly effective principals raise the achievement of a typical student in their schools by between two and seven months of learning in a single school year; ineffective principals lower achievement by the same amount" (para 3). According to Amrein-Beardsley (2012), the principal's quality is the primary factor that attracts teachers to schools

with high needs. Highly effective principals with capabilities to influence student achievement must expand their impact by identifying and retaining effective teachers and teacher leaders. The principal's responsibility is to develop the teacher leaders within the school to lead colleagues and drive initiatives. The building leadership team, often comprised of representatives from each department or grade level, serves as middle management between teachers and administration.

The leadership team members, known as grade-level chairs, hold a unique position within the school building. Brown et al. (2000) referred to grade-level or departmental leadership as a "middle management team" and "the key to developing successful schools" (p. 240). Teachers serving in the role of the grade-level chair must understand the magnitude of leading school change and engage in leadership work successfully. Smylie and Eckert (2018) stress the importance of providing adequate support and professional learning for educators fulfilling the role of a team leader so they may fulfill the role effectively. According to Anderson and Kumari (2009), the means to achieve the vision of increased student achievement is to develop the knowledge and skills of teachers and teacher leaders. Beginning with the grade-level chairs' leadership capacity, the influence of a highly effective principal can reach each classroom in the school building.

The Problem

The influence of teachers remains the most significant factor on student achievement, both academic and non-academic. Oppen (2019) estimates teachers have a two to three-fold more significant impact than any other factor. Furthermore, Hattie (2003) surmised the focus to ensure improved student outcomes should be on the most significant source of variance for students: the teacher. Therefore, developing an effective leadership team is paramount to facilitating the growth and improvement of more teachers. Grade-level chairs, also known as grade-level

leaders, are tasked with leading their team in implementing action steps towards school improvement, typically without the professional development required to ensure they have the leadership abilities to do so, therefore resulting in grade-level chairs fulfilling the role of messengers between administrators and their teams.

The leadership team at Fletcher Elementary School, while comprised of veteran teachers, consisted of educators with no professional learning or training in leadership practices. The lack of leadership development among the members of the leadership team contributed to the unclear understanding of the roles and responsibilities of grade-level chairs. This action research study investigated the development of leadership capacity in grade-level chairs in one public, suburban elementary school.

Overview of the Research Site

Fletcher Elementary School (district, school, and participant names are pseudonyms) resides within the large, suburban school district of Connor County. CCSD consists of 52 schools: 28 elementary schools, 11 middle schools, ten high schools, and three specialty schools. In total, the enrollment in CCSD is approximately 43,000 students with 5,000 employees. Due to significant housing and commercial developments in the once-rural area, FES is one of the district's fastest-growing schools, as outlined in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1

Fletcher Elementary School Student Enrollment Data 2020-2023

Year	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023
Total Enrollment	751	795	880

Note. Enrollment data retrieved from the Connor County Student Information System and

includes students enrolled as of the last day of the school year.

The population surge also marks shifting demographics within the student population, as outlined in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2

Fletcher Elementary School Student Demographic Data 2020-2023

	2020-2021		2021-2022		2022-2023	
	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number
White	55.25%	415	47.42%	377	39.09%	344
African American	28.09%	211	32.58%	259	40.22%	354
Hispanic	10.92%	82	11.32%	90	12.04%	106
Multi-Racial	5.19%	39	7.67%	61	7.50%	66
Asian/Pacific Islander	.53%	4	.75%	6	.91%	8
American Indian	0%	-	.25%	2	.23%	2

Note. Enrollment data retrieved from the Connor County Student Information System and includes students enrolled as of the last day of the school year.

In addition, subgroup data for FES reveals approximately 13% of students enrolled receive services under the Students with Disabilities designation, 7.5% receive gifted services, and approximately 5% receive language services, as modeled by Table 1.3.

Table 1.3

Fletcher Elementary School Student Subgroup Data 2020-2023

	2020-2021		2021-2022		2022-2023	
	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number
Students with Disabilities	13.63%	116	18.08%	151	18.69%	177
Gifted	19.39%	165	17.84%	149	16.79%	159

English Language Learners	2.35%	20	2.99%	20	3.06%	29
504 Plan	3.19%	24	1.76%	14	2.84%	25
Economically Disadvantaged*	37.4%	281	34.7%	276	*Not yet published	*Not yet published

Note. Enrollment data retrieved from the Connor County Student Information System and the Georgia Department of Education. Includes students enrolled as of the last day of the school year.

Connor County earned the title of the second-fastest-growing county in the state and eighth-fastest in the nation. The county saw a 100% increase in population from 2000 to 2010 and another 20% increase in population from 2010 to 2020; thus, increasing the need for new schools, qualified educators, and motivated leaders.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to understand how to build leadership capacity in grade-level chairs within a public, suburban elementary school. This study focused on the grade-level chairs and their roles as teacher leaders. The action research design team studied distributive leadership and how to utilize this practice to instill and support the development of grade-level chairs. The study included identifying the perceptions of teacher leaders and their influence from their perspective. This research aimed to develop grade-level chairs into instructional leaders whom the staff trust while fostering the school culture to accept the expertise of their peers to implement change.

Research Questions

The guiding questions that facilitated this action study are as follows:

1. How do teachers perceive the leadership team's roles, responsibilities, and overall impact in one public, suburban elementary school?
2. How do administrators foster and develop leadership capacity in grade-level chairs in a public, suburban elementary school?
3. How does the action research team describe the impact of the action research process on the practice of the leadership team in one public, suburban elementary school?

Definition of Terms

Critical terms for this study are as follows:

- “Collaborative Leadership” is another term used interchangeably with “distributive” leadership.
- “Distributive Leadership” in the context of Fletcher Elementary School “criticizes the hierarchical design of leadership and suggests that involvement of all personnel in the decision-making mechanism and collaboration among the entire staff as ways to effectively coordinate work and solutions to organizational problems” (Gumus et al., 2018, pp. 30-31).
- “Grade-Level Chair” in the context of Fletcher Elementary School is a teacher leader who assumes an instructional leader role, serves on the building leadership team, and represents their grade level.
- “Instructional Coach” in the context of Fletcher Elementary School is an instructional leader who collaborates with teachers and administrators to improve teaching and learning through observation, feedback, data analysis, and professional learning. In addition, this leader is a member of the administrative and building leadership teams.

- “Professional Learning” in the context of Fletcher Elementary School is a process that intends to help the professionals in their areas of growth or assist the professional with becoming proficient with a newly implemented initiative by the school or district.
- "Student Support Facilitator" in the context of Fletcher Elementary School is an individual who serves as the leader of the special education department, a member of the building leadership team, and the administrative team. In addition, this individual completes coaching responsibilities for special education teachers.
- “Teacher Leader” in the context of Fletcher Elementary School is an individual who “lead[s] within and beyond the classroom, identify with and contribute to a community of teacher-learners and leaders, and influence[s] others toward improved educational practice; and accept[s] responsibility for achieving the outcomes of that leadership" (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001, p. 6).
- “Transformational Leadership Theory” – Wiyono (2018) detailed the description by Hoy and Miskel (2005), which stated, “Transformational leadership is a leadership behavior model that is proactive, raises awareness levels of subordinates about inspirational collective interests and helps subordinates achieve unusually high performance outcomes” (p. 397).
- “Organizational Learning Theory” – According to Chiva et al. (2014), organizational learning is "a process that develops a new way of seeing things or understanding the within organizations, which implies new organizational knowledge” (p. 3).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used for this action research study was a combination of Organizational Learning Theory and Transformational Leadership Theory. Evans et al. (2012)

asserted, “in order for organizational learning to occur, an organization must employ strategies to systematically integrate individual and collective learning into skills and knowledge that will deeply affect the organization” (p. 159). The action research study sought to shift the roles of the building leadership team and its impact on the overall school improvement initiatives.

Furthermore, the type of organizational learning used in the study was double-loop learning, identified by Argyris and Schön (1978), which is similar to single-loop learning in that it included the evaluation of action plans; however, it also integrated the assessment of core values, beliefs, and policies that guide the school. Basten and Haamann (2018) declared that instances of adjustment that require alterations to the original plans require double-loop learning as it entails two feedback cycles “that connect observed effects with strategies and values served by those strategies” (p. 3).

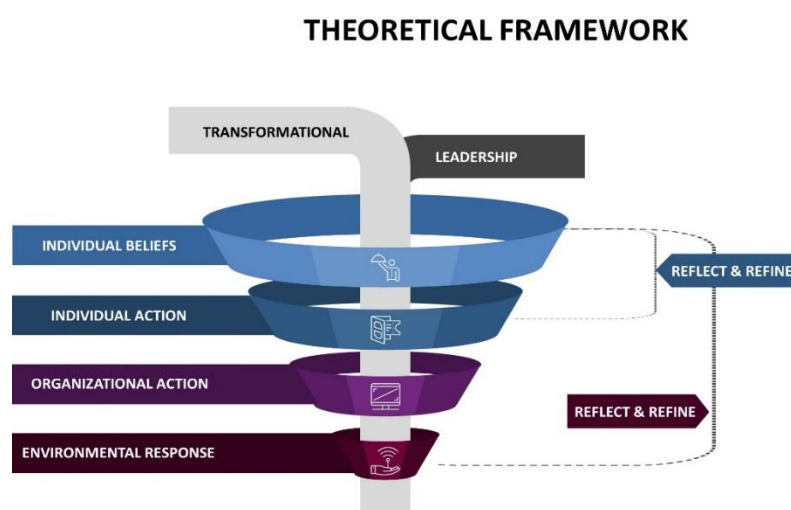
Transformational leadership, according to Seltzer and Bass (1990), occurs when leaders “may inspire their followers, may deal individually with subordinates to meet their developmental needs, and may encourage new approaches and more effort toward problem solving” (p. 694). The action research study sought to develop the leadership capacity of the individual members, also known as the grade-level chairs, so they may effectively and intentionally lead their teams toward specific goals.

Developing each member required the principal to differentiate professional development according to the personalities and needs of each grade-level chair. Jovanovic and Ciric (2016) supported this practice by asserting, “Leadership is seen as a process through which a person engages with others and is able to connect with others, resulting in enlargement of morale and motivation of both, leaders and followers” (pp. 497–498). To motivate individuals and enhance the leadership team's performance, this action research required the practices of a charismatic

leader. According to Bass (1990), “Charismatic leaders have great power and influence. Employees want to identify with them, and they have a high degree of trust and confidence in them” (p. 21). Figure 1.1 depicts a visual representation of transformational leadership theory embedded within organizational learning theory used for this action research study.

Figure 1.1

Theoretical Framework for Organizational Learning and Transformational Leadership Theory

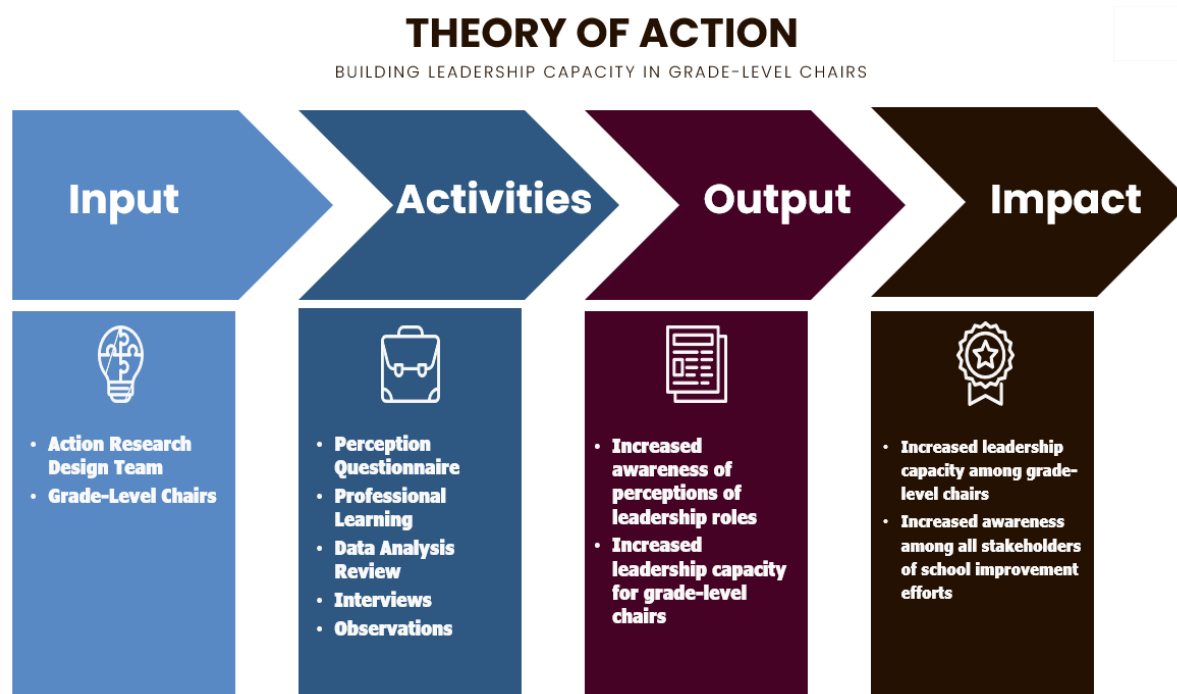


Due to the varying perspectives and concerns impacting the field of education, a conceptual framework, or logic model, must be implemented in research. It is due to the variables that affect educational research that Eisenhart declared the necessity of a conceptual framework that requires “comprehensive, inclusive, sensitive, appropriate, useful, and timely approaches” (1991, p. 212). The theory of action was the conceptual framework or logic model for this action research study. According to Culclasure et al. (2019), a logic model is a visual representation depicting the connection between the input, activities, outcomes, and impacts of action research.

The theory of action, detailed in Figure 1.2, included action steps completed by the research team throughout the study. Input actions included collecting perception data from the grade-level chairs. The collected data sought to highlight the perceptions of the roles of a teacher leader or grade-level chair. The various audiences which provided data for the research included current grade-level chairs and members of the Action Research Design Team (ARDT). The ARDT reviewed research practices around developing school leadership teams to impact change with the perception data. After reviewing all data, the ARDT identified areas of need for each grade-level chair and necessary professional development to foster leadership capacity within each leader and the overall team. The grade-level chairs participated in various activities throughout the research process.

Figure 1.2

Theory of Action



Overview of the Methodology

The methodology applied in this study was action research. Coghlan (2019) defined action research as “a family of related approaches that integrate theory and action with a goal of addressing important organizational, community, and social issues together with those who experience them and to generate actionable knowledge (p. 189). Corey (1954) highlighted one of the psychological values in action research in education is practitioners are natural researchers as the profession continues to evolve due to environmental, social, and familial changes in the world.

The researcher established an action research design team (ARDT), known as the "design team," and an action research implementation team (ARIT). The design team included the principal, two assistant principals, one instructional coach, and the student support facilitator. The implementation team comprised a grade-level chair for each grade, kindergarten through fifth grade, a department chair for special education, and a department chair for support positions such as the Gifted Support Teachers, Early Intervention Program Teachers, and Specials Teachers. The design team studied various leadership models to support the implementation team and build leadership capacity in each grade-level chair. This study also included qualitative data collection of perception data through questionnaires, focus groups, and interviews to measure the impact grade-level chairs have on their teams throughout the process. Data from observations also informed the action research cycles during the study.

Action Research

The action research format was appropriate for this study due to the documented benefits of influencing change. Glanz (2014) identified the ability of action research to create a systemwide mindset for school improvement, enhance decision-making, promote reflection and

self-assessment, instill a commitment to continuous improvement, and create a more positive school climate where teaching and learning are at the forefront of the work, empower those who participate in the process, and make a direct impact on practices. In planning the necessary steps, the design team united to calibrate their understanding of school needs. As Corey (1954) discussed, cooperative efforts of multiple stakeholders result in a clearer understanding of the problem and desired outcome with realistic measures that are more likely to become impactful actions.

Cooperative efforts required trust amongst the design and implementation teams, with a solid foundational relationship supported by continuous improvement. The design team studied best practices for establishing meaningful, professional relationships and coaching models to prepare for the work with the implementation team. Coghlan (2019) asserted the importance of working alongside others to enhance relationships includes "trust, concern for others, equity of influence, common language, and so on" (p. 5).

The elements of action research are in every educator's practice. "Action research works through a cyclical process of consciously and deliberately, a) assessing a situation which is calling for change, b) planning to take action, c) taking action, and d) evaluating the action, leading to further cycles of planning" (Coghlan, 2019, p. x). Teachers review data to determine if students exhibited mastery of a learning objective, create a plan of action different than before to remediate or accelerate the standards, fulfill that plan, and assess once again to ensure students are successful. This data review is done weekly, perhaps daily, in the classroom and aligns with this study's cyclical action research process. The design and implementation teams actively collected and monitored qualitative data to determine effectiveness and progress toward the desired goals.

Qualitative data were collected using perception questionnaires, focus groups, observations, and interviews. By interviewing participants, the context of behaviors is better understood through their individual histories and experiences (Glanz, 2014; Seidman, 2006). Interviews throughout the study allowed the teams to properly operate and adjust upcoming steps in the space of the action research study. Perception questionnaires collected at appropriate intervals were analyzed by the ARDT to determine if the hypothesized action steps provided the desired results. The analysis of questionnaires allowed for the ARDT members to engage in focus groups as they identified trends and patterns. Members of the implementation team represented varying roles as they completed the perception questionnaires, which provided a broader perspective of data. Glanz (2014) noted the importance of perception monitoring to ensure the actions of the implementation team are understood and present the intended outcomes.

Interventions

This action research study required multiple interventions designed to guide the research process. The Action Research Design Team followed the Input, Activities, Output, Impact model for all interventions. The first intervention sought to understand the perceptions of the roles and responsibilities of a grade-level chair so the design team could triangulate the data collected along with current research to cultivate clear definitions and expectations.

Input: Members of the Building Leadership Team, known as grade-level and department chairs, completed a perception questionnaire to express their perception of the roles and responsibilities expected of the position. The grade-level chairs participated in an interview with the researcher to provide additional details about the questionnaire responses. The Action Research Design Team observed each grade-level chair leading a team meeting to gather qualitative data about each individual's practices. The teacher leaders received feedback from the observations.

Activities: The design team reviewed current research about distributed leadership models and the significance of clearly defined roles and expectations to enhance team performance. The team then reviewed the data from the perception questionnaires, observations, interviews, and research to create clear expectations and guidelines for grade-level chairs at Fletcher Elementary School.

Output: The design team shared clearly defined expectations and standards of a grade-level chair with the implementation team. The grade-level chairs provided feedback on the information. The design team modified the expectations based on the feedback and the supporting research.

Members of the action research implementation team completed interviews with the researcher to provide qualitative data about the first intervention cycle and to inform the second intervention cycle.

Impact: The role of the grade-level chair became a well-defined leadership role within the school to support continuous improvement efforts.

The second intervention consisted of providing professional learning for the grade-level chairs based on the responses from the perception questionnaires, observations, interviews, and research conducted during the first intervention cycle.

Input: Members of the Building Leadership Team, known as grade-level and department chairs, completed a perception questionnaire to share their perception of the overall impact of a grade-level chair. The questionnaire results, observations, interviews, and research provided the design team with perceptions about grade-level chairs' impact on school improvement efforts.

Activities: The design team reviewed current research about distributed leadership models that provide opportunities for grade-level chairs to facilitate school improvement. The team then

analyzed the perception questionnaires, observation notes, and interview data to determine the grade-level chairs' professional learning needs to increase their leadership capacity.

Output: The design team provided differentiated professional learning for grade-level chairs to increase and enhance leadership capacity. Members of the design team conducted observations to collect data on the impact of professional learning on the leadership capacity of each grade-level chair. Teacher leaders received feedback from the observations. Grade-level chairs completed interviews to conclude intervention cycle two to evaluate their learning.

Impact: The grade-level chairs increased their leadership capacity to effectively lead a team. Teacher leaders increased their awareness of school improvement goals and how their individual and team efforts support the school community.

The conclusion of the action research study included one final questionnaire completed by each member of the implementation team. The culmination of qualitative data collected throughout the two intervention cycles provided information about the effectiveness of the action research process in enhancing the grade-level chairs' leadership capacity.

Significance of the Study

The action research conducted contributes significantly to the field of educational leadership. The continuous changes in education require extensive research, reflection, and modification of practices one leader is incapable of completing individually. Leadership skills and strategies must be pervasive throughout the building and embedded within the culture to enact actual change leading to the success of schools. Teachers often seek understanding and assistance while an administrator tends to another need within the building. Principals must instill leadership capacity in their grade-level leaders so they may provide support to the individuals on their team.

Leadership no longer requires a single individual to carry the weight of the entire organization. Multiple leaders acting with the same vision can advance and ensure a successful outcome in an expedited fashion. The results of this study will likely contribute to how leaders select their teacher leaders, foster a culture of differentiated professional learning to instill leadership capacity in grade-level chairs, and cultivate an impactful team focused on school improvement.

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is comprised of six chapters. Chapter 1 introduced the study and offered the purpose, research questions, and the definition of terms pertaining to the case. The first chapter also outlines the theoretical framework, logic model, overview of the methodology, interventions, and significance of the study. Chapter 2 reviews the literature and defines teacher leadership, describes the role of the principal when developing the capacity of teacher leaders, and the needs of grade-level chairs to facilitate school improvement. Chapter 3 depicts the methodology involved in this action research and the qualitative data collection and interpretation methods. Chapter 4 analyzes the findings.

Chapter 5 details the Analysis of Finds from the Action Research Case based on the action research cycles related to the research questions. This chapter also describes and analyzes the interventions executed by the researcher, the action research team, and the implementation team. Finally, Chapter 6 encapsulates the study, discusses the findings from the research questions, and presents implications for school leaders and further research.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

While the role of the school principal is often romanticized (Feeney, 2009), the principalship “has faced constant redefinition” (Vang, 2015, p. 190). The shifts in expectations of leadership throughout history aimed to improve the academic outcomes of underperforming schools and guarantee organizational success (Murphy et al., 2007). Graham (2018) reported, “Based on research and findings, an effective leader can establish and sustain a successful school if they build a community of trust, develop teacher capacity through shared leadership, and provide open and honest communication” (p. 25). With trust and investments in teacher leadership, principals can use the powerful tool of shared leadership to expand the school’s capacity to achieve its goals (Hallinger, 2011).

The principal’s responsibility to improve school outcomes requires intentional work with teacher leaders; therefore, the work “must focus on galvanizing and empowering other individuals to organize for the effort, action, and improvement” (Bagwell, 2019, p. 98). While research highlights the need for environments conducive to teacher leadership development (Sinha & Hanuscin, 2017), and less hierarchical leadership models, Smylie and Brownlee-Conyers (1992) surmised, “Development of new working relationships between teacher leaders and their principals is a complex and complicated matter” (p. 156).

The purpose of the study was to understand how to build leadership capacity in grade-level chairs within a public, suburban elementary school. This study focused on the grade-level chairs and their roles as teacher leaders. The action research design team studied distributive

leadership and how to utilize this practice to instill and support the development of grade-level chairs. The study of leadership styles included identifying the perceptions of teacher leaders and their influence from the staff's perspective. This research aimed to develop grade-level chairs into instructional leaders whom the staff trusts while fostering the school culture to accept the expertise of their peers to implement change.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do teachers perceive the leadership team's roles, responsibilities, and overall impact in one public, suburban elementary school?
2. How do administrators foster and develop leadership capacity in grade-level chairs in a public, suburban elementary school?
3. How does the action research team describe the impact of the action research process on the practice of the leadership team in one public, suburban elementary school?

The researcher studied teacher leadership, shared leadership models, and professional learning information to plan intervention cycles with the goal of increasing the leadership capacity of grade-level chairs in an elementary school setting.

The literature review provided information and research results about the need for leadership capacity among grade-level or department leaders in public education. The first section of the literature review details the call for school improvement and increased academic achievement from public education throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. The second section identifies the role of the school principal to curate a climate conducive for teacher leadership, build trust among stakeholders, and valuing teacher voice. The third section defines teacher leadership and highlights the ambiguity of the role along with the perceptions of teacher leaders. The final section details the shared leadership models studied by the Action Research Design Team.

The Call for School Improvement

Public education is no stranger to critique and criticism, particularly in the United States. Hallinger and Heck (1996) reported, “Fueled by reports of the failure of the public schools, concerns for improving the achievement of students reached unprecedented levels in the early 1980s” (p. 6). Cohen and Mehta (2017) stated, “Hopeful initiatives began with Horace Mann and his allies in the 1830s and continue today” (p. 645). The demands and expectations of schools to increase the academic outcomes for all students are all too familiar. Elgart (2017) discusses practices in place throughout the decades-long stride toward improvements, such as state accountability systems, district and school improvement plans, and protocols, to guide teacher collaboration as “at least at the heart of efforts to improve instruction both big and small” (p. 54).

Smylie (2009) noted, “Most of today’s schools are yesterday’s schools, built for purposes and contexts disappearing or gone” (p. 2), while Representative Fudge (2017) identified the foundation of education policy as “still functioning as a basic civil rights protection” (p. 223). Educational policies such as No Child Left Behind (Ladd, 2017) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) set the stage to hold schools accountable for increased student achievement; however, they failed to address the necessary support to fill gaps within communities.

The two most significant levers to ensure increased academic success are a qualified teacher delivering high-quality instruction and the leadership under which the learning occurs (Leithwood et al., 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2010). Proper leadership recruitment and retention must occur, targeting leaders with the skill set to sustain academic achievement while facing adversity. The Wallace Foundation (2013) concluded, “Without effective principals, the national goal we’ve set of transforming failing schools will be next to impossible to achieve” (p. 17). Unprecedented increases in local, state, and federal accountability via test scores that drive

policy initiatives to fall to the schools and, more specifically, the school's principal (Vang, 2015; Anderson, 2017).

Coupled with high-stakes testing, "The role of the school leader has grown more complex as the nature of the work has shifted to meet the challenge of guaranteeing higher levels of learning for all students" (Wells & Klocko, 2015, p. 313). Schools must have effective leadership capable of providing stability and appropriately challenging goals to increase student achievement; however, the immense weight to ensure every student succeeds must be shared with other leaders.

Leader and Teacher Retention

Research consistently reports that principals significantly impact students, second only to the classroom teacher (Brent et al., 2014; Leithwood et al., 2004). Branch et al. (2013) quantified the potential of a highly effective principal to "raise the achievement of a typical student in their schools by between two and seven months of learning in a single year; ineffective principals lower achievement by the same amount" (para. 3). Effective principals impact other aspects of the student experience such as reductions in absenteeism and discipline incidents (Grissom et al., 2021; The Wallace Foundation, 2021). Grissom et al. (2013) found "that principals' effects on both attendance and chronic absenteeism are even larger in urban schools and schools with high concentrations of student poverty" (p. 41).

The concern of retribution from state assessment results is one factor that leads to the high turnover of teachers and leaders (Ryan et al., 2017). The principal is known as the most significant lever to drive change. Enacting change requires expertise and quality leadership. If principals working in schools with higher numbers of students of color, economically

disadvantaged students, and English Language Learners are at a greater risk of being removed from their posts due to accountability test scores, attracting high-quality principals cannot occur.

From their onset, high-stakes testing and accountability measures added extensive stress to school leaders serving at-risk populations. In a study of principals dismissed from their positions after one high-stakes assessment, McGhee and Nelson (2005) summarized that “high-stakes accountability systems have negative effects on school leaders” (p. 370) and that “regardless of prior success, principals may be removed from their positions solely as a result of accountability test scores” (p. 370). Lastly, McGhee and Nelson (2005) surmised that the culture of accountability in education “has instead become a culture of fear, driven by unanticipated consequences of the system” (p. 368).

Frequent changes in school leadership leave a climate of instability and inconsistency for teachers and students. Principal turnover disrupts school processes such as teacher development, school climate, and student achievement (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019) and is “often cited as an impediment to improving high-poverty in low-performing schools” (Branch et al., 2013, para. 23). High-needs schools require the leadership of highly-qualified leaders to achieve a successful “turnaround.” Harris (2010) describes effective principals as individuals with a “very strong moral purpose” as they “maintain high expectations for student achievement” (p. 698). While most principal turnover occurrences denote a period of decline, instances where ineffective principals leave can positively impact the school community.

Teachers strive to work in a supportive environment with a trusting, compassionate leader. The Wallace Foundation (2021) reported, “Research also shows clear links between effective leadership and important teacher outcomes, including more positive teacher working conditions and reduced turnover, especially among effective teachers” (Grissom et al., 2013, p.

92). Amrein-Beardsley (2012) surveyed teachers, who defined an expert principal “as one who was caring, supportive, committed to teachers and student learning, open-minded, knowledgeable, wise, and an expert leader him/herself” (p. 14). Conversely, an ineffective principal can majorly contribute to teacher turnover (Amrein-Beardsley, 2012). Likewise, Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2019) reported that one of the most predictive indicators of teacher turnover was “a perceived lack of administrative support” (p. 15) and that teachers are “more than twice as likely to move schools or leave teaching” (p. 15) when they strongly disagree with the administration.

School and district leaders faced with the current teacher shortages understand the necessity to hire highly-effective educators as they are “among the most important determinants of student achievement” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 17). Guin (2004) reported that teacher turnover is a significant concern due to its “disproportionate impact on minority and low-income students” (p. 3). Furthermore, leaders serving schools in the South see the highest teacher turnover rates, “reaching about 16 to 17% in cities and suburbs and 14 to 15% in towns and rural areas” (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019, p. 6). Sutchter et al. (2019) reported, “Regardless of the state, students in high-poverty and high-minority schools typically feel the largest impact of teacher shortages [as they] are most likely to be taught by underprepared, inexperienced, and out-of-field teachers” (p. 7).

When identifying why teachers leave the profession, Perryman and Calvert (2020) sought to understand what led teachers into the field in the first place. They found the overwhelmingly consistent response that “teachers entered the profession because they wanted to work with young people and make a difference” (p. 4). The teaching profession relies on prospective candidates ignoring the historically low pay, minimal benefits, and policy-driven initiatives often

out of their control. Picower (2013) identified a blind spot for teachers who joined the profession, believing that policies do not connect to their daily work within their classroom walls.

Olsen and Sexton (2009) reported that teacher preparation programs do not adequately prepare teachers to navigate the political landscape of education. The study indicated a need for novice teachers to enter their role with “knowledge of, strategies for, and allies within the policy-related work contexts that they will face in schools” (Olsen & Sexton, 2009, p. 40). The decrease in graduates from teacher preparation programs, coupled with the number of teachers leaving the profession, reveals the need to listen to the voices of educators across the country to “further inform educational practices and policies and to improve teacher quality and the substandard levels of student learning and achievement inhibiting America’s neediest” (Amrein-Beardsley, 2012, p. 16).

Despite teacher shortages in the face of turnover, students arrive at school daily to learn. Families expect increased levels of teaching and learning regardless of the adult in the classroom. High-stakes accountability measures and pressures to ensure student achievement led schools to “often respond by hiring inexperienced or unqualified teachers, increasing class sizes, or cutting class offerings, all of which impact student learning” (Sutcher et al., 2019, p. 3). These weighty decisions fall to the principal’s ever-evolving role.

The Principal’s Role

The perception of the school principal’s roles and responsibilities varies throughout history. In a study by Hallinger (1992), principals from the 1920s through the 1960s focused primarily on administrative management. The late 1960s into the 1970s highlighted a shift from management of the schoolhouse to curricular changes and the principal acting as a change agent.

Federal funds provided programs for increased academic achievement and required monitoring for compliance and providing support to teachers so they could adequately follow the expectations. The 1980s brought yet another turn for school principals as expectations moved from managerial and program management to instructional leadership (Hallinger, 1992). Finally, the restructuring of schools began in the 1990s with principals fulfilling the role of transformational leaders responsible for restructuring schools employing collaboration with a “greater emphasis on problem finding and goal setting by the staff and community” (para. 36).

Fostering A Climate for Teacher Leaders

The National School Climate Center (2007) defined school climate as “the quality and character of school life. School climate is based on patterns of students, parents, and school personnel’s experience of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures” (para 1). Positive school climates encourage increased student achievement and teachers who thrive in their profession (Engels et al., 2008). The principal is responsible for creating and cultivating a positive school climate. Thapa et al. (2013) reviewed research on school climate and summarized, “A positive school climate promotes cooperative learning, group cohesion, respect, and mutual trust” (p. 365). It is in this climate that a shared leadership model can thrive.

Cultivating a shared leadership model within a school requires a positive climate where teachers work collaboratively with peers and administrators. Teacher leaders must feel a sense of safety when facing the challenges of education and the profession’s demands. Kilinic (2014) identified, “In directive climates, teachers who feel supported by their principals in assuming leadership roles may be more eager to lead both within and outside of their classrooms” (p. 1738). Support from principals includes direct communication of expectations and

responsibilities, a shared vision, professional learning, and a compassionate demeanor focused on finding creative solutions to fit the school's needs.

Building Trust

Graham (2018) identified trust as an essential element required from administrators to show allegiance to the school community and as the “leader’s foundation for building teacher capacity and sharing leadership” (p. 24). Teams require trust among members as they take risks to enact change. Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) acknowledged the weight of responsibility on principals and the necessity of consistent, pervasive trust to ensure a positive school climate and high levels of student achievement when they stated, “Trust is increasingly recognized as an essential element in vibrant, well-performing schools” (p. 257). When high levels of trust are present, a school is “better positioned to accomplish the essential goals of fostering student achievement and equipping students for citizenship” (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015, p. 258). The principal sets the tone of trust, which impacts productivity, school climate, and relationships between staff, families, and students.

Building trust in the school community requires time and vulnerability. Handford and Leithwood (2013) identified behaviors that cultivate trust between teachers and administrators, which included modeling competence, openness, benevolence, consistency, and reliability. Tschannen-Moran & Garis (2015) also stated, “When principals are trustworthy, they set a tone that influences how teachers relate to one another, to students, and the community at large” (p. 258). When building leadership teams and developing teacher leaders, principals must understand that teachers’ trust in the administrators will influence the teams’ trust in one another. This trust then flows to the community and back into the school. To ensure proper relationships

and collaboration, the principal must have the trust of all stakeholders. Without the faith of the school's community, there can be minimal growth.

Sutton and Shouse (2016) found that when leaders trusted teachers to take on leadership roles in professional learning, teachers became “instructional and pedagogical leaders within the school” (p. 73). This method of sharing power (Graham, 2018) and developing “professional capital” (Eckert, 2019, p. 501) gives teachers a voice, which not only impacts trust between leaders and teachers but also improves trust with stakeholders overall (Graham, 2018).

Valuing Teacher Voice

Over time, the roles and responsibilities of teachers have grown to include more than solely academics. Aubrey (1968) stated, “At one time, the teacher had a single major professional responsibility: to impart knowledge to the young. Now she is expected to be a knowledge specialist, a counselor, a coordinator of instruction, and a surrogate parent” (p. 277). Perryman and Calvert (2020) reported similar sentiments over 50 years later as they investigated reasons for teacher attrition within less than five years. Research revealed that educators left the field to improve their work-life balance and escape the excessive workload. The lack of support from management and not feeling valued are frequently cited reasons for leaving teaching. These expectations continued to grow considerably due to outside agencies enforcing policies and requiring the implementation of practices that are often unrealistic, unattainable, and do not consider the ever-present outside factors affecting a classroom, such as parental education levels, poverty, social injustices, or even a world-wide health pandemic.

Research by Valli and Buese (2007) supported the idea that teachers' workload increased, intensified, and expanded in response to federal, state, and local policies intended to increase student achievement. As educators on the front lines of teaching and learning, teachers must have

the capacity and opportunities to lead the changes that will one day become a routine practice within their four walls. Good et al. (2017) noted that the barriers to teachers participating in policymaking include time constraints, isolation within the profession, minimal power in decision-making in schools, and teachers' professional status. However, expanding educators' roles to ensure students' success, upgrade certification, and maintain professional standing shows no sign of slowing. Therefore, it is essential to involve teachers in developing student expectations and educational policies if the goal is to achieve positive change.

Teacher Leadership

Various definitions of teacher leadership plagued schools and districts as the microscope focused on developing effective teams that yielded positive educational change since the 1980s. In reviewing approximately 150 articles, Nguyen et al. (2019) cultivated two standard definitions of the phrase. The first definition stated that teacher leadership is "the process by which teachers, individually or collectively, influence their colleagues, principals, and other members of the school communities to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increased student learning and achievement" (York-Barr & Duke, 2004, pp. 287-288). The second definition given in the review detailed teacher leaders as individuals who "lead within and beyond the classroom, identify with and contribute to a community of teacher-learners and leaders, and influence others toward improved educational practice; and accept responsibility for achieving the outcomes of that leadership" (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001, p. 6). The shared themes within each definition included the necessity of a leader to possess the ability to influence others and maintain the goal of increased achievement. For this study, the definition established by Katzenmeyer and Moller (2001) served as the basis of this research.

The varying definitions and expectations for teacher leadership highlighted the need for transparency among schools. Brown et al. (2000) described the United Kingdom's response to the call for clarity known as the Teacher Training Agency's National Standards for Subject Leaders, developed in 1998 to "help providers of professional development to plan and provide high quality, relevant training which meets the needs of individual teachers and headteachers" (p. 239). The United States, while overwhelmed with policies dictating school practices and accountability requirements, has only a few states that specify conditions for educators seeking the position of department or grade-level chair (Brent et al., 2014).

Teacher Leadership Role Ambiguity

In a qualitative study conducted by Jacobs et al. (2016), teacher leaders nationwide completed surveys and interviews to provide insight into the perceptions of critical issues in teacher leadership. Nearly half of the results indicated role ambiguity as a significant challenge to their work with other teacher leaders, colleagues, and administrators. While studying department chairs and their leadership practices, Zepeda and Kruskamp (2007) concluded that teacher leaders serving as department chairs "created roles based on what they believed were expectations from teachers and administrators through indirect communication" (p. 49) as they did not receive directives from the principal. The lack of proper communication regarding the principal's vision for grade-level chairs and their roles in facilitating the school's plans for improvement led to teacher leaders who identified as managers focused on task completion instead of facilitators of support for their teams (Brent et al., 2014; Feeney, 2009). The ambiguity seemed exacerbated in elementary settings where teacher leaders viewed themselves as messengers of information between the administration and their colleagues. At the same time, they focused solely on their team rather than the school (Angelle & Schmid, 2007).

Furthermore, Jacobs et al. (2016) found that resentment, conflict, and confusion resulted from unclear expectations of teacher leaders' roles and responsibilities. The principal's responsibilities to cultivate and enhance all aspects of the school experience for students, teachers, and families are substantial; therefore, they must invest time into clearly communicating the teacher leaders' expectations, roles, and responsibilities to all stakeholders. Literature and research identify teacher leaders' potential; however, the evidence of impact is sparse due to inconsistent implementation of roles and responsibilities (York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

Perceptions of Teacher Leadership

Leadership roles traditionally carry the perception of individualization as they relate to tasks and accountability. In a study by Angelle and DeHart (2011), they examined the correlation between teacher perception of teacher leadership and the respondents' grade level, degree level, and leadership status. One item of the quantitative study measured the perceptions of teacher leadership skills and their willingness to share these skills and knowledge with their colleagues. Results indicated that elementary educators viewed their leadership potential as confined to their classrooms. Results also implied that teachers viewed leadership roles as unnecessary "extra duties" despite the potentially positive impacts on students. Results also showed that educators with four-year degrees in education rated themselves highest in sharing expertise and leadership. This finding was significant given that most teachers with a four-year degree in education also had fewer years in the field. These novice teachers relied on collaboration to build their skills, while those with graduate-level degrees were more inclined to seek formal leadership roles. The findings from this study concluded the following:

Principals cannot expect that teacher leaders will ‘step up’ if they are interested in leadership. However, an awareness of the roles a teacher leader may play in the organization can inform teachers of opportunities to practice leadership regardless of their years of experience. As teachers respond to these opportunities, administrators can provide professional development and training to strengthen teacher skills in these areas. (p. 155)

Harris and Jones (2019) concluded three critical dimensions of teacher leadership. First, they believed the teacher leadership role is one of influence rather than a formal title or responsibility. The second aspect of teacher leadership is that it is an action going beyond the traditional classroom roles. Lastly, Harris and Jones (2019) surmised that teacher leadership develops pedagogical excellence within their classroom, and other students may benefit from research-based practices.

Leadership Models

The Wallace Foundation reported that the shift of responsibility and accountability brings dramatic changes in what public education needs from principals. They can no longer function simply as building managers tasked with adhering to district rules, carrying out regulations, and avoiding mistakes (2012). Instead, the principal is responsible for cultivating and communicating a vision for the school, leading teachers in their instruction, monitoring student achievement, encouraging parent involvement, supervising federal funds and programs, managing human resources, ensuring safety and operational functions occur, and much more. The Wallace Foundation (2012) added that principals must also cultivate leadership in others. For a principal to ensure success, they must organize a team of leaders who share the same vision and are not afraid to get to the root cause of an issue and make changes to drive improvement.

Teachers historically viewed the formal leadership role in schools as the driver for improvement and the provider of solutions. Research shared in the early 1990s revealed the potential benefits of increased student achievement, higher levels of engagement, and teacher motivation when shifting to a collaborative culture (Hargreaves, 2019). Feeney (2009) supported the redefinition of leadership to encourage teachers to use their experiences and expertise to understand and address problems hindering the progress of schools alongside principals. The obligation of cultivating the essential leadership skills in teacher leaders resides in the team's creator: the principal.

Harris (2004) acknowledged broadening leadership theories away from traditional, hierarchical roles and responsibilities. Principals are encouraged to practice distributive leadership to increase schools' organizational capacities and enhance student growth and learning (Klar et al., 2016). Shared leadership among administrators and teacher leaders amplifies the potential for positive impact due to the more significant commitment to the vision and mission of the school; however, it requires significant investments on behalf of the principal to build trust among staff, value teacher voice, and establish a sense of collective efficacy (Graham, 2018; Eckert, 2019). Despite the challenges, barriers, and fears of relinquishing perceived control, principals cannot ignore the call for increased outcomes from public education. Hargreaves (2019) warned that school and system leaders must empower teachers to collaborate and creatively solve problems to avoid teachers retreating to their individual classrooms.

Distributed Leadership

Educational leaders function within the complex and continuously changing context of a school. According to Harris (2013), and Bagwell (2019), school principals alone cannot

guarantee success in such a demanding environment and, therefore, to lead effectively, must employ distributed leadership practices to make decisions with different backgrounds, experiences, skills, and expertise involved in the process. Bagwell (2019) challenged school leaders to seek individuals willing to engage in the work of “creating schools that are responsive to an increasingly diverse student population” (p. 98) through a distributed leadership framework, while Harris (2009) highlighted the literature promoting the positive relationship of the framework to positive change in schools.

Timperley (2005) noted the importance of distributed leadership as “dynamic interactions between multiple leaders and followers” (p. 396) and not the same as delegating tasks to reach a goal. Harris and Spillane (2008) clarified, “A distributed model of leadership focuses upon the interactions, rather than the actions, of those in formal and informal leadership roles” (p. 31). Harris (2013) further explained that the purpose of distributed leadership is not solely to create more leaders but to increase the quality and capabilities of both formal and informal leaders.

Skeptics of distributed leadership believe the practice is an abuse of power, with literature “littered with contradictions” (Lumby, 2013, p. 588) due to the persistence and requirement for a single leader to share the necessary leadership responsibilities. Other researchers critique distributed leadership due to scarce evidence and examples of leader actions and outcomes (Jones, 2014). Distributed leadership supporters discussed potential implementation challenges, such as “the importance of building relational trust so that distributed leadership is authentic and not simply delegation by another name” (Harris, 2013, p. 552).

Transformational Leadership

When leading and striving for change, one can quickly become frustrated or overwhelmed by the requirements. Complexities within education require creativity and

innovation to solve problems and provide results. Transformational leadership, initially developed by Burns (1978) and later enhanced for education by Bass (1985), “Involves inspiring followers to commit to a shared vision and goals for an organization or unit, challenging them to be innovative problem solvers, and developing followers’ leadership capacity via coaching, mentoring, and provision of both challenge and support” (Bass & Riggio, 2006, p. 4). Leithwood and Sun (2012) further reported that followers become highly engaged and motivated to achieve the set goals due to the shared values and beliefs of the leader. Additionally, increased engagement between leaders and followers supports superior results by implementing one or more of Avolio’s (1991) Four I’s: Idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration.

Idealized influencers are transformational leaders who are respected, trusted, and admired by their followers. Leaders earn the influencer title by “considering the needs of others over his or her own personal needs” (Bass & Avolio, 1994, p. 3). Inspirational motivators are leaders who cultivate team spirit, collaboratively create a vision with followers, clearly communicate expectations, and display enthusiasm and optimism for the work. Transformational leaders “stimulate their followers’ efforts to be innovative and creative by questioning assumptions, reframing problems, and approaching situations in new ways” (Bass & Avolio, 1994, p. 3) exemplify intellectual stimulation. Lastly, being mindful of each individual’s needs for achievement and growth through coaching models individualized consideration. The four behaviors allow transformational leaders to “develop their followers to the point where followers can take on leadership roles and perform beyond established standards or goals” (Bass & Avolio, 1994, p. 28).

Leadership for Learning

Leadership for Learning includes aspects of other leadership models, such as distributed leadership, transformational leadership, situational leadership, and instructional leadership (Daniels et al., 2019). Hallinger (2011) noted the difference in the terms ‘instructional leadership’ and ‘leadership for learning’ as the former primarily focused on the principal, and the latter suggested a more comprehensive range of leadership sources. Marsh et al. (2013) identified leadership for learning as a “community-wide activity that is conceptualized as a relational and learning-focused activity that is not limited to those in formal leadership positions” (p. 396).

According to Murphy et al. (2007), there are eight dimensions of leader behaviors with accompanying functions that comprise leadership for learning, also referred to as ‘leadership for school improvement.’ The dimensions include a vision for learning, instructional programs, curricular programs, assessment programs, communities of learning, resource acquisition and use, organizational culture, and social advocacy.

CHAPTER 3

ACTION RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

While the role of the school principal is often romanticized (Feeney, 2009), the principalship “has faced constant redefinition” (Vang, 2015, p. 190). The shifts in expectations of leadership throughout history aimed to improve the academic outcomes of underperforming schools and guarantee organizational success (Murphy et al., 2007). Graham (2018) reported, “Based on research and findings, an effective leader can establish and sustain a successful school if they build a community of trust, develop teacher capacity through shared leadership, and provide open and honest communication” (p. 25). With trust and investments in teacher leadership, principals can use the powerful tool of shared leadership to expand the school’s capacity to achieve its goals (Hallinger, 2011). The principal’s responsibility to improve school outcomes requires intentional work with teacher leaders; therefore, the work “must focus on galvanizing and empowering other individuals to organize for the effort, action, and improvement” (Bagwell, 2019, p. 98). While research highlights the need for environments conducive to teacher leadership development (Sinha & Hanuscin, 2017), less hierarchical leadership models, Smylie and Brownlee-Conyers (1992) surmised, “Development of new working relationships between teacher leaders and their principals is a complex and complicated matter” (p. 156).

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leadership and how to utilize this practice to instill and support the development of grade-level chairs. The study of leadership styles included identifying the perceptions of teacher leaders and their influence from the staff's perspective. This research aimed to develop grade-level chairs into instructional leaders whom the staff trusts while fostering the school culture to accept the expertise of their peers to implement change.

The following research questions guided this study:

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3. How does the action research team describe the impact of the action research process on the practice of the leadership team in one public, suburban elementary school?

Chapter 3 discusses the elements of qualitative research design that guided the study, including the logic model, theoretical framework, data collection methods, data analysis strategies. The chapter describes the members of the Action Research Design Team and Action Research Implementation Team participating in the case.

Rationale for Qualitative Research Design

In an era with a significantly heightened focus on the public-school system and many demanding reforms, quality educators and educational leaders face scrutiny surrounding instructional delivery, resources, motives, and achievement outcomes of students. While the post-pandemic climate in education feels more aggressive and combative than in the past, Elgart (2017) stated, “continuous improvement has been part of the lexicon of school improvement for decades” (p. 54). Hallinger (1992) identified the principal as the “linchpin in plans for

educational change and as a favored target” of American policymakers who lack the lens to consider the varying circumstances that exist within a social system such as a school community. Qualitative research, as stated by Bloomberg (2023), promotes “a deep understanding of a social setting or activity as viewed from the perspective of research participants” (p. 70). Due to the unique environments of a school setting, often unable to replicate elsewhere, there must be a comprehensive understanding of the history, community, students, teachers, and leaders.

Although renowned researchers such as Leithwood (2016) call for additional quantitative studies in school improvement efforts, qualitative research design suits the complexities of conducting research in an educational setting. Glanz (2014) preferred qualitative methods due to the ease of adoption within schools and the powerful “ability to enrich our understanding of a given phenomenon” (p. 80). The purpose of the study was to examine the development and enhancement of leadership capacity within the grade-level chairs representing each department in an elementary school. A qualitative research design allowed the study of perceptions of teacher leadership roles and the impact of a grade-level chair throughout the action research process. Additionally, Bloomberg (2023) identified the basis of qualitative research as “exploration and discovery with a goal of giving voice to the research participants” (p. 69) through interviews, observations, and focus groups, all of which occurred in the study.

Overview of Action Research Methods

Action research, according to Glanz (2014), is the preferred type of applied research for educators as it is easily adopted in the school setting and is often credited with creating a “mindset for school improvement” (p. 17). A strength of action research, as described by Bloomberg (2023), is “the research is deliberate and solution-oriented and involves an ongoing process in which the researcher, together with the research participants, systematically examines

their own educational practice” (p. 104). Bloomberg (2023) identified five phases of the action research cycle: identifying the problem, collecting and organizing data, interpreting data, identifying an action based on data, and reflection. This process is cyclical and repeats as often as necessary to enact positive change.

Vallenga et al. (2009) stated, “fundamental to action research is participation and collaboration between the researcher and practitioners” (p. 82). Cultivating quality relationships among all members of the study is vital and should, therefore, “be managed through trust, concern for others, equality of influence, common language, and so on” (Coghlan, 2019, p. 5). Bloomberg (2023) further supports the significance of positive relationships as they encourage “an in-depth understanding which is beneficial to a thorough analysis and interpretation of the findings” (p. 76) while issuing caution for the researcher to remain aware of their “ability to collect (and interpret) data in an unbiased manner” (p. 76). Strong, professional, trusting relationships within the action research study provide the proper support for collaboration.

When identifying the problem driving the study, Shani and Coghlan (2018) noted the researcher must “understand the external environmental factors that shape what the organization is about and how it aims to function and perform” (as cited in Coghlan 2019, p. 5). Without an extensive understanding of the context, the problem may be misidentified, and school improvement cannot occur.

The researcher was uniquely positioned to identify the problem driving the study and understand the context due to serving as the principal of Fletcher Elementary School. Moreover, the researcher previously served as a member of the leadership team as an assistant principal at FES. The researcher cultivated professional relationships with the grade-level chairs from different perspectives and was familiar with the school's improvement efforts.

Action Research Design

The Action Research Design Team (ARDT) followed the theory of action throughout the study while engaged in cycles of input, activities, output, and impact. The educational setting called for action research as the purpose of the study was to increase the leadership capacity of practitioners charged with leading a team of peers (Glanz, 2014). Action research allowed the primary researcher and participants to analyze the perceptions of the grade-level chair's responsibilities and impacts, provide professional learning for the teacher leaders to enhance their leadership capacity, and interpret the overall impact of the study on the grade-level chair to lead school improvement efforts.

The Spiraling and Iterative Nature of Action Research

The principles of action research, often credited to Lewin (1946), "emphasized that theory and practice should be connected, leading to action, specifically social improvement" (Bloomberg, 2023, p. 103). Cohen et al. (2018) identified action research as a means of empowering educators due to the "straightforward cycle of identifying a problem, planning an intervention, implementing the intervention, and evaluating the outcome, reflective practice, political emancipation, critical theory, professional development, and participatory practitioner research" (p. 455). Cultivating strong educators to lead in various roles in the field of education and further spread their influence continues to be a priority and noted benefit of action research as it involves educators and supervisors to better understand their work (Glanz, 2014).

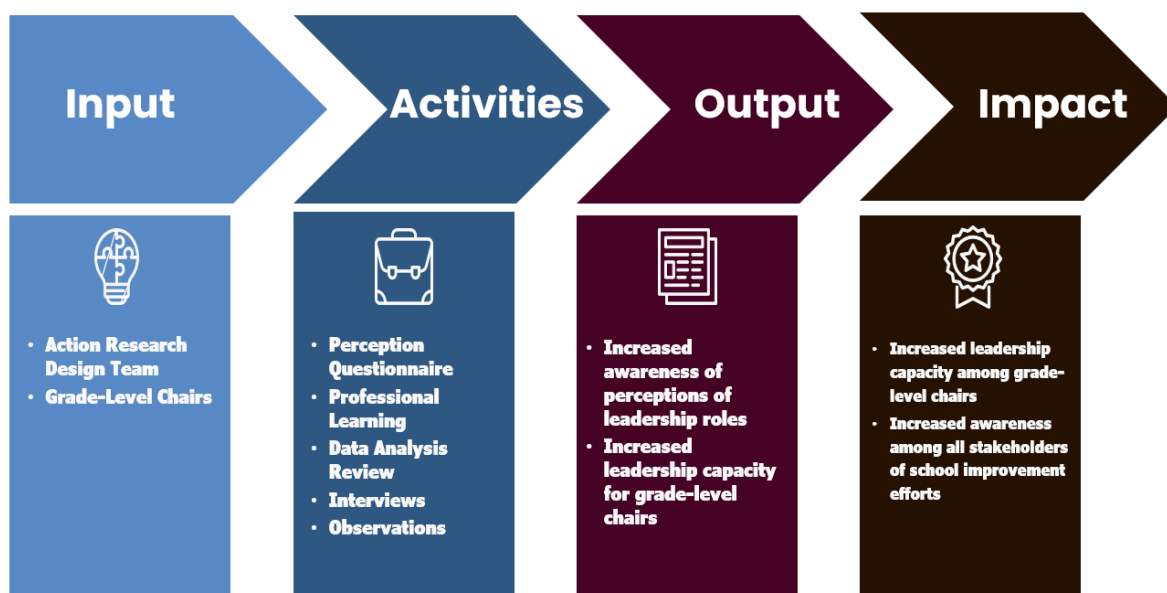
The first cycle of the study included a perception questionnaire completed by each Action Research Implementation Team member. The researcher interviewed the ARIT members to glean additional insight into the questionnaire responses. The Action Research Design Team analyzed the written and transcribed responses and created the roles and responsibilities of the

grade-level chairs. The first cycle concluded with professional learning for the ARIT members to provide clarity on the grade-level chairs' roles and responsibilities at FES. The ARDT members conducted observations to collect qualitative data on the impact of the first cycle on the leadership capacity of the ARIT.

The second cycle began with the researcher interviewing the ARIT members to understand the impact and collect reflections from the first cycle of the study. The observation data from cycle one and the interview transcriptions, analyzed by the ARDT, provided information for the second professional learning session. The ARIT members completed the professional learning session with an observation from the ARDT members to monitor the impact on the leadership capacity of the grade-level chairs. The ARIT members concluded cycle two with a final interview with the researcher.

Logic Model

The action research study, which sought to increase the leadership capacity of grade-level chairs in an elementary school, aligned with the theory of action. The cycles of the study aligned with the Input, Activities, Output, and Impact framework depicted in Figure 3.1. The logic model supported each phase of the study to determine stakeholder perceptions, develop professional development, monitor the impact of the learning, and measure the leadership capacity of grade-level chairs.

Figure 3.1*Logic Model for the Study*

Qualitative data, gathered by the researcher throughout the study, provided the input necessary to determine the activities for the grade-level chairs. Interviews, questionnaires, and observations collected throughout the cycles provided information to the ARDT. The design team then conducted focus groups to identify themes within the data to design professional learning sessions. The implementation team members participated in professional learning based on identified needs. Observations conducted by the design team throughout the cycles provided information to measure the development of the grade-level chairs' leadership capacity.

Theory of Change

The purpose of the study was to increase the leadership capacity of grade-level chairs as they implemented schoolwide improvement plans and led their teams. The connection between schoolwide initiatives and the smaller departments, or grade levels, required shared leadership models to further spread the influence of the research-based practices; therefore, the researcher and members of the Action Research Design Team studied varying leadership models

emphasizing distributed leadership practices. Using qualitative research characteristics, the researcher and participants worked collaboratively to identify the potential actions to address the phenomenon in need of change.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) identified constructivism as a necessary and “central characteristic of all qualitative research” (p. 24) due to the collaborative nature of conducting action research in a complex organization such as a school. Members of the ARDT collaboratively analyzed data to design professional learning for grade-level chairs at FES. Professional learning occurred in a small-group setting and required interaction between the implementation team and design team members. Vygotsky positioned that “the founding father of social constructivism, believed in social interaction and that it was an integral part of learning” (as cited in Powell & Kalina, 2009, p. 243). The Action Research Design Team conducted observations and analyzed data in focus groups to determine the necessary professional learning of the grade-level chairs. Coghlan (2019) asserted, “The second dimension of action research is that it is collaborative, in that the members of the system being studied participate actively in the cyclical process” (p. x). Perception and interview data provided input and measures for reflection throughout the intervention cycles.

The Case

Case studies often include qualitative data collection methods such as interviews, observations, questionnaires, and document analysis (Jervis & Drake, 2014). Case studies also comprise “multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a certain project, politician, institution, program or system in a real” context” (Bondia & Gracia, 2022). The action research study included the collection and analysis of qualitative data pieces to inform the actions of the

Action Research Design Team as they sought to increase the leadership capacity of the grade-level chairs at Fletcher Elementary School.

The leadership team, composed of grade-level chairs and a department chair for the Exceptional Student Education team, historically practiced top-down initiatives. Meetings occurred monthly and followed the task-completion practices in comparison to collaboratively working to improve the school. Graham (2018) noted, “Prior to building teacher capacity and sharing leadership, a leader should establish a sense of trust” (p. 462). The academic achievement levels declined, and teacher attrition increased over the last several years; therefore, school turnaround became increasingly difficult. The school lacked a unified vision and became disjointed within departments and across the building. Trust in the school leaders did not exist, and the community lacked cohesion. Zepeda (2013) stated relationships within a school cultivate cohesion, which “will help to bind people and their values to the work they do in the process of improving schools and working with one another” (p. 15). The initial responsibility of the researcher was to cultivate a climate of trust and cohesion so that collaborative learning among the Action Research Design Team and Action Research Implementation Team could occur.

The Action Research Design Team

The Action Research Design Team included certified educators from Fletcher Elementary School. The primary researcher, the assistant principals, the Student Support Facilitator (SSF), and the Instructional Effectiveness Facilitator (IEF) all engaged as members of the Action Research Design Team.

The primary researcher served as the principal at FES and sought to improve the instructional delivery within each classroom through the influence and leadership capacity of each grade level’s identified leader, known as the grade-level chair. The principal held the

significant responsibility to implement collaborative planning structures and lead a data-driven culture.

The assistant principals, SSF, and IEF all served on the administrative team and represented their respective areas of instruction and subgroups of students, such as students with disabilities. The administrative team members met weekly to discuss the needs of the school, monitor progress toward school improvement plans, and design necessary coaching cycles for the teachers working with students each day. The Action Research Design Team members, detailed in Table 3.1, engaged in a professional learning session led by the principal to learn about the background of the study, action research processes, specific research questions, their roles, and the roles of the members of the Action Research Implementation Team.

Table 3.1

Action Research Design Team

Team Member	Primary Role at Fletcher Elementary School	Action Research Role
Primary Researcher Ms. E. Duncan	Principal, FES	Leads and conducts all research within the Action Research Design Team for data analysis. Brings 7 years of teaching experience, 4 years of grade-level chair experience, and 5 years of administrative experience, including 2 years as principal.
Ms. L. Carter	Assistant Principal, FES	Provides instructional leadership based on 17 years of teaching experience and 4 years of administrative experience as assistant principal.
Mr. J. Smith	Assistant Principal, FES	Provides expertise based on 13 years of teaching and is

		in the first year as assistant principal at FES.
Ms. D. Richards	Student Support Facilitator, FES	Provides expertise based on 16 years of experience teaching students with disabilities and 8 years as the administrative team member responsible for the Exceptional Student Education department at FES.
Mrs. J. Paulson	Instructional Effectiveness Facilitator, FES	Provides expertise based on 18 years of teaching experience, 8 years of instructional coaching experience, and 8 years as a member of the administrative team at FES.

The ARDT sought to increase the leadership capacity of grade-level leaders through intentional professional learning, observations, feedback, and reflection cycles. The researcher and members of the ARDT worked with the members of the Action Research Implementation Team.

Action Research Implementation Team

Cultivating the Action Research Implementation Team members began with an invitation via letter in August 2023. More specifically, grade-level chairs from kindergarten, first, second, third, fourth, and fifth grades, and the chair of the Exceptional Student Education department received the information and invitation to engage in the study for the 2023-2024 school year. Each member obtained details about the action research study and the relationship between the Action Research Design Team and the Action Research Implementation Team. Table 3.2 identifies the members of the Action Research Implementation Team, the grade level they represented, and their years of experience as a classroom teacher and years as a grade-level chair.

Table 3.2*Action Research Implementation Team*

Team Member	Primary Role at Fletcher Elementary School	Action Research Role
Teacher A	First Grade Chair	Provides 17 years of teaching experience in elementary education with 7 years as the grade-level chair.
Teacher B	Second Grade Chair	Provides 12 years of teaching experience in elementary education with 0 years as the grade-level chair.
Teacher C	Third Grade Chair	Provides 6 years of teaching experience in elementary education with 0 years as the grade-level chair.
Teacher D	Fourth Grade Chair	Provides 12 years of teaching experience in elementary education with 1 year as the grade-level chair.
Teacher E	Fifth Grade Chair	Provides 26 years of teaching experience in elementary education with 5 years as the grade-level chair.
Teacher F	Kindergarten Grade Chair	Provides 17 years of teaching experience in elementary education with 1 year as the grade-level chair.
Teacher G	Exceptional Student Education Department Chair	Provides 26 years of teaching experience in elementary education with 4 years as the grade-level chair.

The Action Research Implementation Team members, known as grade-level chairs, were veteran teachers in their respective fields with varying experiences teaching elementary grades.

The teacher leaders representing Kindergarten, second grade, third grade, fifth grade, and

exceptional student education were in their first year serving as grade-level chairs during the course of the study.

Research Plan and Timeline

Driving change in a complex setting such as an elementary school with diverse backgrounds and evolving needs calls for action research due to the “direct relevance to improving practice and advocating for change” (Bloomberg, 2023). Action research requires the identification of a situation in need of change, creating a plan to implement an action, executing the action, and evaluating the impact of the action (Coghlan, 2019). The cyclical pattern of action research necessitates reflection as “critical to understanding and thinking about events and phenomena as they unfold in the school” (Glanz, 2014, p. 23). The action research timeline in Table 3.3 outlines the cycle of reflection and actions used in the study.

Table 3.3

Action Research Timeline

Date	Action Research Activity	
	Action Research Design Team (ARDT)	Action Research Implementation Team (ARIT)
July 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monthly meeting • Secured consent to participate • Collected artifacts • Recorded data and reflections from the researcher 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided consent to participate • Artifact collection • Researcher’s journal – recorded data and reflections
August 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monthly meeting • Collected artifacts • Reviewed research about clearly identified roles and responsibilities of grade-level chairs • Triangulated qualitative data to prepare for cycle #1 • Observed grade-level team meetings • Recorded data and reflections from the researcher 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perception questionnaire #1 • Interviewed with the researcher • Artifact collection • Researcher’s journal – recorded data and reflections

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identified roles, expectations, and responsibilities of grade-level chairs 	
September 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monthly meeting Collected artifacts Provided professional learning based on qualitative data analysis Observed grade-level team meetings Triangulated qualitative data to prepare for cycle #2 Recorded data and reflections from the researcher 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provided feedback on the roles, expectations, and responsibilities of grade-level chairs Interview #2 with the researcher Received feedback from observations Artifact collection Researcher's journal – recorded data and reflections
October 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monthly meeting Provided professional learning based on qualitative data analysis Collected artifacts Recorded data and reflections from the researcher 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participated in professional learning Artifact collection Researcher's journal – recorded data and reflections
November 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monthly meeting Observed grade-level team meetings Collected artifacts Recorded data and reflections from the researcher 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Received feedback from observations Interview #3 with the researcher Perception questionnaire #2 Artifact collection Researcher's journal – recorded data and reflections

The research plan began with the researcher securing consent from the grade-level chairs as participants in July/August 2023. Once the participants signed the consent, they completed a perception questionnaire and scheduled an interview with the researcher. Each member of the Action Research Implementation Team conducted an interview with the researcher in August 2023. The Action Research Design Team conducted a focus group in August to analyze the data and plan the first cycle of professional learning. The ARDT members also conducted

observations of the grade-level chairs during team meetings to collect qualitative notes about leadership practices.

In September 2023, the ARDT provided professional learning to the ARIT members with the goal of clarifying the roles and responsibilities of a grade-level chair at FES. The ARIT members provided feedback on the roles. The ARDT observed the grade-level chairs to collect qualitative data about the leadership capacity of each leader after the professional learning took place. Each member of the ARIT interviewed with the researcher to provide insight and reflection from the first professional learning session and the impact on leadership capacity.

The ARDT conducted a focus group to review and analyze data from the interviews and observations to determine the next professional learning session for the grade-level chairs. Professional learning took place in October 2023. The ARDT conducted observations of the ARIT members during a team meeting to collect qualitative data about the impact of professional learning on leadership capacity. Members of the ARIT interviewed with the researcher to provide insight and information about the impact of the second cycle of professional learning. The ARIT also completed the final perception questionnaire.

Context of the Study

Connor County School District (CCSD) operates within Connor County, a large, suburban, metropolitan county spanning 327 square miles and sitting approximately 33 miles south of the state capitol. With over 43,000 students and 5,000 employees, CCSD is the eighth-largest school district in the state and the largest employer in the county.

Student Body Characteristics

The most recent state data identified FES enrollment of 880 students during the 2022-2023 school year, of which 40.22% were African American, 39.09% White, 12.04% Hispanic,

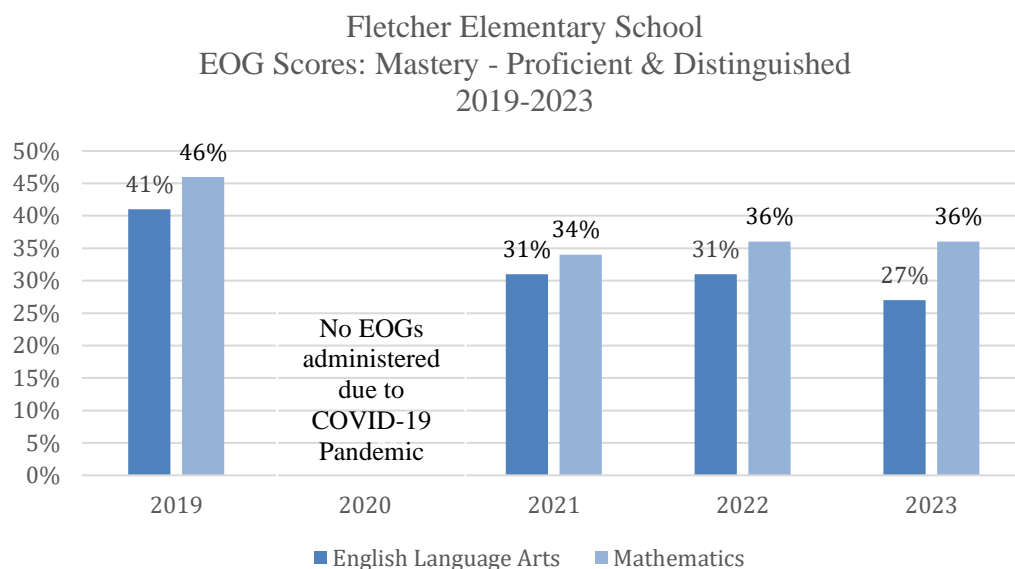
7.50% Multi-Racial, and .91% Asian. The diverse student body of FES requires varying services and supports for learning. According to the Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement (2022), 18.69% of FES students received services under the Students with Disabilities designation, 16.79% received gifted services, and 3.06% received language services during the 2022-2023 school year.

Academic Achievement

Historical data provided by the Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement disclosed that student achievement in English Language Arts and Mathematics continues to decline each year. Georgia Milestones Assessment results for the 2022-2023 school year revealed approximately 36% of students performed on grade level or above in Mathematics, and 27% achieved on grade level or above in English Language Arts. Figure 3.2 models the decline in student achievement at Fletcher Elementary School according to the Georgia Milestones Assessment in English Language Arts and Mathematics from 2019-2023.

Figure 3.2

Fletcher Elementary School: Students Scoring at or Above Expectations According to Georgia Milestones Assessment



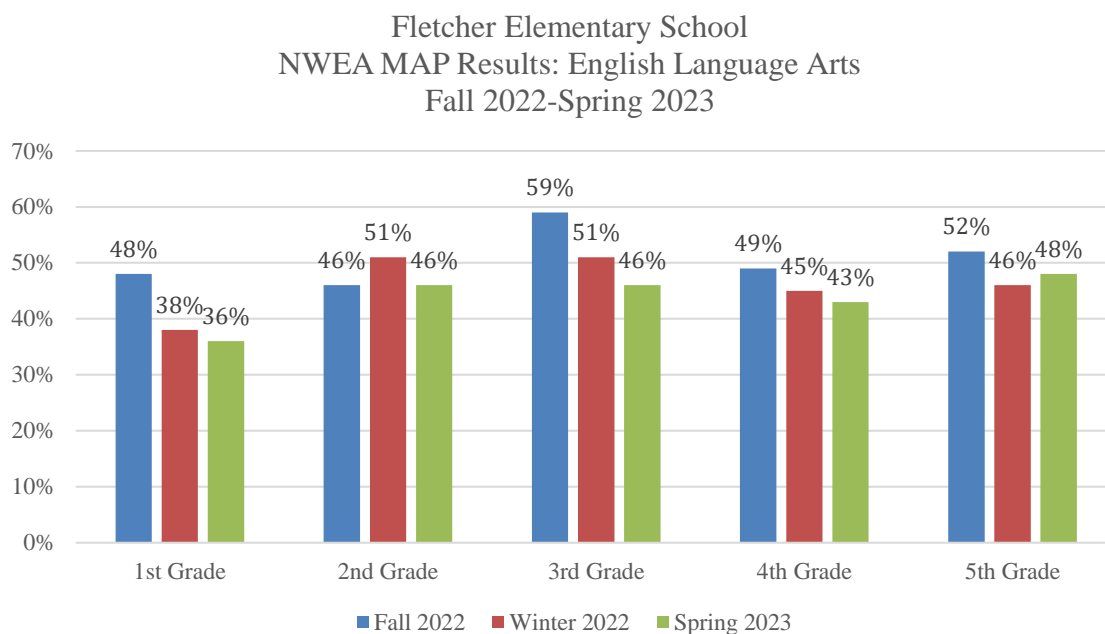
Note. As reported by the Georgia Governor’s Office of Student Achievement (2023). Georgia Milestones Assessment was not administered during the 2020 school year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Student achievement data declined by 14% in English Language Arts from 2019-2023 and by 10% in mathematics from 2019-2023. The Georgia Milestones Assessment, administered to third through fifth-grade students, provided information for approximately half the student population.

Fletcher Elementary School, along with all schools in Connor County, conducted the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) universal screener at the beginning, middle, and end of each school year. The MAP assessment provided information about student achievement for students in first through fifth grade; therefore, a more comprehensive analysis took place. Figure 3.3 represents the achievement levels of students in the first through fifth grades during the 2022-2023 school year in English Language Arts.

Figure 3.3

Fletcher Elementary School NWEA MAP Results: English Language Arts 2022-2023

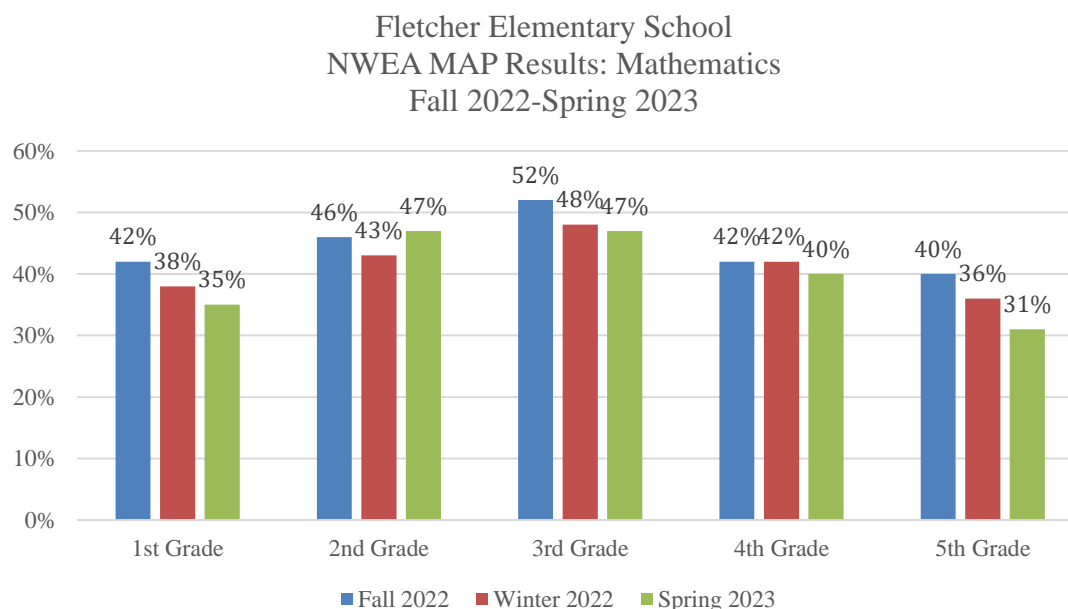


Note. Students scoring at or above expectations as reported by Measures of Academic Progress (NWEA).

Figure 3.4 details the achievement levels of FES first through fifth grade in mathematics for the 2022-2023 school year. Information about the first and second-grade students provided significant value as the students matriculate through the school and complete the state assessments within two years.

Figure 3.4

Fletcher Elementary School NWEA MAP Results: Mathematics 2022-2023



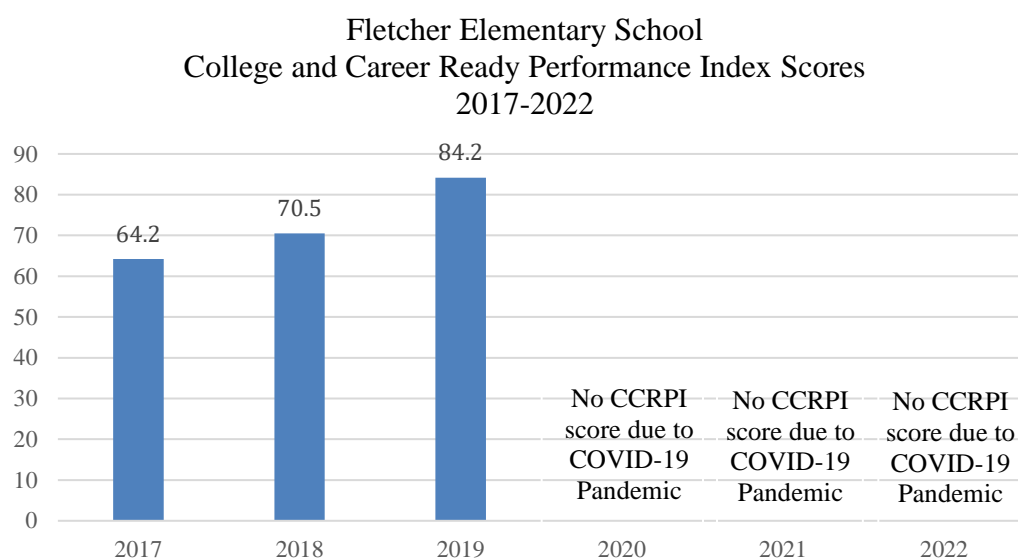
Note. Students scoring at or above expectations as reported by Measures of Academic Progress (NWEA).

FES student scores decreased in the areas of meeting or exceeding expectations according to MAP in English Language Arts and Mathematics from fall to spring in all grades except second grade. The most significant decrease in English Language Arts occurred in third grade, with a decrease of 15% from fall to spring administrations. The largest decline in Mathematics was in fifth grade, with a 9% slide.

The Georgia Department of Education uses the College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) to rate schools according to academic, attendance, climate, and behavior data. The scores represent each school's ability to prepare students for future endeavors. Figure 3.5 represents the CCRPI score earned by FES since 2017.

Figure 3.5

College and Career Ready Performance Index Scores: Fletcher Elementary School



Note. As reported by the Georgia Department of Education (2023).

Staff Characteristics

Fletcher Elementary School faculty and staff during the research year included one principal, two assistant principals, two counselors, one mental health and wellness facilitator, one instructional coach, teachers, paraprofessionals, and other classified staff members such as front office staff, and one clinic aide. There were 72 certified educators: 35 females and 2 males served as classroom teachers. The teacher demographics were 95% white and 5% black. The overall certified staff demographics were 81% white, 15% black, 3% Hispanic, and 1% Asian. The demographics of the staff members at FES did not represent the diverse population of the student body.

The FES administrative team included the principal, two assistant principals, two counselors, one mental health and wellness facilitator (MHWF), one Instructional Effectiveness Facilitator (IEF), and one Student Support Facilitator (SSF). One of the administrative team

members was male. The administrative team is 37.5% white, 50% black, and 12.5% Hispanic. One member of the administrative team held an undergraduate degree in psychology, one member held a master's degree, four members held a specialist degree, and two members held a doctorate degree. The team consisted of new members during the 2023-2024 school year as the principal was newly appointed to FES, one assistant principal began their first year in administration, and one counselor began midway through the 2022-2023 school year.

The 2023-2024 school year began with 77% of teachers returning from the previous year. Replacing the 15 teachers who left at the end of 2022-2023, coupled with the increase in enrollment, led to the school hiring 24 new staff members. The ongoing teacher shortage underscored the difficulty of filling vacancies; therefore, four of the educators hired held a provisional certificate and sought to complete an alternative certification program. At the time of this study, leadership retention was 33%, with the principal and one assistant principal beginning their first year leading FES.

The building leadership team had significant turnover prior to the new administration joining FES. Of the grade-level chairs who served on the building leadership team in the 2022-2023 school year, two remained in the position of grade-level chair for the 2023-2024 school year.

Factors Causing Disruption

The end of the 2019-2020 school year brought the most significant disruption to education with the COVID-19 Pandemic. Students in the state of Georgia went home on March 13, 2020, with their computers and packets quickly thrown together by the teachers. The focus of district and building leaders during that time was on basic needs such as food, shelter, and safety. Classroom instruction via online programs and video conferencing prioritized essential standards

and supported students. The 2020-2021 school year, although anticipated initially as a typical start, began in a virtual setting for all schools in CCSD. The district superintendent and board of education placed a staggered return to buildings in place after the first six weeks of school. The administration spent most of its time reviewing close contacts, contacting families, and quarantining individuals for weeks.

Due to the back and forth of student and teacher attendance, teachers juggled a hybrid teaching model with students in the classroom and students at home. The administration worked to lessen the load on the teachers and removed extra requirements such as focus teams and additional meetings. Despite the hybrid environment, FES was one of the schools where over 90% of students returned to the building. Teachers felt overwhelmed and mental health concerns took priority over true data analysis and rigorous instruction and monitoring. When the 2023-2024 school year began, the academic data highlighted significant learning loss and the need for courageous conversations about teaching and learning.

Data Sources

Deteriorating student achievement and heightened teacher attrition rates at Fletcher Elementary School indicated the urgent need for intervention. The purpose of the study was to examine the perceptions of teacher leaders, known as grade-level chairs, on their impact on overall school improvement through their leadership practices.

Participants

The grade-level chairs identified to represent their teams on the building leadership team for the 2023-2024 school year served as participants in the study. After the 2022-2023 school year, various leadership team members moved to different grade levels according to the needs of FES. The team shifts occurred alongside 67% of the grade-level chairs ending their two-year

term on the building leadership team. The only two teacher leaders eligible to return in the capacity of the grade-level chair were the first-grade and fourth-grade representatives. Therefore, the opportunity to serve in a leadership capacity at FES opened to all staff interested in fulfilling the role.

Prior to the arrival of the researcher, also known as the principal at FES, grade-level chair responsibilities fell on whomever the administration identified as capable. However, the individual did not always wish to serve in such a role. The 2023-2024 school year was the first year with the researcher as principal. The researcher previously served as an assistant principal at the school. During the summer of 2023, the researcher met with each teacher on the leadership team. Teachers often expressed interest in serving the school community in a greater capacity. The researcher maintained the belief that educators who seek ways to contribute to the school must have opportunities to do so, or they could potentially look elsewhere to support professional goals.

Selection Criteria

The significant needs of the school required various types of leaders, as opposed to one formal position, to serve as decision-makers and creative thinkers. Bagwell (2019) surmised,

Efforts to close the opportunity gap will likely fall flat, or even fail, if the responsibility for this work is concentrated on only one or two individuals solely because they possess formal leadership roles instead of distributing the work broadly across the school. (p. 98)

The selection of teachers for the role of grade-level chair was intentional and criterion-based, “given the close proximity of department chairs to the teachers in their departments, they are in ideal positions to provide support, guidance, and encouragement” (Zepeda & Kruskamp, 2007, p.

49). Criteria included the teacher leader expressing interest in fulfilling the role of grade-level chair to the researcher.

Prior to expressing interest, teachers understood that the members of the building leadership team committed to two years of service, bi-monthly meetings with the administrative team members, mandatory professional learning to develop leadership capacity, redelivery of professional learning to teams, and observation of team meetings by members of the Action Research Design Team and administrative team. Therefore, the sample size depended on the number of teachers who met the criteria to serve as grade-level chairs and were willing to participate in the study.

During the design and selection process, one significant sampling difficulty emerged. The researcher attempted to require a minimum of three years of teaching at Fletcher Elementary School; however, the third-grade team needed an individual who met this criterion. The unsuccessful identification of FES educators who met the final requirement of time teaching at the school further supported the purpose of the study, which sought to develop leadership capacity in grade-level chairs. The lack of stability in staff members impeded collaboration, hindered the development of relational trust among stakeholders, and increased stress among professionals. Developing leadership capacity and “sharing power allows the teacher to have a voice in school decisions, which in turn, develops a sense of trust between the leadership and not only teachers in the building but also all stakeholders” (Graham, 2018, p. 24). Educators require trust, or they will find another school or, more specifically, another leader to support the work of school improvement.

The following section details the data collection methods the Action Research Design Team used in this action research study.

Data Collection Methods

Successful school leaders increase the leadership capacities of teachers after establishing and reinforcing levels of trust (Day et al., 2016). The researcher sought to cultivate trust in the research process and the eventual results; therefore, triangulation of data occurred to include multiple data sources from various moments of the study from the perspectives of different individuals (Bloomberg, 2023). The action research study required the triangulation of qualitative data collection methods. Oliver-Hoyo and Allen (2006) stated, “Triangulation involves the careful reviewing of data collected through different methods in order to achieve a more accurate and valid estimate of qualitative results for a particular construct” (p. 42).

Data collected and triangulated for this study included:

1. Questionnaires completed by the members of the ARIT prior to cycle one, after the delivery of professional learning for grade-level chairs in cycle one, and at the end of cycle two to identify perceptions of the impact and responsibilities of a grade-level chair;
2. Interviews between the researcher and the members of the ARIT at the beginning, middle, and end of the study;
3. Observations of team meetings led by grade-level chairs throughout the study;
4. Researcher journal notes from interviews, professional learning sessions, and observations conducted throughout the study;
5. Artifacts, including questionnaire responses, observations, and participant journal notes guided the ARDT when designing professional learning for grade-level chairs to increase leadership capacity and enhance school improvement efforts.

Questionnaires

Questionnaires completed throughout the study served as one data collection method, with the first inquiring about the perceptions of grade-level chairs' responsibilities and impact on school improvement initiatives and efforts. The primary purpose of questionnaires, according to Glanz (2014), is to "survey respondents' attitudes toward a particular issue" (p. 120). In addition, members of the ARDT and ARIT answered open-ended inquiries to provide qualitative data that guided the next steps of the study.

The second questionnaire, provided in Table 3.4, collected qualitative responses from the design and implementation team members about the overall action research process. Grade-level chairs provided in-depth narratives to the open-ended questions about their leadership capacity development from the onset of the study to the conclusion. In addition, design team members provided insight to the researcher about the action research process and its impact on the teacher leaders.

Table 3.4

Sample of Pre-Cycle 1 Questionnaire

Research Questions	Questionnaire Questions
Research Question 1:	How do you define the role of the grade-level chair?
How do teachers perceive the leadership team's roles, responsibilities, and overall impact in one public, suburban elementary school?	What do you believe is the purpose of grade-level chairs?
	What responsibilities does the grade-level chair have at your school?

Research Question 2:

How do administrators foster and develop leadership capacity in grade-level chairs in a public, suburban elementary school?

What do you believe is the responsibility of administrators, specifically with grade-level chairs?

What do you believe is the responsibility of the grade-level chair with school improvement plans?

Research Question 3:

How does the action research team describe the impact of the action research process on the practice of the leadership team in one public, suburban elementary school?

Please describe professional learning from which you would benefit in teacher leadership practices.

Please share any insights or information about teacher leadership that you have not yet shared within the questionnaire.

Interviews

The researcher conducted interviews with the members of the ARIT at the beginning, middle, and conclusion of the study. The benefits of individual interviews include “the potential to capture a person’s perspective of an event or experience” (Bloomberg, 2023, p. 282; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Glanz, 2014). Open-ended questions yielded descriptive data from each interviewee about the impact of grade-level chairs on school improvement efforts. In addition, responses from the design team members shed light on beliefs and perceptions of specific responsibilities of those in the role of grade-level chair. Teacher leaders also answered questions about desired professional learning to increase their leadership capacity.

Interviews after the study encouraged each interviewee to reflect on the interventions. In addition, the semi-structured interviews, sampled in Table 3.5, inquired about the shifts in leadership capacity and perceptions of the role.

Table 3.5*Sample of Pre-Cycle 1 Interview Questions*

Research Questions	Interview Questions
Research Question 1:	What led you to become a grade-level chair? How were you selected for this role? (RQ1, RQ2)
How do teachers perceive the leadership team's roles, responsibilities, and overall impact in one public, suburban elementary school?	Does your role as grade-level chair have a detailed description of responsibilities? (RQ1) What do you believe is the role of a grade-level chair or teacher leader? What responsibilities should this include? (RQ1) In reality, what roles and responsibilities does the grade-level chair fulfill at your school? (RQ1)
Research Question 2:	How long have you been in a teacher leadership ("grade-level chair") role? (RQ2)
How do administrators foster and develop leadership capacity in grade-level chairs in a public, suburban elementary school?	How effective do you feel as a teacher leader or grade-level chair? (RQ2) What professional learning opportunities have you participated in to develop as a teacher leader? (RQ2) What leadership opportunities exist at your school? (RQ2) What should administrators do to support your development as a teacher leader? Please elaborate. (RQ2)

Focus Groups

The study included focus groups with the ARDT. Focus Groups "are dynamic group discussions used to collect information" (Harrell & Bradley, 2009, p. 6) and "an extended way of

the interview method, a more specific in-depth group interview with discussion” (Gundumogula, 2020, p. 299). The design team discussed various distributed leadership models, interview transcripts, questionnaire responses, and observation data throughout the action research cycles. Table 3.6 provides the script used in the focus groups to determine the professional learning needs of the implementation team members.

Table 3.6

Sample of Focus Group Script

Research Questions	Researcher Script
<p>Research Question 1:</p> <p>How do teachers perceive the leadership team's roles, responsibilities, and overall impact in one public, suburban elementary school?</p>	<p>Our perception survey results are ready for analysis as we prepare for the first intervention. Please review the data independently and prepare for a discussion about the next steps. <i>Note: The Action Research Design Team will review perception questionnaire data and interview results. The ARDT will identify themes that emerge from the data and discuss the necessary research and professional learning required for cycle 1.</i></p>
<p>Research Question 2:</p> <p>How do administrators foster and develop leadership capacity in grade-level chairs in a public, suburban elementary school?</p>	
<p>Research Question 3:</p> <p>How does the action research team describe the impact of the action research process on the practice of the leadership team in one public, suburban elementary school?</p>	

Observation Notes

Observations of the grade-level chairs occurred during team meetings which the teacher leader facilitated. The researcher collected data on the impact of the grade-level chair on their respective teams both before and after engaging in professional learning designed to increase leadership capacity. Field notes assisted the researcher in gathering further data and addressing

the research questions. Observations in qualitative research “offers a firsthand account of the situation under study, and when combined with interviewing and document analysis, allows for holistic interpretation of the phenomenon being investigated” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, pp. 160-161). All implementation team members understood the researcher’s role during observations as both the data collector and participant for collaboration and support.

Researcher’s Journal

Avison et al. (1999) expressed the importance of action researchers reflecting after interventions to determine the effects and implications. Coghlan (2019) identified journals as reflection tools and defined the research journal as a “reflective notebook that captures both events of the project and one’s own thoughts and feelings about the events and one’s own learning-in-action” (p. 191). The researcher maintained a journal throughout the study to record observations, collect data and reflect on actions. Information maintained in the journal included personal reflections of the researcher, notes from the action research design team, and notes from the action research implementation team. Furthermore, members of both the ARDT and ARIT received recommendations to document learning and reflections from their perspectives throughout the action research study.

Artifacts

Documentation collected throughout the action research study served as artifacts and qualitative data. For example, Bloomberg (2023) surmised that written texts serve as artifacts, including mission statements, lesson plans, memos, and more. Likewise, this study’s written texts included questionnaires completed by implementation team members, interview questions, professional learning resources, and more.

Qualitative data collection and analysis by the action research design team supported the study's interventions. Interventions provided the ongoing data to drive the decisions for future actions that supported the grade-level chairs' development of leadership capacity.

Interventions

Trunk Sirca and Shapiro (2007) examined the differences in action research compared to other study forms: "Formal research has a clear plan, method, and timelines, action research models are wide open. The process cannot be set, fixed [or] finite. Rather, the course it takes depends on what develops in the research process" (p. 101). The primary researcher in the study engaged in social constructivist practices, acted as a knowledge facilitator, and provided experiences for members of the implementation team.

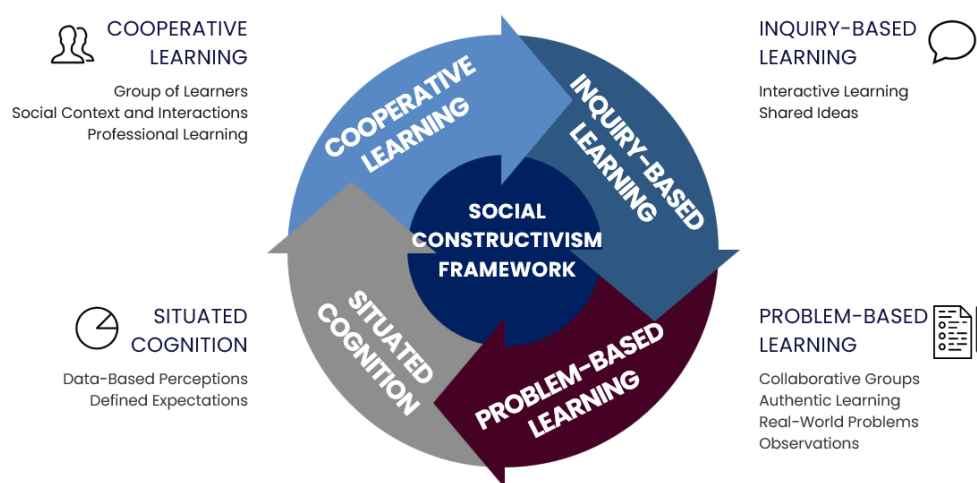
The design of the specific interventions was to increase the leadership capacity of the grade-level chairs as they became "active participants in constructing their own meaning based on strongly held preconceptions" (Aldridge et al., 2004, p. 245). Interventions, according to Argyris and Schon (1991) and cited by Dickens and Watkins (1999), are also known as "experiments that bear the double burden of testing hypotheses and effecting some (putatively) desirable change in the situation" (p. 129).

The purpose of the study was to increase the leadership capacity of grade-level chairs while fostering the school culture to accept the expertise of their teacher-leader peers to effect change. Adams (2006) called for the researcher to cultivate a safe environment where knowledge construction and social mediation are paramount. The researcher collected perception data from stakeholders at the onset of the study, throughout the intervention process, and after the study to monitor the impact of grade-level chairs' leadership practices on school improvement efforts.

Figure 3.6 illustrates the social constructivism framework, adapted from Vygotsky (1962) and Kalpana (2013), used in the study.

Figure 3.6

Social Constructivism Framework



Note. Adapted from Kalpana (2013); Vygotsky (1962).

Situated Cognition

The context within which the grade-level chairs conduct their work uniquely connects to the social setting at Fletcher Elementary School. It is challenging to apply to other environments; therefore, the information collected to inform interventions must connect to the situation (Kalpana, 2013). Thus, the first intervention of the study required the Action Research Design Team to provide participants with a questionnaire to gather perceptions about the roles, responsibilities, impacts, and expectations of the teacher leaders known as grade-level chairs at FES. The design team sought to use collected data to prepare clear expectations and measures of the impact of the grade-level chairs' leadership practices combined with data-driven professional learning.

Cooperative Learning

Action research requires collaborative, or cooperative, learning practices and is “never solitary” (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010, p. 20). Powell and Kalina (2009) refer to the founding father of constructivism, Lev Vygotsky, in the belief that learning new practices and developing deeper understanding occurs more effectively when social interaction occurs. Accordingly, the Action Research Implementation Team engaged in cooperative learning through monthly professional learning sessions. Based on data from the previous intervention, sessions sought to increase the leadership capacity and practices of each grade-level chair.

Inquiry-Based Learning

Kalpana (2014) summarized inquiry-based learning with social constructivism as researchers working together to “formulate hypotheses to explain the event; collect the relevant data to test the hypotheses and draw conclusions” (p. 29). Members of the implementation team acquired leadership skills and practices through monthly professional learning sessions. Within these sessions, they participated in simulations that required trials of the skills taught in professional learning.

Problem-Based Learning

Similar to inquiry-based learning, problem-based learning requires collaborative groups to seek solutions to problems; however, the problem must be faithful to the context. This method “develops flexibility in thinking and reasoning skills” (Kalpana, 2014, p. 29). The Action Research Design Team conducted observations to collect data and better understand the leadership development of each grade-level chair. The observations provided insight to determine further professional learning needs, coaching cycles, and feedback to increase capacity among the teacher leaders. Observations occurred after each monthly professional learning

session with the grade-level chairs. The outlined intervention cycle of the action research study, provided in Table 3.7, includes the aligned segment of the framework and frequency details.

Table 3.7

Intervention Cycle

Intervention Cycle	Timeline	Social Constructivism Framework	Tasks	Purpose
Pre-Cycle 1	July 2023	Situated Cognition	Perception Questionnaire and Interviews ARIT	Collection of Perception Data
Cycle 1	August 2023	Cooperative Learning	Professional Learning	Based on Perception Data
	September 2023	Problem-Based Learning	Observations of ARIT	Observations of Grade-Level Chairs
Pre-Cycle 2	October 2023	Situated Cognition	Interviews with ARIT members	Collection of Perception Data
Cycle 2	November 2023	Inquiry-Based Learning	Professional Learning	Based on Perception Data
	December 2023	Problem-Based Learning	Observations of ARIT	Observations of Grade-Level Chairs
Post Cycle 2	December 2023	Situated Cognition	Perception Questionnaire and Interviews with ARIT members	Collection of Perception Data

Data analysis occurred throughout the intervention process. Data collection methods included questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, and observations. The Action Research Design Team reviewed and interpreted each piece of data to determine the necessary steps of the study.

Data Analysis Methods

Qualitative research aims to generate a “deep and nuanced understanding of a given phenomenon” (Lester et al., 2020, p. 95). Action research calls for multiple data collection methods and sources for the purpose of triangulation to “enhance the completeness and confirmation of data in research findings” (Thurmond, p. 257, 2001). Furthermore, Ngulube (2015) identifies the importance of creating meaning and making sense of the data through data analysis. Lester et al. (2020) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016) affirm qualitative data analysis is ongoing, nonlinear, and iterative. Additionally, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) support qualitative data analysis as constant as “the data can be unfocused, repetitious, and overwhelming in the sheer volume of material that needs to be processed” when reviewed after the study.

Coghlan (2019) discussed the cyclical nature of the action research process, where researchers assess a situation calling for change, create an action plan, implement the action, evaluate the action, and determine future cycles of action to achieve the desired change. Continuous data analysis and reflection throughout the study provide insight into the effectiveness of interventions designed to cultivate change. Bloomberg (2015) stated, “Without thorough engagement in data analysis, the findings cannot present an argument to support the research questions” (p. 15).

Coding

The purpose of the study was to increase the leadership capacity of grade-level chairs and included interviews, observations, focus groups, and questionnaires as data collection methods. The significant amount of data collection required coding to analyze trends within the Action Research Implementation Team members and Action Research Design Team members as groups and individuals. Oun and Bach (2014) identified coding as an interpretive technique that

organizes results and introduces interpretations. Creswell et al. (2007) described the coding process as requiring multiple reviews of the collected data followed by open coding, that is, reviewing for major categories or themes of information.

After open coding, “axial coding emerges in which the researcher identifies one or more of the open-coding categories (called the core phenomenon) and reexamines the data or collects new data to build a model around this core phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 249). Bloomberg (2023) described the process identified by Creswell et al. (2007) when depicting axial coding as providing insight into the causes, strategies, contextual and intervening conditions, and consequences of the “core phenomenon.” The final process of coding involved confirming the alignment of the theory with data and conducting literature reviews to develop “the grounded theory and understanding its broader significance” (Bloomberg, 2023, p. 96).

Seidman (2019) labeled coding as a “conventional way of presenting and analyzing interview data” (p. 133) as researchers search for connecting themes and patterns among the transcripts to gain detailed information about lived experiences and histories. Identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes in data allows for a thorough thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Thematic Analysis

Qualitative research poses challenges due to the open-ended nature of conducting research, collecting data, and analyzing results (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018) as opposed to quantitative methods that determine results using numerical data. Swain (2018) argued that thematic analysis is an extensively used method in qualitative research analysis; however, “there is no clear agreement about how researchers can rigorously apply the method” (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 2). Lester et al. (2020) affirmed, the “value of structuring data analysis in phases is that

it creates a transparent process for both the qualitative researcher and (ultimately) the reader of a given research report” (p. 98). Stahl and King (2020) expounded on the required merit of qualitative studies as the results “might provide guidance in evaluating or revising” (p. 28) practices or programs to initiate change.

Braun and Clarke (2006) assert a step-by-step guide, while not specific to only thematic analysis processes, maintains the flexibility of qualitative research while ensuring the analysis is valid. Nowell et al. (2017) illustrated Braun and Clarke’s (2006) step-by-step approach, known as phases, with the aligned purpose of establishing trustworthiness. The phases, the explanations, and the means of establishing trustworthiness are provided in Table 3.8.

Table 3.8

Thematic Analysis Phases – Explanations and Means of Establishing Trustworthiness

Thematic Analysis Phases	Explanation	Means of Establishing Trustworthiness
Phase 1: Familiarizing yourself with your data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transcribing data (if necessary) • Reading and re-reading the data • Noting down initial ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prolong engagement with data • Triangulate different data collection modes Document theoretical and reflective thoughts • Document thoughts about potential codes/themes • Store raw data in well-organized archives • Keep records of all data field notes, transcripts, and reflexive journals
Phase 2: Generating initial codes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set • Collating data relevant to each code 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer debriefing • Researcher triangulation • Reflexive journaling • Use of a coding framework • Audit trail of code generation • Documentation of all team meetings and peer debriefings

Phase 3: Searching for themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collating codes into potential themes • Gathering all data relevant to each potential theme 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researcher triangulation • Diagramming to make sense of theme connections • Keep detailed notes about the development and hierarchies of concepts and themes
Phase 4: Reviewing themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2) • Generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researcher triangulation • Themes and subthemes vetted by team members • Test for referential adequacy by returning to raw data
Phase 5: Defining and naming themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme and the overall story told by the analysis • Generating clear definitions and names for each theme 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researcher triangulation • Peer debriefing • Team consensus on themes • Documentation of team meetings regarding themes • Documentation of theme naming
Phase 6: Producing the report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The final opportunity for analysis • Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples • Final analysis of selected extracts • Relating back the analysis to the research question and literature • Produce a scholarly report on the analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Member checking • Peer debriefing • Describing the process of coding and analysis in sufficient details • Thick descriptions of context • Description of the audit trail • Report on reasons for theoretical, methodological, and analytical choices throughout the entire study

Note. Adapted from Braun and Clarke's Phases of Thematic Analysis (2006) and Nowell et al.'s

Phases of Thematic Analysis and Establishing Trustworthiness (2017).

Conducting research requires ethical practices that promote reliability and validity. For example, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested practices such as triangulation, reviewing interpretations with interviewed individuals, reflecting with peers about findings, and leaving an audit trail to support the research's reliability and validity.

Reliability, Validity, and Generalizability

Reliability, also referred to as consistency, in qualitative studies is “the extent to which repeated administration of a measure will provide the same data or the extent to which a measure administered once, but by different people, produces equivalent results” (Bloomberg, 2023, p. 119). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) declared, “All research is concerned with producing valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner” (p. 237). Multiple data collection methods and thorough analysis promote reliable and valid results and interpretations of qualitative research studies. Thurmond (2001) stated when used appropriately, “triangulation might enhance the completeness and confirmation of data in research findings of qualitative research” (p. 257). Data triangulation facilitated increased trustworthiness in the process and results of the study. Elo et al. (2014) cited the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985) when identifying “the aim of trustworthiness in a qualitative inquiry is to support the argument that the inquiry’s findings are “worth paying attention to” (p.2).

This action research study provided multiple data sources analyzed using qualitative data analysis strategies. Cope (2014) noted strategies to enhance trustworthiness in qualitative studies, as outlined in Table 3.6, such as an audit trail, member checking, and sharing strategies used to provide evidence using rich descriptions.

Table 3.9*Enhancing Credibility and Trustworthiness*

Strategy	Description	Examples
Audit Trail	Collection of materials and notes used in the research process that documents the researcher's decisions and assumptions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interview Transcripts • Data Analysis and Process Notes • Drafts of the Final Report
Member Checking	The researcher communicates a summary of the themes that emerged and requests feedback from participants after the completion of the data analysis.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interview Transcript Data with Coding • Emerged Themes
Reporting	The researcher shares the strategies performed with the readers. The strategies include rich descriptions of the strategies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quotes from Transcripts • Researcher Journal

Note. Adapted from Cope (2014).

Subjectivity Statement

Researchers serve as instruments of data collection and analysis in qualitative research and therefore possess personal biases that may impact a study. Furthermore, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) recommend the researcher recognize and monitor biases "in relation to the theoretical framework and in light of the researcher's own interests, to make clear how they may be shaping the collection and interpretation of the data" (p. 16). Cypress (2017) surmised that researcher bias occurs more commonly in qualitative studies as the research is often exploratory; therefore, researchers must use reflexivity to understand personal bias. Reflexivity, as defined by Cypress (2017), "means that the researchers actively engage in critical self-reflection about their potential biases and predispositions that they bring to the qualitative study. Through reflexivity,

researchers become more self-aware and monitor and attempt to control their biases" (p. 259).

The researcher, also serving as principal, identified potential biases and individual perceptions of grade-level chairs' roles, responsibilities, and impacts. Before fulfilling the principal role, the researcher served as a leadership team member and participated in professional development to increase leadership capacity and impact. The researcher's experiences while acting as a grade-level chair combined with the role of principal led to questionnaires and interview questions that encouraged individual reflections.

Limitations

The purpose of the study was to increase leadership capacity in grade-level chairs in one public, suburban elementary school. Due to the unique setting and context of the qualitative research study, limitations arose. The primary limitation was the timeframe in which the study took place. The researcher conducted two action research cycles, beginning in August 2023 and ending in December 2023.

Another limitation included the dual role of the researcher as a participant and observer. In addition, the researcher held a position of authority as the building principal. Although participants received frequent reminders of their voluntary participation, the authoritative role of the researcher served as a barrier that required extensive efforts to cultivate a safe environment of reflection and dialogue.

Finally, the study included teacher leaders from one elementary school in the United States Southeast region, known as grade-level chairs. The unique demographics, teacher retention rates, and academic achievement history limit the transferability of the research findings to schools with different contexts.

Chapter Summary

This chapter described the research methods and design for this action research study. Using qualitative data collection methods and analysis, the researcher sought to understand how to increase the leadership capacity of teacher leaders to drive change in the complexity of an elementary school setting. The data collection methods included interviews, focus groups, perception questionnaires, and observations of the teacher leaders. Throughout the two action research cycles, the researcher used qualitative data analysis methods such as coding to review interview responses, identify common themes, and provide professional development for implementation team members.

The study pursued understanding the perceptions of teacher leaders' roles, responsibilities, and impact on school improvement and change, as well as increasing leadership capacity. The next chapter presents the findings from the study at Fletcher Elementary School.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS FROM THE ACTION RESEARCH CASE

The purpose of the study was to examine and understand how to increase the leadership capacity of grade-level chairs in one public, suburban elementary school. Teacher leaders, also known as grade-level chairs, who served on the building leadership team, had the opportunity to explore the perceptions of the grade-level chair role and work with administrators to enhance their impact within their teams. The research questions that guided this study included:

1. How do teachers perceive the leadership team's roles, responsibilities, and overall impact in one public, suburban elementary school?
2. How do administrators foster and develop leadership capacity in grade-level chairs in a public, suburban elementary school?
3. How does the action research team describe the impact of the action research process on the practice of the leadership team in one public, suburban elementary school?

This chapter includes a description of the study's context, identifies the problem facing the school, expounds upon the story and outcomes of the story, and concludes with the findings of the action research cycles.

Context of the Study

Fletcher Elementary School (pseudonym) serves a suburban community approximately 25 miles from the state capital. The school opened in 2002 and, until the time of the study, operated under the leadership of the same principal. FES is one of 28 Connor County School District elementary schools and currently serves approximately 850 students. The average school

in CCSD serves 624 students, making FES one of the largest schools in the county. The increasing student population also provided a shift in the school's demographics, an increase in individuals qualifying for free and reduced meals, and changes to the subgroups, as outlined in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1

Student Subgroup Data During FY22, FY23, and FY24

	FY22		FY23		FY24	
	Number of Students	Percentage	Number of Students	Percentage	Number of Students	Percentage
Students with Disabilities	159	18.8%	177	18.69%		
Gifted			159	16.79%		
English Language Learners	26	3.1%	29	3.06%		
504 Plan			25	2.84%		
Economically Disadvantaged	295	34.7%	275	34.7%		

Note. Enrollment data retrieved from the Connor County Student Information System and includes students enrolled as of the last day of the school year.

The surge in the population of more than 100 students, particularly during the 2022 and 2023 school years, required additional teachers and support staff to be hired and trained.

Identifying quality educators during these years proved difficult due to the national teacher shortage and the school's location being further from the interstate than others. The 2023-2024 school year began with 22 teachers who were new to the school, 5 of whom did not yet hold a completed teaching certification in the state. Table 4.2 summarizes the staff members new to the school and their respective grade levels or departments during the study.

Table 4.2*Fletcher Elementary School: FY24 New Teachers and Leaders*

Grade Level or Department	Number	Number with Full Certification
Kindergarten	2	1
1 st Grade	5	3
2 nd Grade	2	2
3 rd Grade	4	4
4 th Grade	2	2
5 th Grade	2	1
Special Education	5	4
Administration	2	2
Total	24	19

Due to population, FES required an administrative team of two assistant principals and one principal. Two of the administrators were among the new staff members. One of the assistant principals was new to the school, the district, and the role for the 2023-2024 school year. While in the third year of the position, the principal served the first two years at another school in the same district. Uniquely, the principal served at FES as an assistant principal for the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years. The second assistant principal began their fifth year of service during the study.

State metrics highlighted declining students' academic achievement across all districts, and FES followed a similar pattern. Before schools mandated virtual learning in 2020, the state reported increased student results on the state assessment between 2018 and 2019 at FES, as shown in Table 4.3. Many narratives point to the COVID-19 pandemic as the root cause for

decreased student achievement results; however, there are multiple facets to the deterioration of graduation rates, reading levels, and students performing at or above grade-level expectations in mathematics and English Language Arts.

Table 4.3

Fletcher Elementary School State Assessment Achievement Results: Pre-Pandemic

	2018	2019	
	Content Mastery	Content Mastery	+/- Previous Year
English Language Arts	54.83	63.29	+8.46
Mathematics	59.79	69.88	+10.09
Science	44.77	55.77	+11.00
Social Studies	46.28	59.24	+12.96

Note. Content mastery data retrieved from the Georgia Department of Education College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI).

Despite historic gains in academic achievement at FES, the community's problems were vastly different than before the pandemic. The results from the same state assessment during the first three administrations after COVID-19 note a decline in both English Language Arts and Mathematics. Results from the Spring 2023 administration revealed that 39% of FES students performed at the level of Beginning Learner, 33% performed at the level of Developing Learner, 21% performed at the level of Proficient Learner, and 7% performed at the level of Distinguished Learner in English Language Arts.

Similarly, in mathematics, 39% of students performed at the level of Beginning Learner, 34% at the level of Developing Learner, 21% at the level of Proficient Learner, and 6% at the level of Distinguished Learner. The teachers and staff at FES identified the low levels of achievement when compared to the Spring 2022 administration, detailed in Table 4.4, and understood the need for an immediate turnaround.

Table 4.4*Fletcher Elementary School State Assessment Achievement Results: Post-Pandemic*

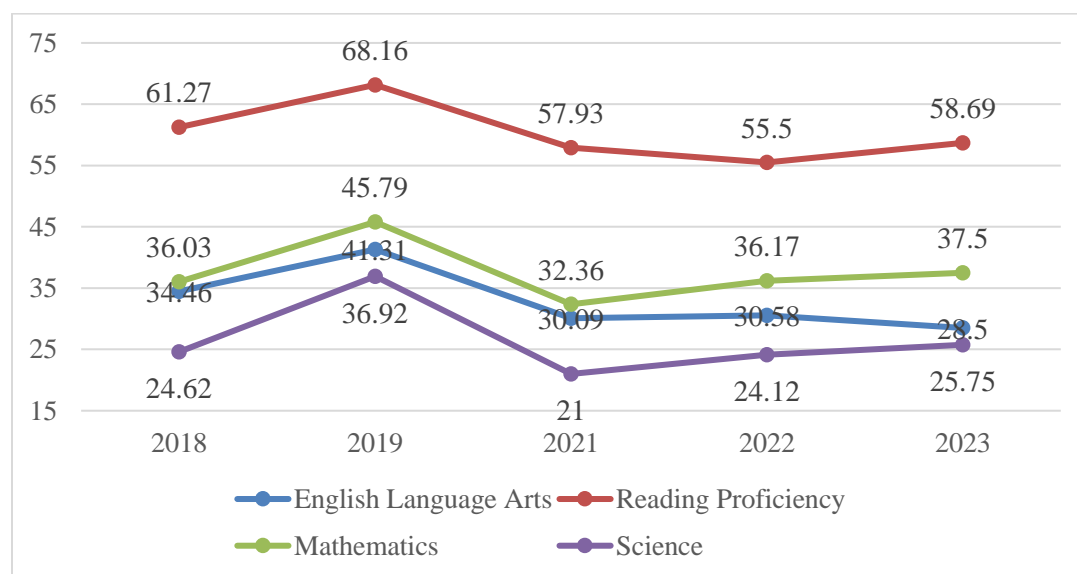
English Language Arts	2022	2023	+/- Previous Year
Beginning Learner	34.04%	39.00%	+ 4.96%
Developing Learner	35.37%	32.50%	- 2.87%
Proficient Learner	23.40%	21.50%	- 1.9%
Distinguished Learner	7.18%	7.00%	- .18%
Mathematics	2022	2023	+/- Previous Year
Beginning Learner	26.86%	28.75%	+ 1.89%
Developing Learner	36.97%	33.75%	- 3.22%
Proficient Learner	26.60%	28.25%	+ 1.65%
Distinguished Learner	9.57%	9.25%	- .32%

Note. Content mastery data retrieved from the Georgia Department of Education College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI).

Declining academic achievement at FES contradicts the school's reputation as one of the top-performing buildings in Connor County Schools. Figure 4.1 depicts the percentage of third through fifth-grade students who performed at or above grade-level expectations on the state assessment before and after the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Figure 4.1

Fletcher Elementary School State Assessment Results By Subject: 2018-2023



Note. Content mastery data retrieved from the Georgia Department of Education College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI).

Prior to 2020, more than 68% of students at FES read on or above grade-level expectations according to Lexile Levels. This increase was almost 6% from the previous administration. The Spring 2023 administration data revealed that reading proficiency is not yet at the levels reported before the pandemic. The pattern continues for all other subject areas assessed on the state assessment.

Action Research Implementation Team

At the beginning of each school year, the building leadership team conducts an in-depth data analysis of academic achievement, academic growth, attendance, behavior, demographics, subgroup achievement, family engagement, and the school's comprehensive needs. The team members represent the different grade levels and departments of the school, thus providing unique and expert views of the needs of their colleagues and students.

Due to the extensive process conducted by the grade-level chairs to review the data and formulate goals for the upcoming school year, the teachers serving as grade-level chairs received the invitation to participate in the action research study. The work required to move the school toward greater success calls for the teacher leaders to enhance the effectiveness of their teammates. For this study, the members selected represented each grade level and the special education department at FES. Table 4.5 details the information about each grade-level chair, the number of years of experience in education, the years served as grade-level chair at FES, and whether or not the individual holds a leadership certification.

Table 4.5

Fletcher Elementary School: Action Research Implementation Team Members

Member	Years in Education	Years as Grade-Level Chair at FES	Leadership Certification
Kindergarten Chair	17	1	No
First Grade Chair	17	7	No
Second Grade Chair	12	0	No
Third Grade Chair	6	0	No
Fourth Grade Chair	12	1	No
Fifth Grade Chair	26	5	No
ESE Chair	26	4	No

The implementation team, comprised of seven members who served on the Building Leadership Team (BLT), collectively possessed 116 years of teaching experience and 18 years as the grade-level or department chair at FES. During the qualitative action research study, two members began their first year as grade-level chairs at FES.

The initial meeting with the implementation team members in July 2023 included a review of the purpose of the study and established a sense of urgency behind the research. The researcher obtained participant consent from all members and provided the grade-level chairs with the Pre-Cycle I questionnaire (See Appendix B) to begin data collection surrounding the perceptions of teacher leaders' roles, responsibilities, and impacts. The primary goal of the implementation team was to engage in the study through semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and participation in professional development to increase the leadership capacity based on their differentiated needs.

Action Research Design Team

The action research design team comprised the principal, two assistant principals, the student support facilitator, and the instructional coach (the Instructional Effectiveness Facilitator) at Fletcher Elementary School. The principal had five years of administrative experience, two years as an assistant principal, and less than one year as the principal at FES. Before taking on administrative roles, the principal served as an elementary school teacher within Connor County School District for seven years. The two assistant principals had a combined 25 years of elementary teaching experience and five years of administrative experience. The instructional coach had 18 years of elementary teaching experience, with the latter eight years serving as the sole instructional coach at FES. The coach's role included supporting all teachers across the school with instructional strategies, data analysis, classroom management, and any other topics identified as a need for the staff. The student support facilitator at FES had 16 years of experience in the elementary school setting at the onset of the study. The SSF position supported the educators within the exceptional student education department in areas such as special education compliance, data collection, progress monitoring, and instructional strategies.

With 25 years of experience supporting educators from outside the classroom, the design team members worked cohesively to prepare for the 2023-2024 school year. Various data informed the members, also known as the administrative team at FES, of the work required to reach the school's ambitious goals. Although the team possessed extensive experience in roles designed to enhance teachers' instructional capacity, focusing on developing fellow leaders was a new, albeit necessary, endeavor.

The design team's primary focus was increasing the leadership capacity of the grade-level chairs; therefore, the members analyzed data throughout the study. They sought to understand the grade-level chairs' perceptions, clarify the roles and responsibilities, provide professional learning, monitor the implementation of taught practices, observe the teacher leaders to identify shifts in leadership practices, and identify the ongoing needs of the implementation team members.

Story and Outcomes

The qualitative action research study commenced in July 2023 and concluded in December 2023. The researcher, who also served as the principal of FES, received IRB approval from the school district and university in June and July 2023, respectively. A meeting with the design team members occurred before a session with the implementation team's prospective participants. During the initial meeting with both teams, the researcher communicated the purpose of the study and established a sense of urgency around the research topic. To establish a sense of urgency, the researcher highlighted the data surrounding the current year's staffing, student achievement, behavior, and the school improvement plan goals.

The researcher discussed the problem statement, research questions, empirical findings, literature review, and research timeline. The researcher also noted that the study focused on the

role of administrators and how they enhance the performance of teacher leaders throughout a school building. At the conclusion of the implementation team meeting, the grade-level chairs signed the consent forms to participate in the study and received the Pre-Cycle I questionnaire. The discussion with the design team culminated with each member understanding their role within the action research study to increase the leadership capacity of the grade-level chairs.

Pre-Cycle I Interviews

Prior to the first cycle of interventions in August 2023, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with each implementation team member. The grade-level chairs scheduled the interview to fit their schedule and met with the researcher in person at FES. There were 7 total interviews, with each participant answering 14 questions (See Appendix A). The interview questions sought to learn about each participant's educational background and experience as a teacher leader. They also pursued the perceptions of each grade-level chair about the position's roles, responsibilities, and impacts. Lastly, the interview inquired about professional learning needs related to leading peers in an elementary setting such as FES.

Each participant's responses, recorded using a private Google Meet session or the researcher's phone and transcribed using Google Meet and Otter.ai, informed the interventions planned by the design team. Each interview concluded within thirty minutes. The transcript of responses provided by Otter.ai underwent two additional reviews by the researcher to ensure accuracy. The researcher removed personal information from the transcripts and provided the responses to the ARDT and ARIT for review and analysis.

The semi-structured interviews revealed six of the seven participants fulfilled the role of the grade-level chair under circumstances they believed made them the “default” leader, such as years in the building, organization skills, or it being their “turn.” The grade-level chairs openly

shared their perceptions of a teacher leader's roles, responsibilities, and ability to impact teams and the school's improvement efforts.

Additionally, all participants detailed their primary role was to serve as a liaison between grade level teams and the administration. When asked if they engaged in professional learning or advanced degrees specific to leadership, all seven interviewees stated they had not. These admissions frequently followed with an expressed desire for professional learning that would enhance their work with their respective teams.

The interview responses, coupled with the questionnaire responses, underwent manual coding and data analysis with the members of the ARDT. The team used the perception data to plan the two intervention cycles for the ARIT members. The ARDT identified that the roles and responsibilities of a grade-level chair needed clarification during the first cycle of intervention. The second cycle, pending further data collection and analysis, would focus on providing professional learning to equip the grade-level chairs with the skills to successfully perform the roles and responsibilities identified in cycle one.

Pre-Cycle I Questionnaire

Perception questionnaires completed by the participants prior to the first intervention cycle provided data to the design team about the commonly accepted definition of a grade-level chair. The questionnaire (See Appendix B) encouraged the participants to identify the purpose of a grade-level chair, the necessary qualities and responsibilities of an individual fulfilling the role, and the impact of a teacher leader on their team and the school's improvement efforts. The data collected from the questionnaire intended to provide information for the action research study's first and second intervention cycles, which occurred over approximately 18 weeks.

The members of the ARIT completed the first questionnaire and submitted their responses via email to the researcher. The researcher compiled the responses according to the questions and removed personally identifiable information. The responses underwent analysis by the members of the ARDT during a focus group session. Questionnaire responses revealed consistent results with the initial interview transcripts. Grade-level chairs detailed the responsibilities of the teacher leader as facilitating meetings, possessing instructional knowledge, and acting as a liaison with the administration.

Focus Groups

Design team members engaged in focus group discussions to review qualitative data collected throughout the action research study. The focus groups followed the protocol outlined in Appendix C to analyze and interpret observation notes and responses from the questionnaires and the interviews at the beginning of each intervention cycle and the culmination of the study. The intervention design process required a thorough, in-depth analysis of each grade-level chair's perceptions, experiences, and professional needs. Table 4.6 outlines the timeline and purpose of each focus group session during the action research study.

Table 4.6

Timeline and Purpose of Focus Group Sessions

Purpose	Date Completed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review and analyze qualitative data collected • Design intervention for Cycle I 	August 23, 2023
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review and analyze qualitative data collected during Cycle I • Design intervention for Cycle II 	October 11, 2023
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review and analyze qualitative data collected during Cycle II • Determine the impact of the action research study on participants 	December 20, 2023

Using focus groups to debrief about observations and research-based leadership practices allowed for intentional design and implementation cycles that sought to increase the leadership capacity of the participants.

Action Research Cycle I and Interventions

After the participants responded to the initial questionnaire and engaged in the one-on-one interview in August 2023, the design team utilized a focus group protocol (See Appendix C) to analyze the qualitative data and identify common themes. The purpose of the focus group was to prepare for the first intervention cycle. The design team agreed that the qualitative data revealed the need to clearly define the role of an elementary school grade-level or department chair. The members also discussed the misconceptions of the grade-level chair position as perceived by the teacher leaders themselves. The design team reviewed the research about highly effective leadership teams, the definitions and specifications of varying leadership styles, and the specific needs at FES. Once the design team agreed upon the definition of a teacher leader or grade-level chair, a meeting with the implementation team took place at FES in September 2023.

The September 2023 meeting's purpose was to share the themes identified in the interviews, observations, and questionnaire responses, communicate the expectations of a grade-level chair, and receive feedback on the teacher leader's clarified definitions, roles, and responsibilities. The implementation team used a reflection protocol to facilitate conversations with the implementation team members and solicit suggestions and questions about the research-based intervention in Cycle I. Members of the implementation team discussed the necessity of sharing the information with all staff at FES to assist with understanding the grade-level chair role for the remainder of the school year and in years to come. The grade-level chairs agreed with the role definition and the expectation that they participate in professional learning designed

to develop each member's leadership capacity. After clarifying their roles, the researcher observed the implementation team twice in their respective grade-level or department meetings to collect qualitative data surrounding the chairs' leadership practices.

The researcher and members of the ARDT conducted observations of the grade-level chairs during two team meetings. Anecdotal notes revealed that the grade-level chairs needed more intentional preparation for team meetings. Throughout every observation, two for each of the participants, the team struggled to start on time, complete tasks, and address the needs of the team's upcoming events. Observations revealed the need to set meeting norms, prepare team agendas, implement protocols to maintain team engagement, and confidently address questions or concerns.

Qualitative notes, collected during the observations and recorded in the action research journal, provided information to the design team members about the intervention planning for Cycle II. Cycle I of the action research study took place over nine weeks and concluded with the leadership team meeting held on October 4, 2023. During the meeting, participants discussed successes throughout the first intervention cycle and prepared for the upcoming leadership professional learning retreat. The researcher scheduled one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with each grade-level chair to collect data for the design team's preparation and implementation of the interventions for Cycle II.

Action Research Cycle II and Interventions

Cycle II of action research commenced on October 11, 2023. The purpose of the second cycle included participating in professional learning sessions designed to enhance the leadership capacity of each grade-level chair, specifically in the areas identified through data collection in Cycle I. The second cycle also required observations of each teacher leader to provide coaching

and feedback on their leadership practices when working with their teams. Data collected from interviews, questionnaires, and observations provided the design team with information to select research-based interventions for the second action research cycle.

Members of the design team met on October 11, 2023, and engaged in a focus group protocol to identify trends and plan professional learning for the grade-level chairs. After thorough analysis, the design team identified four core areas of leadership capacity to focus on with the implementation team. Qualitative data analysis revealed that the grade-level chairs required professional learning in the areas of designing meaningful meeting agendas, using norms and protocols to adhere to the set agenda items, conducting observations and providing feedback to colleagues, and navigating varying personalities in team meetings. The design team selected research-based resources to create professional learning experiences for the grade-level chairs. The researcher arranged a full-day training for the participants on November 13, 2023.

All implementation team members participated in the leadership professional learning sessions and completed an independent questionnaire immediately afterward. The researcher and instructional coach delivered the content and discussed the learning. Additional observations followed the professional learning day to monitor the implementation of new practices by each grade-level chair. The researcher recorded anecdotal notes and reflections in the researcher's journal.

Researcher Notes of Participant Observations

The researcher conducted observations throughout the research cycles to collect anecdotal notes about each grade-level chair as they led their teams. The observation notes, recorded in the researcher's journal, focused on the teacher leader's capacity to lead the team toward the intended purpose of the meeting. The goal of each meeting varied in topics such as

instructional planning, data analysis, or upcoming events. Due to the varying purposes of each meeting, the researcher focused on the habits and practices of each grade-level chair as they began their meeting, facilitated the discussions, delegated tasks, and handled disruptions such as off-task discussions or negativity that halted productivity. The design team reviewed the observation notes during focus groups to triangulate alongside interview and questionnaire responses.

Observations conducted after the delivery of professional learning focused on the specific topics addressed on November 13, 2013. Anecdotal notes revealed all participants provided an agenda to the team prior to the meeting, five participants started the meeting on time, all participants set and reviewed norms to begin the meeting, five participants adhered to the agenda items, and six of the participants either successfully or attempted to navigate personality differences within the meeting. Each participant received feedback on the observations during the final interviews in December 2023.

Post-Cycle II Interviews

Final interviews took place in December 2023, with each member of the ARIT and the researcher. Interviews took place at FES and at the convenience of each participant. There were seven total interviews, each concluding within half an hour, recorded using the researcher's phone with the permission of the participants. The interviewees answered seven open-ended questions (Appendix F) designed to capture each grade-level chair's perceptions of their leadership role, the responsibilities of administration to increase leadership capacity in teachers, the overall impact of the study on their leadership practices, and the desired next steps in leadership development for grade-level chairs.

The researcher uploaded each recording to Otter.ai to develop an interview transcript. The researcher reviewed the transcripts for accuracy, removed personal information from the transcripts, and provided the responses to the ARDT for review, manual coding, and thematic analysis. Responses were then added to Delve for additional coding by the researcher alongside the final questionnaire responses, observation notes, and information from the researcher's journal.

Post-Cycle II Questionnaire

Participants submitted responses to eight questions in the post-cycle II questionnaire (Appendix F) via email to the researcher by December 20, 2023. The questionnaire aimed to understand how each grade-level chair's perceptions shifted after engaging in the action research process. Questions regarding the roles and expectations of the position, administrator responsibilities to enhance teacher leadership, and reflections from the overall study provided the design team with qualitative data to interpret the effectiveness of the study.

The researcher compiled the responses according to the questions and removed personally identifiable information. The responses underwent analysis by the members of the ARDT during a final focus group session. Questionnaire responses, triangulated with final interview transcripts and observation notes, revealed the impact of differentiated professional learning and how administrators play a pivotal role in teacher leadership development.

Action Research Team Artifacts

Various data sources provided artifacts throughout the action research study. Artifacts included participant responses on questionnaires, transcripts for individual, semi-structured interviews, anecdotal observation notes, focus group notes and the researcher's journal.

Furthermore, research referenced to prepare interventions and items created by the design team to deliver professional learning sessions serve as artifacts.

Researcher Journal Notes

Qualitative data analysis occurred to ensure the design and implementation teams followed the study's theoretical framework. Notes captured in the researcher's journal provided insight and information about leadership practices observed by the researcher over the course of the intervention cycles. The theoretical framework for the action research study combined Organizational Learning Theory and Transformational Leadership Theory. Moreover, the research teams practiced Argyris and Schön's (1978) double-loop learning to evaluate the action plans and assess the organization's core values, beliefs, and policies related to the role of grade-level chairs. Anecdotal notes collected over time and analyzed with the design team facilitated feedback cycles required for double-loop learning (Basten & Haamann, 2018) and monitored the grade-level chair's shifts in leadership practices due to coaching and development obligatory of transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Chapter Summary

This chapter detailed the qualitative action research study by providing insight into the setting and the sense of urgency for interventions. Two action research cycles conducted by the implementation and design teams commenced in July 2023 and concluded in December 2023. Both intervention cycles, planned by the design team using data collected from the implementation team, included continuous feedback opportunities through interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups. Cycle I called for clarity in defining a grade-level chair or teacher leader at Fletcher Elementary School. Additionally, specific roles and responsibilities communicated to all staff members further enhanced the meaning of anyone serving as grade-

level chair. Cycle II required targeted professional learning for the teacher leaders to enhance their impact on their teammates and the school's improvement plan goals, as noted in the responsibilities of an effective grade-level chair. The next chapter of this dissertation details the analysis of findings in the context of Fletcher Elementary School as they relate to the research questions guiding this research.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS FROM THE ACTION RESEARCH CASE

The purpose of the study was to examine and understand how to increase the leadership capacity of grade-level chairs in one public, suburban elementary school. Teacher leaders, also known as grade-level chairs, who served on the building leadership team, had the opportunity to explore the perceptions of the grade-level chair role and work with administrators to enhance their impact within their teams. The research questions that guided this study included:

1. How do teachers perceive the leadership team's roles, responsibilities, and overall impact in one public, suburban elementary school?
2. How do administrators foster and develop leadership capacity in grade-level chairs in a public, suburban elementary school?
3. How does the action research team describe the impact of the action research process on the practice of the leadership team in one public, suburban elementary school?

Chapter 5 provides the findings of the action research study conducted at Fletcher Elementary School over the course of approximately 18 weeks. This chapter details the data collection and analysis processes that led the Action Research Design Team and Action Research Implementation Team to identify findings, major themes, and minor themes. Various data sources, such as interview transcripts, questionnaire responses, observation notes, and focus group discussions, provided qualitative information to answer the research questions.

Key Findings and Themes

The qualitative data collected throughout the study included responses from three questionnaires, three one-on-one interviews, focus groups with the design team, observations of the grade-level chairs, and the researcher's journal. Data collection conducted over two research cycles underwent thorough analysis using coding practices to identify common themes, which informed six major findings. The major findings were:

1. Teachers perceive the building leadership team as individuals possessing positive character traits and skills that enable them to cultivate a cohesive and effective team.
2. Teachers perceive the building leadership team as individuals with tools to ensure accountability with school improvement plans and the team's performance.
3. Teachers perceive the building leadership team members as liaisons between their respective grade-level teams and administration, whose role is solely to disseminate information.
4. Administrators foster and develop leadership capacity in grade-level chairs by identifying opportunities for growth, designing clear action steps for improvement, and communicating expectations.
5. Grade-level chairs appreciated the clarity surrounding the roles and expectations of the position to enhance their leadership capacity and the effectiveness of their work with their teams.
6. Grade-level chairs expressed the desire for continued development of their leadership capacity due to the positive impact among their respective teams during the action research process.

The findings emerged as a result of thematic analysis conducted by the researcher to identify common codes within the qualitative data collected throughout the study. After the researcher conducted multiple rounds of thematic analysis, six themes arose. The themes were:

1. Cultivate
2. Facilitate
3. Collaborate
4. Empower
5. Clarify
6. Enhance

The process by which the researcher and design team members concluded the themes and findings for this action research study is detailed in this chapter.

Findings

The researcher identified major findings using thematic analysis, which involved an inductive and deductive approach to coding responses from one-on-one semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, observation notes, and the researcher's journal. An inductive approach to coding "involves working exclusively from the participant experiences that drive the analysis entirely" (Azungah, 2018, p. 391). Despite aligning the research questions with the questionnaires and interview questions, which created the initial framing for coding, an analysis of raw data without prior expectations aligned with an inductive coding approach (Thomas, 2006). Vanover et al. (2021) identified deductive coding as a process where the researcher predefines codes and then analyzes data "to determine whether and how the data fit within those codes" (p. 135). Deductive coding practices emerged as the study progressed, and the design team prioritized major and minor findings.

The participants agreed to record their interviews using a closed Google Meet session or the researcher's phone with the understanding that a transcription website, Otter.ai, would assist with the data collection process. The researcher collected questionnaire responses via email and used a website, Delve.com, to manually code the responses and track their frequency. Notes from observations, the researcher's journal, and transcripts from the three one-on-one interviews also underwent manual coding on Delve to assist with data triangulation. The action research design team engaged in focus groups to analyze responses and codes identified by the researcher. After the final consultation with the design team, six findings emerged from the study:

1. Teachers perceive the building leadership team as individuals possessing positive character traits and skills that enable them to cultivate a cohesive and effective team.
2. Teachers perceive the building leadership team as individuals with tools to ensure accountability with school improvement plans and the team's performance.
3. Teachers perceive the building leadership team members as liaisons between their respective grade-level teams and administration, whose role is solely to disseminate information.
4. Administrators foster and develop leadership capacity in grade-level chairs by identifying opportunities for growth, designing clear action steps for improvement, and communicating expectations.
5. Grade-level chairs appreciated the clarity surrounding the roles and expectations of the position to enhance their leadership capacity and the effectiveness of their work with their teams.

6. Grade-level chairs expressed the desire for continued development of their leadership capacity due to the positive impact among their respective teams during the action research process.

Furthermore, the researcher maintained an electronic record of the identified minor codes. The frequency of codes within the data sets informed the themes and, ultimately, the study's findings. Table 5.1 shows the alignment of the research questions and the frequency of the correlating minor codes.

Table 5.1

Alignment of Research Questions with Minor Codes

RQ1	RQ2	RQ3
Possess positive character traits (22)	Set clear roles and expectations (11)	Provided ongoing professional learning (14)
Act as a liaison (19)	Value grade-level chair input (9)	Clearer communication (6)
Lead teams in instructional planning and data analysis (18)	Differentiated professional learning (9)	Sought and accepted feedback on leadership practices (6)
Provide mentoring and feedback to teams for support (11)	Provide leadership opportunities (5)	Improve communication structures and strategies (6)
Instructional and professional knowledge (8)		Trust (4)
Set and monitor team and school goals (7)		Intentional with teams (4)
Inspire others and instill buy-in (7)		
Build positive teams (5)		
Student-focused (3)		
Advocate for team (3)		

Additional coding and analysis of the minor codes led to the identification of major themes that correlated with the research questions. Table 5.2 displays the minor codes and the themes that developed in alignment with the research questions.

Table 5.2

Minor Codes and Correlating Themes According to Research Questions

Research Question	Minor Codes	Theme
RQ1: How do teachers perceive the leadership team's roles, responsibilities, and overall impact in one public, suburban elementary school?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possess positive character traits • Provide mentoring and feedback to teams for support • Inspire others and instill buy-in • Build positive teams 	Theme 1: Cultivate
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lead teams in instructional planning and data analysis • Instructional and professional knowledge • Set and monitor team and school goals • Student-focused 	Theme 2: Facilitate
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Act as a liaison • Advocate for team 	Theme 3: Collaborate
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set clear roles and expectations • Value grade-level chair input • Differentiated professional learning • Provide leadership opportunities 	Theme 4: Empower
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearer communication • Sought and accepted feedback on leadership practices • Intentional with teams 	Theme 5: Clarify
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided ongoing professional learning • Improve communication structures and strategies • Trust 	Theme 6: Enhance
RQ2: How do administrators foster and develop leadership capacity in grade-level chairs in a public, suburban elementary school?		
RQ3: How does the action research team describe the impact of the action research process on the practice of the leadership team in one public, suburban elementary school?		

After three cycles of thematic analysis, the researcher convened the design team for a final analysis and identified the study's findings in alignment with the major themes and research questions. Table 5.3 details the final findings with the corresponding themes and research questions.

Table 5.3

Research Questions, Major Themes, and Corresponding Findings

Research Questions	Major Themes	Findings
RQ1	Theme 1: Cultivate	1. Teachers perceive the building leadership team as individuals possessing positive character traits and skills that enable them to cultivate a cohesive and effective team.
	Theme 2: Facilitate	2. Teachers perceive the building leadership team as individuals with tools to ensure accountability with school improvement plans and the team's performance.
	Theme 3: Collaborate	3. Teachers perceive the building leadership team members as liaisons between their respective grade-level teams and administration, whose role is solely to disseminate information.
RQ2	Theme 4: Empower	4. Administrators foster and develop leadership capacity in grade-level chairs by identifying opportunities for growth, designing clear action steps for improvement, and communicating expectations
RQ3	Theme 5: Clarify	5. Grade-level chairs appreciated the clarity surrounding the roles and expectations of the position to enhance their leadership capacity and the effectiveness of their work with their teams.
	Theme 6: Enhance	6. Grade-level chairs expressed the desire for continued development of their leadership capacity due to the positive impact among their respective teams during the action research process.

Members of the ARDT reviewed the study's theoretical framework during each meeting and focus group discussion. The purpose of the study was to increase the leadership capacity of grade-level chairs using Organizational Learning Theory with Transformational Leadership Theory embedded throughout the intervention cycles. More specifically, the themes identified align with the tenets of Organizational Learning Theory: individual beliefs (IB), individual actions (IA), organizational action (OA), and environmental response (ER). Table 5.4 specifies the alignment of the research questions, major themes, and the theoretical framework.

Table 5.4

Alignment of Research Questions, Major Themes, and Theoretical Framework

Research Question	Major Theme	Alignment to Theoretical Framework
How do teachers perceive the leadership team's roles, responsibilities, and overall impact in one public, suburban elementary school?	Theme 1: Cultivate	Organizational Learning
	Theme 2: Facilitate	Organizational Learning
	Theme 3: Collaborate	Transformational Leadership
How do administrators foster and develop leadership capacity in grade-level chairs in a public, suburban elementary school?	Theme 4: Empower	Transformational Leadership
How does the action research team describe the impact of the action research process on the practice of the leadership team in one public, suburban elementary school?	Theme 5: Clarify	Organizational Learning
	Theme 6: Enhance	Transformational Leadership

Results from Action Research Cycles

Prior to the first action research cycle, the seven grade-level chairs submitted an initial questionnaire and participated in a semi-structured, one-on-one interview with the researcher.

The questionnaire responses provided perception data from each grade-level chair. Pre-Cycle I

interviews sought to expound upon the questionnaire responses and provide further insight from the teacher leaders. The researcher conducted observations of the grade-level chairs as they facilitated a team meeting and recorded anecdotal notes.

In August 2023, the researcher provided the design team with the responses after removing all personally identifiable information, and the team engaged in the first focus group discussion (Appendix C). The ARDT sought to review and analyze the qualitative data collected to identify common themes, determine the interventions, and develop an action plan. Table 5.5, entitled Pre-Cycle I Interview Questions, Common Themes, and Alignment to Research Questions (Appendix G), displays the relevant interview questions, the common themes detected, and the alignment with the research questions. Refer to Appendix A for the full interview protocol and questions.

Table 5.5

Pre-Cycle I Interview Questions, Common Themes, and Alignment to Research Questions

Q2. How long have you been in a teacher leadership (“grade-level chair”) role? (RQ2)		
Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7
In the first year	2	2
In the second year	3	3
3 years or more	3	3
Q3. What led you to become a grade-level chair? How were you selected for this role? (RQ1, RQ2)		
Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7
By default	3	3
Volunteered by administration or colleague	4	4
Q4. What do you believe is the role of a grade-level chair or teacher leader? What responsibilities should this include? (RQ1)		
Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7
Share information between administration and teams	3	3
Meet deadlines	3	2
Data analysis	2	2
Instill inspiration and teacher buy-in	2	2

Conduct team meetings	2	2
Mentor teammates with feedback and support	5	2

Q5. In reality, what roles and responsibilities does the grade-level chair fulfill at your school? (RQ1)

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7
Attend leadership team meetings	2	2
Monitor and meet team deadlines	2	1
Share information between administration and teams	2	2
Instill inspiration and teacher buy-in	1	1
Conduct team meetings	3	3
Data analysis	2	2
Mentor teammates with feedback and support	2	1

Q6. What impact do you believe the grade-level chair should have on their respective team? (RQ1)

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7
Desire to influence colleagues and instill teacher buy-in	7	6
Instructional impact	1	1
Positive	2	2

Q7. In reality, what impact does a grade-level chair have on their respective team at your school? (RQ1)

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7
Acts as an organizer of tasks	2	2
Unsure	2	2
Influences team morale	2	2

Q8. What should administrators do to support your development as a teacher leader? Please elaborate. (RQ2)

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7
Ask challenging questions to encourage reflection	4	2
Provide professional development	3	3

Q9. What leadership opportunities exist at your school? (RQ2)

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7
Teacher mentor	2	2
Focus teams	3	3
Leadership team	3	3

Q10. What professional learning opportunities have you participated in to develop as a teacher leader? (RQ2)

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7
No professional development for teacher leadership	6	5
Peer observations	2	2

Q11. What does the leadership team contribute to the climate of the school? (RQ1, RQ2)

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7
Significant contribution due to being responsible for decisions	3	3
Promotes a positive climate	2	2
Q12. How effective do you feel as a teacher leader or grade-level chair? (RQ2)		
Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7
Unsure about how to measure effectiveness	1	1
Impactful with task completion and deadlines	3	3
Somewhat effective	4	4
Q13. Does your role as grade-level chair have a detailed description of responsibilities? (RQ1)		
Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7
No	3	3
Unsure	4	4
Yes	1	1

Table 5.6, Pre-Cycle I Questionnaire Responses, Categories, and Alignment to Research Questions (Appendix H), provides the common categories identified as a result of the questionnaire analysis. Review Appendix B for the complete questionnaire protocol and questions.

Table 5.6

Pre-Cycle I Questionnaire Responses, Categories, and Alignment to Research Questions

Q1. How do you define the role of the grade-level chair? (RQ1)		
Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7
Provide feedback to teammates, mentor	3	3
Instructional leader	4	4
Liaison between teams and administration	7	6
Build positive teams	2	2
Q2. What do you believe is the purpose of grade-level chairs? (RQ1)		
Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7
Provide feedback to teammates, mentor	4	3
Instructional leader	2	2
Liaison between teams and administration	7	5
Collaborate with administration	1	1
Q3. What responsibilities does the grade-level chair have at your school? (RQ1)		

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7
Liaison between teams and administration	6	4
Data analysis	3	3
Goal setting	2	2
Inspire teacher buy-in	3	3
Instructional leader	1	1
Attend leadership team meetings	2	2
Facilitate team meetings	3	2

Q4. What qualities must a teacher leader, or grade-level chair, possess? (RQ1)

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7
Trustworthy	3	3
Willing to mentor and support peers	3	3
Student-focused	2	2
Positive, team player	3	3
Organized	4	4
Instructional leader	2	2
Communicator/Listener	2	2
Possesses people skills	2	2

Q5. How does a grade-level chair know they make an impact on the staff, students, families, etc.? (RQ1, RQ2)

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7
Acknowledgement from stakeholders	4	3
Common understanding and reduced stress within team	2	2
Positive relationships with teams	3	3
Increased student achievement	5	5
Sought after for instructional advice	2	2

Q6. What do you believe is the responsibility of administrators, specifically with grade-level chairs? (RQ2)

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7
Support grade-level chairs with solving problems	4	4
Guide and challenge teachers to encourage reflection	5	2
Articulate expectations	1	1
Remain transparent with school matters	2	2
Provide differentiated professional learning for grade-level chairs	2	2

Q7. What do you believe is the responsibility of the grade-level chair with school improvement plans? (RQ1)

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7
Collaboratively writes the school improvement plan	5	5
Ensures teams understand the school improvement plan	4	4
Inspires buy-in	2	2
Monitors grade-level progress toward team and school goals	2	2

Holds teammates accountable for instructional practices	2	2
Q8. Please describe a professional learning opportunity that significantly impacted your role as a teacher leader. (RQ1, RQ2)		
Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7
Summer leadership meetings to plan school improvement plan	1	1
Has not participated in professional learning for teacher leadership	6	6
Q9. Please describe a professional learning opportunity from which you would benefit in your teacher leadership practices. (RQ1, RQ2)		
Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7
Navigating difficult conversations with peers	2	2
Holding peers accountable as a grade-level chair	2	2
Observe administration team to provide feedback to team	4	4

The Action Research Design Team triangulated the Pre-Cycle I Interview, Pre-Cycle I Questionnaire, and observation notes to determine the necessary intervention for Cycle I. The purpose of the study was to increase the leadership capacity of grade-level chairs at FES. The qualitative data revealed a lack of clarity and understanding of a grade-level chair's roles and responsibilities. Thus, the design team determined that the Cycle I intervention would be to refine the roles and responsibilities of a grade-level chair, communicate the results with the participants, and seek feedback from the implementation team members. The intervention cycle began in August 2023 and concluded in early October 2023. The researcher conducted semi-structured, individual interviews with the participants in October 2023 to encourage reflection from grade-level chairs. Results from Cycle I indicated a clearer understanding of the teacher leadership role at FES and the role of the administration to support the enhancement of leadership capacity within grade-level chairs.

Responses from Pre-Cycle I interviews, Pre-Cycle I questionnaires, Pre-Cycle II interviews, and observation notes denoted the need for professional learning for the grade-level chairs with the topics: conducting observations and providing feedback, designing meaningful

agendas for team meetings, implementing norms and protocols to facilitate effective meetings, and navigating personality differences among teammates. The design team planned the Cycle II intervention in the form of differentiated professional learning. The researcher organized a full-day professional learning opportunity that took place in November 2023.

During Cycle II, the researcher worked with the design team to facilitate professional learning for the grade-level chairs while conducting observations of the participants. At the conclusion of the action research process, the grade-level chairs engaged in the Post-Cycle II interview with the researcher and submitted the Post-Cycle II questionnaire responses. The researcher compiled the qualitative data, removed personally identifiable information, and manually coded the information using the Delve website. The design team met to review the codes, identify common themes, and identify the findings of the action research study using the focus group protocol (Appendix C).

Results from Cycle I

The ARDT sought to clarify the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of a grade-level chair at FES during Cycle I. The design team members reviewed the qualitative data collected throughout the intervention cycle to identify the foundation with which the team perceived their roles as teacher leaders. For instance, initial data collected revealed that participants perceived the primary role of grade-level chairs as liaisons (20) between their respective teams and administration, facilitate and attend meetings (18), and serve as a support system for their respective teams with mentoring and feedback provided to colleagues (14). Grade-level chairs possess knowledge and skills to set school-wide goals (13) and monitor the team's progress toward success (11) while also inspiring teachers and cultivating buy-in to school-wide

initiatives (10). Furthermore, participants highlighted that grade-level chairs possess instructional and content knowledge that exceeds that of the teams they represent (9).

The focus group discussion with the design team also reviewed how administrators must foster leadership capacity in grade-level chairs. Responses called for clarified roles and expectations (8) and for administrators to value the voices of the teacher leaders (8).

Additionally, responses from the interviews after Cycle I called for specific training that teaches grade-level chairs how to reach the clarified expectations set by administration (7), provides an environment where grade-level chairs can provide feedback (4), and cultivates opportunities for reflection (4).

Thus, the design team created specific roles, responsibilities, and expectations for grade-level chairs during Cycle I. The researcher called the implementation team members together in September 2023 to review the clarified responsibilities and sought feedback from the grade-level chairs.

After collecting feedback and conducting Pre-Cycle II interviews, the researcher compiled responses to analyze with the design team, as shown in Table 5.7. Interview responses noted an increase in understanding of a grade-level chair's role (11) and a decrease in the perception of grade-level chairs serving primarily as liaisons (4). Additionally, participants more frequently mentioned that teacher leaders must be positive (5) and maintain a focus on students (2) when serving as grade-level chairs. Lastly, responses identified the importance of grade-level chairs to serve as team builders (4).

Table 5.7*Pre-Cycle II Interview Questions, Common Themes, and Alignment to Research Questions*

Q1. After engaging in the first cycle of professional learning, what do you believe is the role of a grade-level chair or teacher leader? What responsibilities should this include? (RQ1)			
Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7	
Share information between administration and teams	5	4	
Mentor teammates with feedback and support	5	3	
Facilitate Effective Planning	5	4	
Possess instructional knowledge	2	2	
Q2. After engaging in the first cycle of professional learning, what impact do you believe the grade-level chair should have on their respective team? (RQ1)			
Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7	
Positive impact on morale and practices	5	4	
Communicate and provide clarity	3	2	
Mentor teammates with feedback and accountability	4	3	
Q3. After engaging in the first cycle of professional learning, did your leadership practices shift? If yes, please explain. (RQ2)			
Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7	
Increased collaboration	2	2	
Clearer communication	4	4	
Enhanced facilitation skills	4	4	
Q4. How did your effectiveness as a teacher leader or grade-level chair change after the first cycle's professional learning? (RQ1, RQ2)			
Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7	
Improve communication skills and transparency	3	2	
Clarity with the role provided validation	4	3	
Enhanced facilitation of team meetings; Goal setting	3	3	
Q5. What do you believe administrators should do to support teacher leaders as they seek to increase their leadership capacity? (RQ2)			
Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7	
Provide differentiated professional learning for grade-level chairs	5	3	
Trust	1	1	
Clarify expectations and provide support/mentoring	3	2	

Results from Cycle II

Feedback gathered from Pre-Cycle I interviews, Pre-Cycle I questionnaires, Pre-Cycle II interviews, and observational notes highlighted the professional learning needs for the grade-level chairs. The design team identified improvement areas and implemented a full-day professional learning session focused on conducting peer observations and providing specific feedback, crafting purposeful agendas for team meetings, establishing team norms and protocols to enhance meeting efficiency, and navigating personality differences within a team. Cycle II began in November 2023 and ended in December 2023.

After the professional learning session, the researcher conducted observations of the grade-level chairs to monitor the implementation of taught practices. Participants engaged in a final semi-structured, one-on-one interview with the researcher and submitted the Post-Cycle II questionnaire in December 2023. Table 5.8 (Appendix J) details the interview questions, common themes, and alignment to research questions.

Table 5.8

Post-Cycle II Interview Questions, Common Themes, and Alignment to Research Questions

Q1. After engaging in the second cycle of professional learning, what do you believe is the role of a grade-level chair or teacher leader? What responsibilities should this include? (RQ1)			
Categories		Frequency	Participants n=7
Serve as instructional leader		3	3
Serve as liaison between administration and team		4	4
Build an effective team		2	2
Facilitate team meetings		3	3
Mentor teammates		1	1
Q2. After engaging in the second cycle of professional learning, what impact do you believe the grade-level chair should have on their respective team? (RQ1)			
Categories		Frequency	Participants n=7
Mentor teammates		3	3
Serve as instructional leader		2	2

Build an effective team	2	2
Q3. After engaging in the second cycle of professional learning, did your leadership practices shift? If yes, please explain. (RQ2)		
Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7
Enhanced team protocols	6	6
Clearer Communication	2	2
Trust	1	1
Q4. How did your effectiveness as a teacher leader or grade-level chair change after the second cycle of professional learning? (RQ1, RQ2)		
Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7
Increased confidence	3	3
Delegate tasks	1	1
Cultivate a positive team atmosphere	1	1
Q5. What do you believe administrators should do to support teacher leaders as they seek to increase their leadership capacity? (RQ2)		
Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7
Provide specific professional learning	3	3
Check-in on grade-level chair	2	2
Provide Feedback	1	1
Q6. If this study were to continue, what would you say is the next cycle of professional learning that will assist you in your leadership practices? (RQ2, RQ3)		
Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7
Promote community within a team	3	3
Improve communication	1	1

Table 5.9 provides insight into the questionnaire responses, categories, and alignment to the research questions. Interview and questionnaire responses about grade-level chair roles and responsibilities documented a shift in multiple areas. Most notably, participants stated that grade-level chairs are responsible for cultivating trust (7), maintaining positive relationships (4), and serving as mentors to colleagues (4). Final perception data revealed that grade-level chairs serve as liaisons between teams and administrators (4) and facilitate team meetings (4). The researcher reviewed all of the qualitative data collected throughout the intervention cycles and informed the study's findings.

Table 5.9*Post-Cycle II Questionnaire, Categories, and Alignment to Research Questions*

Q1. How has your definition of the grade-level chairs' roles, responsibilities, and purposes changed after engaging in the action research process? (RQ1)			
Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7	
Delegate Tasks	2	2	
Facilitate team meetings	2	2	
Mentor teammates	3	3	
Liaison between teams and administration	3	3	
Q2. What qualities must a teacher leader, or grade-level chair, possess? (RQ1)			
Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7	
Positive character traits	7	7	
Trustworthy	3	3	
Lead by Example	2	2	
Q3. How does a grade-level chair know they make an impact on the staff, students, families, etc.? (RQ1)			
Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7	
Increased student achievement	4	4	
Sought after for advice	2	2	
Q4. What do you believe is the responsibility of administrators, specifically with grade-level chairs? (RQ2)			
Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7	
Provide differentiated support	4	4	
Trust grade-level chairs	2	2	
Transparent communication	2	2	
Provide professional learning for grade-level chairs	2	2	
Q5. What do you believe is the responsibility of the grade-level chair with school improvement plans? (RQ1)			
Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7	
Communicate school improvement plan goals	5	5	
Write the school improvement plan goals	4	4	
Monitor progress toward school improvement plan goals	3	3	
Q6. Please describe a professional learning opportunity that significantly impacted your role as a teacher leader. (RQ3)			
Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7	
None	7	7	
Q7: Please describe professional learning from which you would benefit in teacher leadership practices. (RQ3)			

Categories	Frequency	Participants n=7
Handling difficult situations with colleagues	5	4
Promoting community within teams	3	3

Findings Analysis

Finding 1: Teachers perceive the building leadership team as possessing positive character traits and skills that enable them to cultivate a cohesive and effective team.

Prior to the first intervention cycle of the action research study, participants answered questions in an interview and in a questionnaire that detailed their perception of the grade-level chair's roles, responsibilities, and impact within a school. All seven grade-level chairs identified that team leaders must possess positive character traits that allow them to build effective teams. Teacher E stated, "A teacher leader needs to be positive and solution-oriented. This person should be able to build comradery among a group of people." Teacher D confirmed the belief that a grade-level chair "should inspire others" and "lead by example." Teacher C further detailed the positive character of a grade-level chair by asserting, "A grade-level chair must be reliable, knowledgeable, listen to others, share advice, help support and uplift their team and others." She also described the importance of a grade-level chair to possess skills that allow them to provide a positive environment for collaboration with other teachers. Teacher G explained the role as an individual who knows how to "manage the team in a manner that promotes positive and productive relationships between all team members."

Furthermore, perception data revealed the belief that grade-level chairs must serve as mentors within their teams. Teacher A illustrated the necessity for team leaders to mentor teammates with instructional items and "help grade-level team members understand and implement the standards." Teacher B expounded on this belief when she stated that grade-level

chairs should provide meaningful feedback to colleagues to benefit the development and growth of teachers on the team. Teacher F identified the purpose of a teacher leader to empower other educators through their actions and support. Teacher G noted the responsibility to mentor new staff members in the common expectations, protocols, and lesson planning.

A theme that frequently arose in the pre-interview and questionnaire data was the perception that grade-level chairs must inspire teachers with school initiatives and instill buy-in. Teacher A, Teacher B, and Teacher E identified encouraging “teacher buy-in” as a responsibility of team leaders. Teacher D noted that if buy-in is lacking within a team, misconceptions could arise and deter the grade level or school from reaching a specific goal. When asked if any of the participants engaged in professional learning focused on building an effective team, mentoring other teachers, or cultivating buy-in from colleagues, all seven grade-level chairs revealed they had not received formal training in those areas, despite the belief that it was their responsibility to mentor and develop the teachers on their team.

Throughout the research cycles, each participant’s perception maintained that a grade-level chair should possess the skills to create a positive team, serve as a mentor to other teachers, and cultivate teacher buy-in; however, the confidence and skills to cultivate an effective team increased. Teacher A detailed that she was more confident as she led her team and redelivered information as she had protocols to guide her. After engaging in the intervention cycles, the grade-level chairs expressed they were more mindful of incorporating all teammates to build a cohesive, effective team.

Teacher C identified the improved performance of her teammates due to identifying the different strengths and delegating tasks based on those strengths. Teacher E elaborated on the shift of her perception when she noted that her role must be more active as she works alongside

people, navigates their different personalities, and assists with their needs or concerns. Clarifying the roles and responsibilities of teacher leaders and communicating the expectations to all staff left them feeling more assured in their roles. Teacher G summarized her learning by stating, “The role is to be an encourager – work with all members to participate and engage. The role is to be a supporter. Be there to work with members through difficult situations, topics, etc.”

Finding 2: Teachers perceive the building leadership team as individuals with tools to ensure accountability with school improvement plans and the team’s performance.

Responses from the pre-questionnaires and pre-interviews revealed that participants perceived that grade-level chairs possess instructional knowledge that exceeds or surpasses that of their colleagues, leadership skills to lead a team toward success, and the ability to set team goals while maintaining their focus on students.

When defining the role of a grade-level chair, four of the seven participants noted that they must be familiar with instructional standards and how to help their teammates implement instruction that leads to student mastery. Three of the seven participants described that the purpose of the grade-level chairs was to guide teammates when planning instruction. Teacher D elaborated on the perception by stating, “I believe it is the grade-level chair’s responsibility to ensure that the members of their team align their instructional practices to meet the goals set on the improvement plan.” As the study progressed, participants continued identifying the grade-level chair as an instructional leader who strives to “build their team through collaborative planning.”

Participants described the grade-level chair as an individual who represents their respective teams when collaborating with the administration to develop school goals for the upcoming year and monitor progress toward achieving the set goals. Before the first intervention

cycle, the researcher asked participants in the initial questionnaire about the specific responsibilities of the grade-level chair with the school's continuous improvement plan. Six of the seven participants highlighted the obligations as "building the school improvement plan," "offering ideas to create the school improvement plan," and acting as "a collaborator in developing the plan, embracing the plan, and sharing the plan with their team." in the questionnaire and interview about the perceived grade-level chair responsibilities at FES. Furthermore, initial interview responses revealed that participants viewed the grade-level chair, a leadership team member, as a critical contributor to the school climate due to the input given to the school goals.

Additionally, the perceived roles and responsibilities of the grade-level chairs must take place with a focus on student achievement. Initial questionnaire responses about the qualities a teacher leader must possess included terminology such as maintaining a "positive, kid-focused attitude" by Teacher A, "ensuring that what we do is best for kids" by Teacher B, and "a team player that has the good of the students in mind" by Teacher F. After the action research study, participants elaborated on maintaining a student focus when describing the impact of an effective grade-level chair. Teacher A discussed the importance of being "mindful of doing what is research-based and best for students regardless of personal opinions." Teacher C shared the purpose of collaborating "for the betterment of the students."

Despite extensive references to professed means and abilities of teacher leaders, none of the participants described themselves as being selected for the role due to their capabilities to enhance a team. In fact, during the initial interview, every participant stated they became the grade-level chair by default. Teacher E explained that other teammates had already taken their turn, and she had less on her plate. Teacher C responded, "I think they just had no one else, and I

can get things done.” Moreover, none of the participants participated in professional learning prior to the study that focused on increasing the leadership capacity of teacher leaders.

Finding 3: Teachers perceive the building leadership team members as liaisons between their respective grade-level teams and administration, whose role is solely to disseminate information.

When describing the primary role of a grade-level chair, all the participants detailed the act of sharing information between the school administrators and their teams. Teacher E stated, “A grade-level chair is a representative for their specific group for practical purposes of passing on information in either direction, to the grade level or from the grade level. It is all about being the middleman.” Additionally, three of the grade-level chairs stated their role was to advocate on behalf of their team and to be their voice in school decisions. At the onset of the study, only one grade-level chair perceived their role to be a collaborator with the administrators when they expressed, “Our grade-level chairs meet monthly with the leadership team to collaborate and walk away with common expectations/plans to share with the group they represent.”

The interview conducted after the first cycle of interventions revealed a slight shift in the perception of grade-level chairs serving as messengers of information between the administration and teachers. Teacher B elaborated that the role of a grade-level chair is “no longer just taking information back but building your team through collaboration.” Teacher C described the roles and responsibilities of a grade-level chair after the clarification provided in the first intervention cycle as, “We are still responsible for getting things out to the team, pulling the team together, and getting them to understand and buy into what administration expects, but also to work together.”

After the action research study and implementation of clarified roles and responsibilities of grade-level chairs with differentiated professional learning to perform the expectations

successfully, the teacher leaders continued to perceive their role as liaisons between their respective teams and administration; however, they understood and practiced collaboration with both sides. In the final interviews, Teacher E detailed the role as “more than just being a middleman between the administration and the team. It is to foster an actual team where members all work together in addition to bringing their strengths to the group.” Teacher D specified that grade-level chairs, while still acting as liaisons, can also act as mediators to help resolve concerns within the team before bringing them to the attention of the school administration.

The role of a grade-level chair throughout the study supported the idea that participants serve as liaisons between their teams and the administration; however, with purpose and collaboration to ensure the perspective of most staff remains at the forefront of decisions and improvement plans. The two cycles of interventions sought to clarify the expectations and provide the teacher leaders with the proper skills and opportunities to meet the expectations of a grade-level chair successfully. Questionnaire responses collected at the end of the study indicate that grade-level chairs gained a more explicit understanding of how to be a collaborative liaison and the leadership tools necessary.

Teacher E highlighted that the definition of the grade-level chairs’ roles, responsibilities, and purposes remained consistent; however, the “understanding of how to achieve the expectations and balance the responsibilities is clearer.” Teacher F supported this statement: “The process gave me specific ways of being more effective.” Teacher G also agreed with the other participants: “When we began the cycle, I saw my role as merely a liaison. I now see that I can have a much greater impact.” In final interviews, Teacher D also stated that the two cycles of

professional learning provided the tools to collaborate with other leaders to address issues within the team and reach a productive, positive outcome.

Finding 4: Administrators foster and develop leadership capacity in grade-level chairs by communicating expectations, identifying opportunities for growth, and designing clear action steps for improvement.

At the onset of the study, the responses from interviews and questionnaires, coupled with the observations of grade-level chairs in team meetings, indicated the need for clear expectations of teacher leaders. Participants indicated their perception of the roles and responsibilities stemmed from assumptions and observation of prior grade-level leaders. Anecdotal notes collected during observations described team meetings with no purpose, no protocols to ensure engagement and productivity, and minimal collaboration.

When asked during the initial interviews what administrators should do to support the development of teacher leaders, participants responded with vague descriptions of providing professional learning, listening, and assisting with “handling problem situations.” Questionnaire responses provided additional insight into the responsibilities of administrators to develop the practices of grade-level chairs. Teacher D elaborated that administrators must articulate expectations and remain transparent when sharing information. After the first intervention cycle, five of the seven participants discussed the necessity for administrators to provide professional learning and feedback on their leadership practices to support further development. Teacher A stated, “It is helpful to provide additional training and feedback on how to be an effective teacher leader. Sometimes someone is the team leader by default, and tips to be successful along the way are beneficial.” Teacher G recommended that administrators should “model strategies and

techniques, provide opportunities for grade-level chairs to have dialogue with each other, be open and available for grade-level chairs to come to you for questions, advice or concerns.”

Furthermore, ongoing observations revealed that certain participants required specific professional learning opportunities compared to their peers. The professional learning opportunities offered in Cycle II remained available to all participants; however, their design was for specific needs discussed in focus groups. Differentiated professional learning was highly sought based on the participants’ responses and beliefs of the administration’s responsibilities, such as Teacher F, who stated, “The administration should provide training and professional development to take the teacher leaders’ skills to the next level.” Additionally, three of the participants elaborated that administrators must trust the implementation of professional learning practices through observation and providing ongoing feedback.

After clarifying the roles and expectations of the grade-level chairs, providing differentiated professional learning, and listening to the needs and feedback of teacher leaders, administrators must remain steadfast in the development of the grade-level chairs. Participants believed that administrators serve to “ask questions that challenge teachers,” “guide teacher leaders to appropriate solutions,” and “empower grade-level chairs to be leaders.” Teacher F summarized: “A school is much more successful when the faculty and staff feel they have a voice.” Listening to the voices of grade-level chairs and, by extension, their teams and administrators can establish a foundation for educators to impact the outcomes of a school significantly.

Finding 5: The grade-level chairs appreciated the clarity surrounding the roles and expectations of the position to enhance their leadership capacity and the effectiveness of their work with their teams.

One question asked during the initial interviews sought to identify if there was an explicit description of the roles and responsibilities of a grade-level chair. All seven participants expressed that there was no such description. The responses and observations underwent the analysis of a focus group meeting with the design team members. The team immediately noted that there needed to be a specific description of a grade-level chair's roles and responsibilities. Clarifying the expectations of teacher leaders became the purpose of the first intervention cycle.

After the first cycle of the action research study, the participants engaged in one-on-one interviews with the researcher. One of the interview questions asked how the grade-level chair's effectiveness changed as a result of the first cycle. Teacher C described the outcome as validation for their work. Teacher E stated, "I know better now what I need to do." Teacher G described an improved effectiveness based on their increased awareness of the role. The researcher also asked what leadership practices, if any, shifted after the first intervention cycle. Teacher A described her efforts to be more informative and check in on teammates. Teachers B and C echoed similar statements about intentional communication with their respective teams. Teachers and F described that the clarified roles gave them pause as they reflected on their leadership needs moving forward.

Cycle II results from interviews, observations, and questionnaires further highlighted the benefits of clarifying expectations for grade-level chairs. All seven participants described shifts in their leadership practices based on reflection and the professional learning they required. Teacher A described intentional check-ins prior to collaborative planning to assist with maintaining academic focus on the team's goals while discussing upcoming instruction. Teachers C, D, E, and F also described meeting with the team prior to collaborative planning with an agenda that keeps the team engaged.

The action research study also resulted in enhanced confidence of each grade-level chair when collaborating with the administration, other teacher leaders, and their respective teams. Final interview responses revealed three participants described their enhanced skills to positively impact their teams and navigate personality differences that often deterred meetings in the past. Two additional participants revealed themselves as more confident leaders when conducting their necessary tasks. One participant further elaborated that they learned how to rely on the strengths of their teammates to enhance their work together.

Finding 6: The grade-level chairs expressed the desire for continued development of their leadership capacity due to the positive impact among their respective teams during the action research process.

During pre-interviews and the initial questionnaire, the participants expressed engaging in professional learning experiences throughout their careers that sought to enhance their effectiveness within their classrooms. While all participants possessed the certifications to teach in elementary education, four with graduate degrees, none had yet to pursue certification in leadership. The questionnaire asked participants to describe professional learning topics from which their teacher leadership practices would benefit, and responses varied. Three respondents requested opportunities to observe other leaders as they lead teammates. Teacher C wanted to “have clear expectations for grade chairs and support from the administration on being a grade chair.” At the same time, Teachers D and E requested professional learning about courageous conversations with colleagues.

The final interview asked participants what type of professional learning would best suit their next learning cycle if the study continued. All seven participants wanted to continue learning how to create a more cohesive team and promote a community. Teacher G described the

desire to “continue with learning strategies on how to deal with team members that could be difficult to deal with or communicate with.” Teacher B summarized the need for continued learning about building positive teams: “It will benefit everyone, but most of all the students.”

Chapter Summary

Chapter Five presented the six findings from qualitative data analysis throughout two action research cycles. Data gathered throughout the study from questionnaires, semi-structured one-on-one interviews, observations, and focus groups provided insight into the minor and major codes in the results. Continued analysis and reflection led the researcher to identify themes from the minor and major codes. The six themes, cultivate, facilitate, collaborate, empower, clarify, and enhance, ultimately allowed the researcher to develop the six findings and their alignment with the three research questions. Chapter 6 details the connection of the findings with the study's conclusions, implications, and connections to leadership practices.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONNECTIONS TO LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

The purpose of the study was to examine and understand how to increase the leadership capacity of grade-level chairs in one public, suburban elementary school. Teacher leaders, also known as grade-level chairs, who served on the building leadership team, had the opportunity to express and explore the perceptions of the grade-level chair role and work with administrators to enhance their impact within their teams. Additionally, the study sought to comprehend the involvement of school administrators in enhancing the leadership capacity of grade-level chairs.

The research questions that guided this study included:

1. How do teachers perceive the leadership team's roles, responsibilities, and overall impact in one public, suburban elementary school?
2. How do administrators foster and develop leadership capacity in grade-level chairs in a public, suburban elementary school?
3. How does the action research team describe the impact of the action research process on the practice of the leadership team in one public, suburban elementary school?

This chapter presents a summary of the findings and the correlating major themes identified during thematic analysis. This chapter outlines the correlation between the identified themes and the literature review supporting the study, along with their alignment with the research questions. Finally, the researcher discusses the limitations, implications, and recommendations for leaders and the concluding thoughts of the study.

Summary of the Findings

This action research study revealed six findings aligned with the research questions. Chapter 5 provided evidence and descriptive data, such as questionnaire responses, observation notes, and interview quotes, to enlighten the reader about the results after two intervention cycles. The study's first finding attributed successful teaching teams to the grade level chair's positive character traits, such as being responsible, trustworthy, organized, and an effective communicator. A second perception and subsequent finding was the belief that all grade-level chairs knew to hold teammates accountable regarding school improvement initiatives and the team's performance. The third finding was that the grade-level chair's primary function was to liaison information across the teaching and administrative teams. The first three findings aligned with the first research question of the study.

The fourth finding provided information for the second research question. It indicated that administrators must communicate clear expectations, provide differentiated professional learning, and design attainable action steps for improvement to increase the leadership capacity of grade-level chairs.

The qualitative data collected throughout the action research cycles to answer the final research question provided the fifth and sixth findings. The fifth finding articulated that grade-level chairs felt increased effectiveness when working with their teams as a direct result of explicit expectations. The sixth finding expressed the desire for grade-level chairs to continue developing leadership skills that will impact other educators. Participants shared reflections about the action research process, the tools acquired during the study that impacted leadership practices, and their individual and team growth.

Major Findings Related to the Literature Reviewed

The final findings drawn from the action research study considered the existing literature about the ambiguity of teacher leadership roles and expectations and the responsibilities of the school administrator to cultivate a conducive environment where teachers thrive. Additionally, the research study delved into the observable impacts of the intervention cycles on leadership practices. Lastly, the research clearly depicts the urgency to improve modern schools' outcomes within centuries-old educational structures and the repercussions of high-stakes accountability.

The first finding aligned with the literature surrounding the ability of grade-level chairs to influence colleagues and promote buy-in. Consenza (2015) supported this perception by describing teacher leaders as possessing skills that “not only allows them to be effective in the classroom but also permits them to exert influence beyond their classroom (p. 80). York-Barr and Duke (2004) described the importance of teacher leaders developing trusting and collaborative relationships to have the opportunity to influence their colleagues. Gabatzu and Ensminger (2017) further elaborated that the teacher leader position uniquely holds the space between colleagues and evaluators with access to individual teachers and the school's decision-makers.

Despite the expressed perceptions that grade-level chairs may positively influence and impact the teams they serve, the second finding revealed that grade-level chairs lacked the professional training to facilitate team tasks as expected. Jacobs et al. (2016) studied teacher leaders and the need for professional learning “relevant to their roles and responsibilities as teacher leaders” (p. 392). Literature from York-Barr and Duke (2004) also called for formal training, “such as university coursework district-based professional development, and job-

embedded support, such as coaching by principals or other administrators” (p. 282), as practical elements for development.

The literature aligned with the third finding describing an initial belief that grade-level chairs serve as liaisons versus collaborators. Graham (2018) detailed the importance of leaders expressing interest in and listening to teachers’ voices in school decision-making. Cansoy and Parlar (2017) defined schools that support teacher leadership development as organizations that “attribute great importance to collaboration among colleagues, a sharing environment at school.” Cansoy and Parlar (2017) stated, “It can thus be inferred that a strict hierarchical structure that is based neither on sharing nor friendship may weaken teacher leadership behaviors” (p. 4).

The fourth finding explained that the administrator’s role is to empower grade-level chairs through intentional support and development of leadership capacity, which directly aligns with the literature from Huggins et al. (2017), Jacobs et al. (2016), Wells and Klocko (2015), and Zepeda (2013). School leaders hold primary responsibility for school outcomes; however, Bagwell (2019) reported, “The principal cannot undertake the daunting task of improving schools as alone practitioner. Consequently, principal leadership must focus on galvanizing and empowering other individuals to organize for effort, action, and improvement” (Bagwell, 2019, p. 98). Due to the complex process of initiating change, “Principals around the world are encouraged to engage others in building organizational capacity and fostering school climates that support teacher learning and development” (Zepeda et al., 2017, p. 237).

The ambiguity of a definition for the school’s grade-level chair aligned with the fifth major finding to clarify expectations for all stakeholders. Jacobs et al. (2016) supported this finding by stating, “Principal-teacher agreement on guidelines for teacher leadership will go a long way toward eliminating the role ambiguity principal-teacher conflict, and

misunderstandings between teachers and teacher leaders” (p. 402). Uribe-Florez et al. (2014) detailed the importance of clarified expectations and the potential impact on the school environment if misalignment exists. The sixth finding called for continued enhancement of leadership capacity in teacher leaders. While minimal formal programs support grade-level chairs, the growth must continue, and the administrator’s support will encourage teachers to “courageously venture forth to lead among their peers” (York-Barr & Duke, 2004, p. 282).

Major Findings Related to the Research Questions

Thematic analysis and repeated coding provided the researcher and design team members with insight into the results of the intervention cycles. Table 6.1 summarizes the major themes that emerged during focus group discussions and their alignment to the research questions.

Table 6.1

Identified Themes and Alignment to Research Questions

Research Question	Theme
1. How do teachers perceive the leadership team's roles, responsibilities, and overall impact in one public, suburban elementary school?	Theme 1: Cultivate
	Theme 2: Facilitate
	Theme 3: Collaborate
2. How do administrators foster and develop leadership capacity in grade-level chairs in a public, suburban elementary school?	Theme 4: Empower
3. How does the action research team describe the impact of the action research process on the practice of the leadership team in one public, suburban elementary school?	Theme 5: Clarify
	Theme 6: Enhance

Research Question #1

The first research question investigated teachers’ perceptions of a grade-level chair’s roles, responsibilities, and impact. Data analysis of all responses culminated in three themes.

Theme 1, *Cultivate*, emerged after thematic analysis of interview and questionnaire responses. Teachers believed that grade-level chairs possessed the skills to cultivate a team of teachers through mentoring, feedback, and positive interactions. Participants also described the role of a grade-level chair to inspire colleagues and instill buy-in as they approach school improvement initiatives.

Theme 2, *Facilitate*, arose at the beginning of the study and evolved throughout the intervention cycles. More specifically, participants initially described that grade-level chairs must hold meetings to plan instruction and analyze data. As the study progressed, observations and interview responses provided evidence that the teacher leaders grew from simply holding a meeting to facilitating discussions that impacted how each team analyzed and used data to inform instructional planning. Final interviews and questionnaires revealed that grade-level chairs understood they could bring a team together to complete a task; however, they lacked the proper training in leading colleagues with purpose prior to the intervention cycles.

The researcher arrived at Theme 3, *Collaborate*, after analyzing the descriptions that overwhelmingly described the grade-level chair as a liaison. Teachers frequently described that grade-level chairs were responsible for sharing information between the administrative and grade-level teams. The responses gathered at the beginning of the study made no mention of collaboration within the leadership team and alongside the administration. By the end of the study, grade-level chairs described the responsibility to actively engage with administrators and other team leaders to design initiatives with a school-wide perspective.

Research Question #2

The second research question examined how school administrators foster and develop leadership capacity in grade-level chairs. Theme 4, *Empower*, detailed and affirmed that school

administrators had the innate power to invest in developing teacher leaders through spoken and unspoken leadership practices. The participants expressed the value of setting clear roles and expectations for the grade-level chair, which revealed the team's and individuals' professional learning needs. Valuing teacher voice by actively seeking feedback throughout the study increased buy-in for the ongoing learning and community-building of the leadership team. Lastly, the explicit professional learning sessions with immediate observation and feedback cycles increased confidence and reassurance of taught practices. School administrators must identify strengths in teacher leaders and foster growth that will leave an impact felt throughout the building.

Research Question #3

The final research question inquired about the impact of the action research process on the practices of the leadership team, comprised of grade-level chairs. At the conclusion of the study, the researcher identified Theme 5, *Clarify*, after analysis of interview and questionnaire responses. Grade-level chairs described their leadership practices that shifted throughout the study. Participants detailed the intentional communication with their respective teams and the confidence to clearly describe expectations and mitigate naysayer behaviors. The teacher leaders also expressed the desire to continue researcher observations to receive feedback on their leadership practices with their teams. They remained eager to further clarify how they could continue developing for the benefit of the respective grade-level progress.

Theme 6, *Enhance*, completed the description of the impact of the study on participants. Each member of the design team detailed the specific professional learning sessions that shifted their leadership practices. Grade-level chairs noted the enhanced productivity of teacher teams due to the implementation of specific norms, protocols, meeting agendas, and task delegation.

The participants inquired about continuing the professional learning after the conclusion of the study due to the immediate impact observed and confidence when leading colleagues.

Limitations of the Current Study

Despite meticulous attention to detail and thorough implementation, it is crucial to recognize that this qualitative action research study may have limitations that warrant acknowledgment. The purpose of the study sought to understand the perceptions of grade-level chairs regarding the role, responsibilities, and impact of the educators holding the position at one elementary school. As such, the setting of the study itself may have influenced the findings. Fletcher Elementary School, one of the 28 elementary public schools within the extensive Connor County School District, situated in a suburban metropolitan area of a southern state. The elementary context has unique elements that differ from secondary school settings, such as participant selection. The participants held varying degrees in elementary education and taught all content areas versus secondary teachers, who often focus on one subject. Another limitation that may inhibit the replication of practices was the composition of each participant's team.

An additional limitation is tied to the researcher, who also served as the research site principal. The researcher previously served FES as an assistant principal during the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years and then served as principal at another CCSD elementary school during the subsequent two school years. The study took place following the researcher's return to FES as principal. Conducting research requires trust among participants, which involves a significant amount of time to cultivate. The researcher, although in the first year as principal at FES, already had established professional relationships with the participants as a result of her previous school year as the school's assistant principal.

Furthermore, the researcher transitioned to FES during the Summer of 2023. Prior to retirement in May 2023, the outgoing principal completed initial planning for the upcoming school year, including determining the grade-level chairs for the 2023-2024 school year, perhaps limiting the researcher's participant selection. Finally, the study began in August 2023 and ended in December 2023. Thus, the final limitation of the study was the timeframe during which the research took place.

Researchers conducting qualitative research studies must continuously reflect on personal subjectivity and maintain awareness of biases (Ratner, 2002, para. 1), as both pose "a threat to the credibility of a study" (Roulston & Shelton, 2015, p. 332). To preserve the integrity and validity of the study and results, the researcher maintained transparency with the design and implementation team members. The researcher explicitly outlined the timeline of action items at the onset of the study and provided frequent reminders. The study design included multiple opportunities for participants to provide feedback to drive the cycles via interviews, questionnaires, and observation feedback discussions. Design team members engaged in focus groups to facilitate data analysis through the lens of varying backgrounds and experiences. Lastly, the researcher communicated that the purpose of observations and professional learning sessions was data collection and not evaluation. Clarification on this was especially important due to the researcher's professional role as the school principal.

Implications and Recommendations for School Leaders

Qualitative action research studies reveal numerous data with arguably infinite pathways for interventions, particularly when conducted in complex social settings such as an elementary school. The timeline for the study allowed for two intervention cycles, restricting the future potential outcomes. After reviewing the minor and major themes that led to the final findings, the

researcher offers implications for future studies and recommendations for school leaders seeking to enhance the impact of teacher leaders known as grade-level or department chairs.

The belief about what a grade-level chair's role and responsibilities include informs the actions and eventual outcomes of the individual. Teachers who serve in leadership roles from within the four walls of a classroom, especially an elementary school classroom, develop perceptions of leadership through personal experiences during their careers or possibly through a vague description provided by the administration. Ambiguity leads to scenarios where teachers see the role as an additional task, not one that provides value to the school community. School leaders must set clear and concise roles and responsibilities for the teachers leading their teams. The expectations should then be communicated consistently and in meaningful ways.

While teachers and administrators perceive that a grade-level chair possesses significant instructional knowledge, mentoring capabilities, and the ability to cultivate an effective team, there are minimal opportunities or expectations for training in these areas. Teachers would be labeled ineffective if they assessed students without explicit instruction beforehand. On the contrary, the teacher would provide the strategy during multiple lessons with various practice opportunities. The teacher would monitor progress and provide feedback before issuing a summative evaluation of mastery. Administration within a school should follow this model with intentionality and fidelity to properly cultivate and foster leadership capacity in teachers.

School administrators balance numerous responsibilities at any given moment. Resultantly, the abundant, possibly urgent, obligations of a school leader may contribute to the development of the capacity of teachers becoming an afterthought. The simple reality is that administrators are held responsible for the school's outcomes and performance; however, they do not provide instruction directly to students.

School leaders can support increased outcomes by convening a team of teachers with the same vision and goals. Merely selecting teachers willing to serve in a leadership capacity does not guarantee effectiveness, thus requiring administrators to approach the task while mindful of the school's complex community. Leaders may need to prepare for courageous conversations when identifying the traits and requirements of an educator invited to serve as a grade-level chair. The institution of a team is merely the first step in the necessary journey to identify the school's needs, collaboratively identify action steps, and identify what the members themselves require so they can assist with the initiative. The responsibility to provide the proper professional learning returns to the school administration.

Furthermore, administrators must engage in professional learning alongside the grade-level chairs to calibrate and align expectations. Learning together facilitates trust development and promotes a safe environment where staff can make mistakes, reflect, and enhance practices. Additionally, administrators should seek connection with each member to develop comradery, learn about the teacher's professional goals, observe the implementation of practices taught in professional learning, and provide feedback to continue leadership development. Development and progress require significant time investments for all parties involved. Without the investment in the team members closest to students, administrators will face frequent teacher turnover and widening achievement gaps.

Implications and Recommendations for System Leaders

Headlines focus on the difficulties facing school districts with hundreds of teaching vacancies as educators leave the profession in droves. Principals continue shifting their expectations while hiring due to decreased graduates from teacher preparation programs. Schools hire individuals with alternative or in-progress certifications to ensure an adult in each

classroom. With the field of education under such strain, it continues to become increasingly challenging to identify teachers with experience and desire to serve in additional capacities. The need for qualified candidates also impacts the grade-level chair selection with schools. School systems can support the schools within their districts by helping provide professional learning to grade-level chairs. Implementing professional learning opportunities that span multiple buildings also fosters collaboration across diverse buildings and leaders.

System leaders who seek to assist schools with professional learning that increases teacher leadership capacity could also work with administrators to develop a foundational structure for grade-level chairs or department chairs. The ambiguity of the role and definition of teacher leadership leaves educators to figure it out independently instead of collaboratively researching and designing expectations that could launch more than one grade level or school toward success. Moreover, as system leaders assist with defining and clarifying expectations, they can review and consider how to assist principals with incentivizing the work with structured time for development, assistance with advanced degrees or certifications, or financial compensation.

Implications and Recommendations for Researchers

Considering the constraints of the study and recognizing various factors that may have influenced the findings, future researchers might extend this qualitative study by further investigating the leadership development of elementary school teachers. Although sparse, the existing research highlights secondary teacher leaders, more commonly known as department chairs. These individuals lead colleagues from more than one grade level who all teach the same content area. Elementary school teachers often teach all core content areas within one instructional day, which requires educators to maintain proficiency in research-based instructional strategies best for teaching reading, math, writing, and more.

Additionally, teachers rarely stay in the same grade level throughout their careers. They adjust their instructional approaches based on the age and developmental needs of the class while simultaneously learning new academic learning targets and resources. Future research should focus on how administrators facilitate professional learning to enhance teacher leadership within an ever-changing elementary setting without causing grade-level chairs to feel burnt out.

An opportunity for future research is to investigate the connection between impactful principals, grade-level chairs, and student achievement. The goal of increasing the leadership capacity of teacher leaders is so the influence of the leader exists within all classrooms, strong practices become commonplace, and students learn at high levels. An expanded study would identify impactful practices of school leadership teams that other schools could replicate.

Implications and Recommendations for Policy Makers

Schools constructing teams comprised of grade-level chairs or department heads have long been standard practice in public education in the United States; nonetheless, policies that provide expectations of the role do not exist. Research surrounding successful schools calls for a team to collaboratively establish a vision, analyze school progress, and make decisions for the community. However, there need to be policies to provide consistency across schools.

Policymakers may also influence school systems if they create guidelines to encourage and incentivize educators willing to mentor others while remaining in the classroom. For instance, in the state where the researcher conducted the study, educators' compensation relies on the years of experience and level of certification; however, the advanced degree must directly apply to the teacher's position to qualify for the additional funds. Advanced degrees in grade-level or team leadership do not exist; therefore, recruiting is difficult. Therein lies the

opportunity for policy regarding developing advanced degrees for roles such as grade-level chair that ensure worthwhile compensation.

Policymakers call for accountability and set unrealistic goals while ignoring the factors prohibiting schools from reaching their objectives. The 21st-century student has access to information and technology far more significant than was imaginable when the public education system came to be. Policymakers could revisit policies that shape the centuries-old educational framework and work alongside educators to better align with the needs of a modern student.

Chapter Summary and Final Thoughts

The obligation to ensure schools have successful outcomes is paramount to the enhancement and innovation of the future society and economy. The responsibility to provide the foundation for every student's impending adulthood is too great for only school administrators to uphold. This study investigated how to increase the leadership capacity of grade-level chairs as they serve in dual roles: teacher and team leader. The findings from this qualitative action research study revealed the significant need to invest in the teachers tasked with leading grade-level teams.

Perceptions of a grade-level chair's role and responsibilities starkly contrasted with how the individuals within the role described themselves. The depictions aligned with someone who completes tasks from a checklist and not someone equipped with the skills to mentor others and assist with school improvement initiatives. Despite the contrast in perception and reality, each participant's desire to enhance their leadership capacity remained prominent. Advanced degrees and explicit professional learning programs designed to increase leadership capacity are not commonplace, thus requiring schools to identify needs, develop plans, and actively reflect on growth if they desire to make change.

The study also identified how administrators play a significant role in developing grade-level chairs, providing an environment where teachers can feel safe and take risks as they enhance their skills. Results also highlighted the necessity for school administrators to invest significantly in each grade-level chair to ultimately influence every classroom. Team members' commitment and mutual trust begins with the school administration and flows through the leadership team, grade-level teams, classrooms, community, and back to the leaders. All stakeholders have the opportunity and capacity to influence school outcomes. The responsibility to set the tone, provide opportunities, and grow teacher leaders rests on the individuals who answered the call to be the principal.

APPENDIX

A: Interview Protocol: Pre-Cycle 1 (July/August 2023)

The researcher will say the following:

Thank you for your time and participation today and in the study “Building Leadership Capacity in Grade-Level Chairs.” The purpose of this study is to understand the perceptions of roles, responsibilities, and overall impact of teacher leaders, also known as grade-level chairs. The study also seeks to identify how administrators foster and develop leadership capacity in grade-level chairs. Your participation in the interview is voluntary, and your identity will be kept confidential with pseudonyms during the data collection, analysis, and in the final dissertation. If you are willing to continue the interview, please state, “Yes.” If you are unwilling to proceed with the interview, please state, “No.”

1. Please tell me about your professional background in education, including years in the classroom and level of certification.
2. How long have you been in a teacher leadership (“grade-level chair”) role? (RQ2)
3. What led you to become a grade-level chair? How were you selected for this role? (RQ1, RQ2)
4. What do you believe is the role of a grade-level chair or teacher leader? What responsibilities should this include? (RQ1)
5. In reality, what roles and responsibilities does the grade-level chair fulfill at your school? (RQ1)

6. What impact do you believe the grade-level chair should have on their respective team?
(RQ1)
7. In reality, what impact does a grade-level chair have on their respective team at your school? (RQ1)
8. What should administrators do to support your development as a teacher leader? Please elaborate. (RQ2)
9. What leadership opportunities exist at your school? (RQ2)
10. What professional learning opportunities have you participated in to develop as a teacher leader? (RQ2)
11. What does the leadership team contribute to the climate of the school? (RQ1, RQ2)
12. How effective do you feel as a teacher leader or grade-level chair? (RQ2)
13. Does your role as grade-level chair have a detailed description of responsibilities? (RQ1)
14. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience as a teacher leader?

B: Pre-Cycle 1 Questionnaire:

Roles, Responsibilities, Impacts, and Expectations of Grade-Level Chairs

1. How do you define the role of the grade-level chair? (RQ1)
2. What do you believe is the purpose of grade-level chairs? (RQ1)
3. What responsibilities does the grade-level chair have at your school? (RQ1)
4. What qualities must a teacher leader, or grade-level chair, possess? (RQ1)
5. How does a grade-level chair know they make an impact on the staff, students, families, etc.? (RQ1, RQ3)
6. What do you believe is the responsibility of administrators, specifically with grade-level chairs? (RQ2)
7. What do you believe is the responsibility of the grade-level chair with school improvement plans? (RQ1)
8. Please describe a professional learning opportunity that significantly impacted your role as a teacher leader. (RQ1, RQ2)
9. Please describe professional learning from which you would benefit in teacher leadership practices. (RQ1, RQ2)
10. Please share any insights or information about teacher leadership that you have not yet shared within the questionnaire.

C: Interview Protocol: Cycle I: Focus Group (August 2023, October 2023, December 2023)

The researcher will say the following:

Thank you for your time and participation today and in the study “Building Leadership Capacity in Grade-Level Chairs.” The purpose of this study is to understand the perceptions of roles, responsibilities, and overall impact of teacher leaders, also known as grade-level chairs. The study also seeks to identify how administrators foster and develop leadership capacity in grade-level chairs. Your participation in the focus group is voluntary, and your identity will be kept confidential with pseudonyms during the data collection, analysis, and in the final dissertation. If you are willing to continue the focus group, please state, “Yes.” If you are unwilling to proceed with the interview, please state, “No.”

1. Our perception survey results are ready for analysis as we prepare for the first/second intervention. Please review the data independently and prepare for a discussion about the next steps. *Note: The Action Research Design Team will review perception questionnaire data and interview results. The ARDT will identify themes that emerge from the data and discuss the necessary research and professional learning required for Cycle I/Cycle II.*

D: Interview Protocol: Pre-Cycle 2 (October 2023)

The researcher will say the following:

Thank you for your time and participation today and in the study “Building Leadership Capacity in Grade-Level Chairs.” The purpose of this study is to understand the perceptions of roles, responsibilities, and overall impact of teacher leaders, also known as grade-level chairs. The study also seeks to identify how administrators foster and develop leadership capacity in grade-level chairs. Your participation in the interview is voluntary, and your identity will be kept confidential with pseudonyms during the data collection, analysis, and in the final dissertation. If you are willing to continue the interview, please state, “Yes.” If you are unwilling to proceed with the interview, please state, “No.”

1. After engaging in the first cycle of professional learning, what do you believe is the role of a grade-level chair or teacher leader? What responsibilities should this include? (RQ1)
2. After engaging in the first cycle of professional learning, what impact do you believe the grade-level chair should have on their respective team? (RQ1)
3. After engaging in the first cycle of professional learning, did your leadership practices shift? If yes, please explain. (RQ2)
4. How did your effectiveness as a teacher leader or grade-level chair change after the first cycle’s professional learning? (RQ1, RQ2)
5. What do you believe administrators should do to support teacher leaders as they seek to increase their leadership capacity? (RQ2)
6. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience through the first cycle?

E: Interview Protocol: Post Cycle 2 (November 2023 and December 2023)

The researcher will say the following:

Thank you for your time and participation today and in the study “Building Leadership Capacity in Grade-Level Chairs.” The purpose of this study is to understand the perceptions of roles, responsibilities, and overall impact of teacher leaders, also known as grade-level chairs. The study also seeks to identify how administrators foster and develop leadership capacity in grade-level chairs. Your participation in the interview is voluntary, and your identity will be kept confidential with pseudonyms during the data collection, analysis, and in the final dissertation. If you are willing to continue the interview, please state, “Yes.” If you are unwilling to proceed with the interview, please state, “No.”

1. After engaging in the second cycle of professional learning, what do you believe is the role of a grade-level chair or teacher leader? What responsibilities should this include? (RQ1)
2. After engaging in the second cycle of professional learning, what impact do you believe the grade-level chair should have on their respective team? (RQ1)
3. After engaging in the second cycle of professional learning, did your leadership practices shift? If yes, please explain. (RQ2)
4. How did your effectiveness as a teacher leader or grade-level chair change after the second cycle of professional learning? (RQ1, RQ2)
5. What do you believe administrators should do to support teacher leaders as they seek to increase their leadership capacity? (RQ2)
6. If this study were to continue, what would you say is the next cycle of professional learning that will assist you in your leadership practices? (RQ2, RQ3)

7. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience through the first cycle?

F: Post-Cycle 2 Questionnaire:

Action Research Process and the Impact on the Grade-Level Chairs

Please answer the following questions *after* engaging in the action research process.

1. How has your definition of the grade-level chairs' roles, responsibilities, and purposes changed after engaging in the action research process? (RQ1)
2. What qualities must a teacher leader, or grade-level chair, possess? (RQ1)
3. How does a grade-level chair know they make an impact on the staff, students, families, etc.? (RQ1)
4. What do you believe is the responsibility of administrators, specifically with grade-level chairs? (RQ2)
5. What do you believe is the responsibility of the grade-level chair with school improvement plans? (RQ1)
6. Please describe a professional learning opportunity that significantly impacted your role as a teacher leader. (RQ3)
7. Please describe professional learning from which you would benefit in teacher leadership practices. (RQ3)
8. Please share any insights or information about the action research process that you have not yet shared within the questionnaire.

G: Letter of Informed Consent

July 27, 2023

Dear Aspiring Teacher Leader,

I am currently enrolled as a doctoral student at the University of Georgia. As a requirement for my doctoral degree, I will conduct a research project entitled Building Leadership Capacity in Grade-Level Chairs. This research aims to increase the leadership capacity of teacher leaders, also known as grade-level chairs, in a suburban elementary school. Therefore, I am requesting your permission to include you as a participant in this project.

This project will begin on July 31, 2023, and end on December 14, 2023. As a part of this research, I will not need to look at students' grades or test scores. I will also not need to look at any of your TKES evaluations. Possible benefits for the participants of this project are gaining knowledge in what it takes to lead school change through the lens of the grade-level chair at Unity Grove Elementary School in Henry County Schools. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts for participants in this project. Your name and all other personally identifiable information will be kept confidential. The final report will not include your name nor the name of your school or school district.

Your participation in this project is voluntary. You will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled if you decide not to participate in this research project. If you choose to participate in this project, you may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. You have the right to inspect any instrument or materials related to the proposal. Your request will be honored within a reasonable period upon receipt.

Researcher's Name: Mrs. Mercedes Elyse Durden
 School: Unity Grove Elementary School
 Email Address: mercedes.durden@henry.k12.ga.us

Major Professor/Dissertation Chair: Dr. Jami Berry
 University: University of Georgia
 Email Address: jami berry@uga.edu

If you agree to participate in this research, please complete the information below:

Participant's Name (please print): _____

Participant's Signature: _____

Date: _____

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