Examining the Perceptions of Collaborative Practices and Performance Feedback in a Rural School District: A Case Study

ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, EXAMINING PERCEPTIONS OF COLLABORATIVE PRACTICES AND PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK IN A RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICT: A CASE STUDY, by LATASHA LAMPKIN, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Education, in the College of Education & Human Development, Georgia State University.

The Dissertation Advisory Committee and the student's Department Chairperson, as representatives of the faculty, certify that this dissertation has met all standards of excellence and scholarship as determined by the faculty.

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PROFESSIONAL SOCIETIES AND ORGANIZATIONS

2023 Georgia Association of Educators

EXAMINING PERCEPTIONS OF COLLABORATIVE PRACTICES AND PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK WITHIN PLCS IN A RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICT: A CASE STUDY

by

LATASHA LAMPKIN

Under the Direction of Yinying Wang, Ed.D.

ABSTRACT

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to examine educational leaders' perceptions regarding providing support in the form of collaborative practices and performance feedback in a rural school district and teachers' perceptions of receiving the support. **Theoretical Framework**: This study is theoretically grounded in transformational leadership and collaboration. Drawing upon the tenets of transformational leadership, which emphasizes inspirational motivation and individualized consideration, alongside collaboration, which underscores the importance of shared goals, mutual respect, and communication, this study examines how these factors intersect to shape the dynamics of PLCs. **Methods**: Through qualitative inquiry, this case study elucidated the role of transformational leaders in fostering a culture of collaboration within PLCs and providing meaningful performance feedback. The sample of this study consisted of four educational leaders and four middle school and high school teachers. Educational leader interviews, teacher interviews, and document analyses were used to collect data. First-level and second-level coding were used during the data analysis process. During the first level of the data analysis, there was a line-by-line review to identify initial codes. Comprehensive themes were developed during the second level, which encapsulated the key findings and insights derived from the coding process. **Findings:** Key findings of the study indicated that educational leaders in the rural school district recognized that many teachers in the district operated in isolation. The leaders held favorable views toward collaborative practices, and they valued providing performance feedback to teachers, based on the teachers' individual needs, following professional development sessions. **Implications**: Theoretical, practical, and policy implications from this study highlight the need to implement strategies that provide protected time for teachers while also providing school and district leaders with the necessary training to promote a culture of collaboration, refine their feedback strategies, and improve teacher development, all of which would ultimately benefit teacher

performances. Other implications include the need for district leaders to develop measures to assess the effectiveness of school leaders instituting protected time, which would ensure collective responsibility.

INDEX WORDS: Professional learning communities, Collaborative practices, Performance feedback, Teacher retention, Transformational leadership theory, Collaboration construct, Rural schools, Educational leaders

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LATASHA LAMPKIN

A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the

Degree of

Doctor of Education

in

Educational Leadership

in

Educational Policy Studies

in

the College of Education & Human Development
Georgia State University

Atlanta, GA

2025

DEDICATION

To my sons, whose unwavering support, endless curiosity, and boundless love have been the guiding lights illuminating my academic journey. Your resilience, laughter, and unyielding belief in me have fueled my determination to pursue excellence in all my endeavors.

To my mother, whose wisdom, sacrifices, and unconditional love have been the cornerstone of my life' s foundation. Your strength, encouragement, and unwavering belief in my abilities have been a constant source of inspiration and motivation.

And to the love of my life, whose support, patience, and understanding have been the pillars of strength that have sustained me through the challenges and triumphs of this academic pursuit. Your love, companionship, and belief in me have enriched every moment of this journey, reminding me of the importance of balance, gratitude, and cherishing life's most precious moments.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my entire family for their support, understanding, and encouragement throughout this journey. Their belief in me has been the driving force behind my perseverance and determination to reach this milestone.

I am also grateful to my friends for their invaluable support and camaraderie during both the highs and lows of this endeavor. Their words of wisdom and laughter have made this journey much more memorable.

I extend my heartfelt appreciation to Dr. Wang for her expertise, guidance, and invaluable feedback during this work. I also extend my appreciation to my other committee members, Dr. Hendrick and Dr. Ogletree for their support. Their constructive critiques and unwavering commitment to excellence have shaped this work and propelled it to new heights.

To every individual who has played a role in supporting me on this academic journey, I offer my sincere thanks.

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CHAPTER ONE: THE PROBLEM

Criticism has been leveled at many professional development methods for their inadequacy in fostering meaningful changes in teaching strategies or student learning outcomes (Ollson, 2019). Often, these traditional methods are too generic and disconnected from the actual needs of teachers and students, which has resulted in limited practical application. As a result, there is a growing push for professional development that is personalized, evidence-based, and directly aligned with the specific goals of the school community. Sporadic seminars where teachers are introduced to new teaching methods without ongoing support or follow-up from educational leaders exemplify this shortfall. Educational leaders are directly responsible for providing professional development to all staff to support their needs (Professional Standards for Educational Leaders, 2015). Professional learning communities (PLCs) and the collaborative cultures they foster are frequently observed in high performing schools. Some rural schools, however, do not have true PLCs that consist of same grade level or same content area teachers collaborating to meet common goals (Lampkin, 2023). Instead, these schools may group teachers from different subjects or grade levels, which may limit the effectiveness of collaboration due to varying priorities and curricular focuses. This lack of alignment can result in missed opportunities for teachers to share relevant strategies and address specific challenges together. Establishing authentic PLCs with focused, intentional groupings can better support teachers in refining their practices and driving student achievement in targeted areas. Just as some schools lack PLCs, some teachers feel unsupported by their school leaders, as they view this lack of support as a factor in their decision to leave the profession (Talley, 2017). Without strong backing from school leaders, teachers often feel isolated and undervalued, as they struggle to manage the complex demands of their roles. This lack of support can lead to burnout, especially when teachers are left without adequate resources or guidance to navigate instructional

challenges. By fostering a culture of encouragement and providing consistent support, school leaders can help to retain teachers and improve morale throughout the school.

Educational leaders can support teachers in several ways. One effective approach is by fostering collaborative practices where teachers can share strategies and address common challenges. Leaders can also provide meaningful performance feedback that is specific, actionable, and focused on growth to help teachers to refine their instructional practices. Additionally, by establishing a supportive environment that encourages open communication and celebrates progress, leaders can build trust and inspire teachers to pursue ongoing improvement. Performance feedback provided by educational leaders may support teachers, particularly during the teachers' implementation of evidence-based practices (Baughan et al., 2019). Some teachers argue that it is not happening enough (Talley, 2017). Regarding collaborative practices, DuFour (2004) suggested that the term PLC has been overused by naming any assortment of professional groupings within a school setting, including department and faculty meetings, as PLCs. Another issue is that some leaders and teachers do not support collaborative practices within PLCs (Vangrieken et al., 2017) because some teachers believe that collaboration within their schools is one-sided and that all teachers do not contribute. Each educator involved in the collaborative process must be willing to contribute to the mission of achieving the shared goal. If there is an imbalance, it can lead to frustration among team members, which would reduce the effectiveness of PLCs and potentially hinder meaningful professional growth for all teachers involved. Educational leaders in schools where departments lack shared planning face challenges in allocating time for teachers' collaborative efforts. This problem may be more prevalent in some rural school districts where teachers serve as singletons as there are no other teachers in the school with which to collaborate (Lampkin, 2023). Geographical context is important because one-third of schools in the United States are in rural areas, which accounts for approximately

24% of all students in the country and approximately 56% of school districts in the state of Georgia (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). This percentage reflects that, although Georgia has several metropolitan areas, such as Atlanta and Savannah, a significant portion of the state consists of rural communities with smaller populations. Disparities in educational outcomes between urban and rural students have been documented in various studies (OECD, 2013; Jordan et al., 2012).

According to the Center for American Progress (2020), Georgia is witnessing a population surge, leading some to argue that the state is at a demographic turning point. The state's current population exceeds 10.5 million residents, and, since 2000, the state has grown by approximately 18% (Dickens et al., 2021) and among the state's 181 school systems, 2493 schools serve over 1.8 million students. Additionally, nearly 71% of the state's schools are designated as serving large concentrations of students from low-income families (Dickens et al., 2021). Of the 181 school districts in Georgia, 120 are classified as rural, and the rural schools are among the fastest growing in the state (GaDOE, n.d.). Shortages of qualified teachers in rural areas have worsened due to population shifts towards urban areas (Bisaha, 2018; Sisk, 2015). As a result, educational leaders and teachers in rural districts often face challenges in providing equitable educational opportunities and may rely on less experienced teachers or teachers that did not complete teacher preparatory programs to fill the gaps. With the rapidly changing demographics, educational leaders must be intentional in their efforts to provide support to all teachers. This includes providing training and resources that equip teachers to effectively meet the diverse needs of their students.

Purpose

This dissertation study aims to explore transformational educational leaders' and teachers' perceptions of collaborative practices and performance feedback in a rural school district. By

examining these perspectives, the study seeks to identify factors that enhance or hinder effective collaboration and feedback, which could ultimately be used to inform strategies for improving teacher retention and instructional quality in rural settings. Principals are expected to inspire and motivate their teachers depending on each teacher's individual needs (Bass, 1985). This would require principals being able to build strong, trusting relationships with teachers in their schools while developing a deep understanding of each teacher's strengths, weaknesses, and professional goals. Because educational leaders are viewed as role models by teachers and the students within the school, their perceptions of initiatives to support teachers are heavily valued. Purposely, the study seeks to understand how educational leaders' and teachers' receptiveness to collaborative practices and performance feedback influence implementation and effectiveness. This study begins with a review of existing literature on performance feedback. It will also provide details of existing literature on collaborative practices. Subsequently, the reader will be presented with the theoretical frameworks used to frame the study. Together, the literature and frameworks allow me to argue why this topic should be explored.

Very little empirical literature addresses the perceptions of educational leaders in delivering performance feedback to teachers. The literature fails to acknowledge benefits and barriers educational leaders and teachers face in implementing collaborative practices in rural districts where they are faced with additional challenges (Preston & Barnes, 2017). This study will address the gap in the literature by examining educational leaders' and teachers' perceptions of collaborative practices and performance feedback in a rural school district in Georgia. To fill this void, this dissertation study builds on the literature on transformational leadership and collaboration to explore how educational leaders motivate their teams in the context of PLCs in rural school districts. This study specifically seeks to answer two research questions (RQs):

RQ1: How do transformational leaders in rural schools perceive the role of collaboration within PLCs?

RQ2: How do transformational leaders in rural schools perceive the importance of providing performance feedback to teachers who have had professional development within PLCs?

Significance of the Study

This qualitative study will add to the body of literature on collaborative practices and performance feedback through the lens of transformational leadership. Educational leaders play a vital role in ensuring each teacher receives the level of support needed to be successful. They determine which initiatives should be prioritized, which could range from establishing internal coherence to improving teacher attendance. With the mounting research on collaborative practices and performance feedback, perceptions of educational leaders and teachers should be studied to determine what is prioritized within school settings. Understanding these perceptions can reveal gaps between intended priorities and actual practices, which could be used to guide targeted improvements in professional development and instructional support. Professional leadership standards on the national and state levels support both collaborative practices and performance feedback. By aligning leadership practices with these standards, schools can create environments that encourage open communication, reflective dialogue, and data-driven decision-making. Ultimately, such alignment helps to enhance teacher effectiveness and, in turn, positively impacts student achievement.

Standard 7 of the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders states "effective educational leaders foster a professional community of teachers and other professional staff to promote each student's academic success and well-being" (Professional Standards for Educational Leaders, 2015, p. 15). Collaboration could be used to strengthen teachers, regardless

of their experience levels, in areas where they have weaknesses. The significance of collaborative practices in education can be attributed to the shift in educational paradigms. Traditional education often focuses on teacher-centered instruction and individual learning, while overlooking the importance of social interaction and collective knowledge construction. However, with the recognition of this approach's limitations, there has been a growing emphasis on student-centered learning and the integration of collaborative practices on teaching and learning (James et al., 2007).

Performance Standard 6 of the Leader Keys Effectiveness System states "the leader fairly and consistently evaluates school personnel in accordance with state and district guidelines and provides them with timely and constructive feedback focused on improved student learning" (Leader Keys Effectiveness System, 2014, p. 30). Performance feedback is the exchange of information about an individual or group's performance that is usually given after an observation. The feedback can be used to support, motivate, correct and regulate work efforts and outcomes, and it increases the chances that leaders and employees are in alignment with the expectations and goals that have been set (Aguinis & Gottfredson, 2012). In terms of individual and team performance, performance feedback could significantly benefit employees by enhancing employee motivation, engagement, and job satisfaction.

Insights from this study will be helpful to educational leaders because it will extend the research on how transformational leadership influences change in leaders and teachers regarding collaborative practices and performance feedback, which could ultimately lead to higher student achievement. It will also provide educational leaders and teachers with strategies that have been effective in similar schools or districts. For example, educational leaders and teachers in one rural county are unable to collaborate often because some teachers do not have common planning periods. At least twice a year, the science coach facilitates a collaborative section that allows

science teachers in grades 3-12 to engage in horizontal and vertical alignment sessions. Teachers have collaborated to create pacing guides and common assessments, analyze data, and discuss best practices. They used the vertical alignment session to discuss skills the students leaving elementary and middle school should have to be successful on the next level. The contribution of this study could heighten the understanding of the significance of providing teachers with the time and opportunity to collaborate with each other either within the same schools or during collaborative sessions while also understanding that collaboration may not benefit each staff member.

Key Terms

Professional Learning Communities

Professional Learning Communities, sometimes called PLCs, refer to a community of teachers supported by leaders with a collective responsibility of developing values and vision, shared leadership, and trusting relationships (DuFour, 2004). The term suggests that "focus is not just on individual teachers' learning but on (1) professional learning; (2) within the context of a cohesive group; (3) that focuses on collective knowledge, and (4) occurs within an ethic of interpersonal caring that permeates the life of teachers, students and school leaders" (Stoll, 2011, p. 101). Professional development in the form of PLCs "should be integrated in the schools' organization, be based on collaborative inquiry, and be centered on developing teaching practices in ways that advance student learning" (Ollson, 2022, p. 8). DuFour and Eaker (1998) defined PLC as "an environment that fosters mutual cooperation, emotional support, and personal growth as they work together to achieve what they cannot accomplish alone" (p. 12). Considering the definitions of professional learning communities, I define PLCs as a community of same grade level/same content area teachers supported by leaders integrated in the school's organization,

based on collaborative inquiry, and centered on developing teaching practices with the common goal of advancing student learning.

Performance feedback

Performance feedback can be used to support, motivate, correct and regulate work efforts and outcomes, and it increases the chances that leaders and employees align with the expectations and goals set (Cornelius & Nagro, 2014). It is an evidence-based practice when used to increase implementation fidelity of instructional practices (Cornelius & Nagro, 2014). Performance feedback is a "personal interaction between two people with the oral, written, or gestural communication targeting/regarding progress towards a desired outcome" (Fuller, 2020, p. 10). Johnson et al. (2022) defines performance feedback in organizations as "the provision of information specifically given to change or maintain performance" (p. 65). Using their definitions, I have created a definition that best aligns with the literature review and the focus of this study. Performance feedback is the exchange of information about an individual's or group's performance that is usually given after an observation to assess the implementation of instructional practices that is used to increase implementation fidelity of instructional practices.

Collaborative practices

Collaborative practices refer to practices when members of a learning community work together as equals to support each other's needs. Examples of collaborative practices include professional learning communities and collaboratives. Collaborative practices refer to "various practices among teachers, such as exchanging materials, discussing the learning of specific students, developing common standards for assessing student progress, attending team conferences, teaching jointly in the same class, observing others' teaching and providing feedback, learning from each other, and engaging in joint activities" (OECD, 2014). I define collaborative practices as practices among same grade/same content area teachers, to include

special education teachers, that involve an exchanging of materials, developing of common standards for assessing study progress, and learning from each other.

Transformational leadership theory

Transformational leadership theory is a leadership theory that suggests that leadership should focus on inspiring and motivating followers to achieve a shared vision through personal growth and development (Bass, 1985). Leaders and followers help each other to advance to a higher level of morale and motivation (Burns, 1978). According to Bernard Bass (1985), transformational leadership behaviors include the four dimensions of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation. I define transformational leadership theory as a theory that suggests educational leaders should focus on inspiring and motivating teachers while providing personalized support, coaching, and mentorship to each teacher to increase implementation fidelity of instructional practices.

Rural

Rural has several meanings. The Census Bureau defines rural based on population number and density, with areas having less than 2500 people considered rural. The Office of Management and Budget adds a distinction of metro and non-metro areas, categorizing counties based on the presence of cities with 50,000 or more residents. The Economic Research Service and the National Center for Education Statistics use codes to categorize areas along an urban-rural continuum. The US Department of Education defines rural areas as those with populations under 2500 or open countryside, and it is extended to include conditions of isolation similar to other definitions of rural. Rural school districts are significant distances from urban centers that are often geographically isolated. They often serve large populations of socioeconomically disadvantaged students and are characterized by lower academic achievement than suburban schools (Ringler et al., 2020). In this study, rural school districts refer to school districts in

counties in GA that have fewer than 50,000 residents and are located outside of major urban centers and metropolitan regions. These districts typically serve communities with smaller populations and may face unique challenges related to resources, infrastructure, and student demographics. Rural schools in Georgia, on average, have higher percentages of White students and teachers than their urban and diverse suburban counterparts (Williams et al., 2021).

Educational leaders

Educational leaders serve in the roles of superintendents, assistant superintendents, principals, assistant principals, department chairs, instructional coaches, and curriculum directors. In this study, educational leaders refer to principals, assistant principals, and instructional coaches who identify as transformational leaders. Educational leadership refers to "an educational system approach that unites everyone under a common goal and a core set of values" and is most associated with transformational leadership (American University School of Education, 2013).

Assumptions and Limitations

The sample of educational leaders and teachers was small and not generalizable. In addition, the sample of educational leaders and teachers in the study was confined to predominantly Caucasian leaders and teachers as there is little diversity on the staff in the district in which the study was conducted. This limitation reflects the demographic composition of the district and may influence the generalizability of the findings to more diverse educational settings.

One assumption specific to a qualitative study on transformational leadership is that transformational leadership behaviors significantly impact the school's climate and culture and teacher performance. It is also assumed that these leadership behaviors foster an environment of trust, collaboration, and professional growth, which ultimately enhances both teacher effectiveness and student outcomes. Another assumption is that the study participants will

provide honest and reliable responses during their interviews and other data collection processes. It is also assumed that the participants will feel comfortable sharing their experiences and perspectives, contributing to the depth and authenticity of the data gathered. Limitations specific to a qualitative study on transformational leadership include challenges in measuring the long-term impact of transformational leadership behaviors and dependence on self-reporting by the study's participants. Assumptions specific to performance feedback are that performance feedback plays a significant role in teacher development and performance improvement and that the findings from this study can offer valuable insights into effective strategies for delivering performance feedback. It is further assumed that the quality, timeliness, and constructiveness of feedback directly influence teachers' ability to apply it in ways that enhance their instructional practices and student outcomes. A limitation specific to performance feedback is that external factors, such as school culture or educational leadership changes, may influence participants' experiences with performance feedback during the study period. These factors could introduce variability in how feedback is perceived and applied, potentially affecting the consistency and generalizability of the study's findings.

Overview of the Study

This study aims to look at the perceptions of transformational educational leaders and teachers within rural schools on collaborative practices and performance feedback. By examining these perceptions, the study seeks to identify the factors that contribute to effective collaboration and the ways in which performance feedback influences teacher development and school improvement in rural settings. Teachers in rural schools are faced with additional challenges, such as limited access to professional development opportunities, fewer resources, and the difficulty of attracting and retaining qualified staff. These factors can create barriers to providing high-quality instruction and maintaining a supportive learning environment for students. A

connection between teachers' perceptions, as well as the perceptions of transformational educational leaders may influence the school's focus on administrative support on those constructs. The study addresses a gap by exploring the perceptions of transformational leaders and teachers in rural school districts in using the transformational leadership dimensions of inspirational motivation and individual consideration. Also, it addresses the gap in literature that relates to educational leaders providing performance feedback during observations with the purpose of checking for proper implementation of instructional strategies discussed during PLC sessions. Chapter Two of this study provides a review of the literature. It is broken up into six sections: 1) background and development of collaborative practices and performance feedback; 2) common characteristics of effective collaborative practices and components and elements of performance feedback; 3) benefits and barriers of collaborative practices and performance feedback; 4) implementation and effectiveness of collaborative practices and performance feedback; 5) gaps in the literature; and 6) theoretical framework of the study.

Chapter Three explains the research design of the study. The study will employ the Merriam (2015) qualitative case study design. A qualitative research case study design better aligns with the purpose of the study as it is more exploratory and will allow me to examine the perceptions of multiple participants to gain different perspectives on collaborative practices and performance feedback. Data will be collected during the study in a rural school district using a semi-structured interview for educational leaders, a semi-structured interview for teachers, and document analyses.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter provides a comprehensive examination of the literature relevant to this study, exploring key theories, previous research, and current trends that inform the research questions. The literature review is divided into four sections, each addressing a critical component of the study, including theoretical frameworks and previous empirical research. Section one examines collaborative practices by exploring various models of collaboration in educational settings, the benefits of collaborative teaching and learning, and how these practices contribute to professional development, improved student outcomes, and the overall effectiveness of school communities. Section two describes performance feedback by exploring its definition, various forms, and the role it plays in teacher development. It also examines the impact of feedback on teacher motivation, instructional practices, and student achievement, while highlighting best practices for providing constructive and actionable feedback within rural educational settings. Section three reviews gaps in literature by identifying areas where existing research is limited or inconclusive, highlighting key questions that have yet to be explored in depth. It also examines the inconsistencies or contradictions within current studies and discusses the implications these gaps may have for future research directions, particularly in the context of educational leadership, collaborative practices, and performance feedback. Section four describes the theoretical framework of the study by outlining the key theories and models that underpin the research, and provides a foundation for understanding the relationships between transformational leadership, collaborative practices, and performance feedback. It explores how these theoretical perspectives inform the study's design, guide the analysis of data, and help explain the potential impacts of leadership behaviors on teacher development and school culture. Additionally, the section discusses how the chosen framework aligns with the research objectives and supports the interpretation of the study's findings.

Collaborative practices and performance feedback will be reviewed as they are related to the study's research questions. Transformational leaders view collaboration as an important factor in achieving positive change and growth and encouraging open communication and an exchange of successful strategies and ideas. They promote a culture that is collaborative where educators work together to analyze student data, share best practices, and engage in professional learning. Providing performance feedback to teachers who have had professional development within PLCs is crucial in the context of transformational leadership.

Transformational leaders strongly believe in motivating and inspiring teachers, which empowers the teachers and provides an opportunity for the leaders to highlight the teachers' strengths and areas in which they have shown growth. Individualized consideration is one of the four dimensions of Bass' theory of transformational leadership (1985) that involves recognizing and addressing the individual needs of each follower. This approach allows leaders to promote a supportive environment where they act as mentors, providing personalized guidance and encouragement to help followers reach their full potential. When applying this dimension to performance feedback in education, a transformational leader could tailor feedback to the specific strengths, weaknesses, and developmental goals of each teacher.

Collaborative Practices

Collaborative practices in education have been traced back to as early as the 19th century. Educational pioneers, such as John Dewey (1938) and Vygotsky (1978), emphasized the importance of social interaction and cooperative learning in the educational process. Dewey's foundational ideas for collaborative practices highlighted the value of cooperative learning and group work in education. PLCs were established with the idea that teacher leaders and principals would offer guidance to teachers (Flynn, 2010). Scheduled meeting time is integrated into the school

day and calendar with each session concentrating on instructional areas (Archer, 2012). PLCs offer a framework for schools to enhance student achievement, grounded in the belief that teacher professional development translates into enhanced practice, ultimately yielding maximal gains in student performance (DuFour et al., 2008).

Collaborative environments provide teachers with the opportunities for professional growth, increased autonomy, and improved working conditions as teachers work together to discuss effective teaching strategies, unpack standards, creating pacing guides, create assessments, and analyze data (East, 2015). Collaboration, according to Ingersoll & Strong (2011), often leads to a sense of fulfillment and contributes to the teachers' willingness to remain in the profession. A wealth of research examines collaborative practices in PLCs (DuFour, 2004; Fullan, 2005). Leading researchers in the field concur that establishing effective collaborative practices is standard in high-performing schools, so there is a push to drive the transformation of low-performing schools to do the same (East, 2015). Fullan (2005), argued that collaborative practices within PLCs are not always implemented with fidelity because the key characteristics of PLCs are not present. For instance, in a study conducted by Conderman (2018) that explored collaboration between special education and general education teachers, numerous special education teachers conveyed a sense of lacking authority and being underutilized when working in a general educational classroom.

Some educational leaders use PLC models to introduce collaborative practices, but all PLC models are not the same (DuFour et al., 2008). Researchers in education agreed on seven common characteristics of effective collaborative practices (Baloche & Brody, 2017; DuFour et al., 2005; Hannaford, 2010; Le et al., 2018; Roy & Hord, 2006). The seven common characteristics include action orientation and experimentation, cooperation, collective inquiry, continuous learning, results orientation, shared leadership, and shared mission (Hannaford, 2010). DuFour's

big ideas of collaborative practices include teachers understanding that "The key point of building is learning not teaching, working cooperatively for designed aims" (p.6); creating a culture of collaboration; and becoming focused on results (DuFour, 2004). Hord's (1997) five dimensions included supportive and shared leadership, collective creativity, shared values and vision, shared personal practices, and supportive conditions for sustaining the learning community.

Action orientation and experimentation involve every member of a professional learning community recognizing that learning thrives when engagement is high (East, 2015). This approach requires an educator to be willing to take risks, try new strategies, and refine practices based on feedback. By promoting a culture of experimentation, educators can adapt to the evolving needs of their students. In PLCs, individuals serve as agents of change within schools, fostering an environment where trying new approaches aligns with their existing beliefs and a focus on student outcomes (Hannaford, 2010). Hannaford suggested that PLCs offer a safe space for action and implementation in the quest for enhanced student learning. Lezotte (2005) highlighted PLCs as an embodiment of effective school research, showcasing teachers' willingness to embrace educational reform for the betterment of student learning. Cultivating action orientation and experimentation provides teachers with the necessary groundwork for collaborative discussions in PLCs aimed at achieving desired student achievement outcomes (Hord & Sommers 2008).

Cooperation within PLCs involves systematically working together as a unified group to enhance both individual and collective practices (DuFour et al., 2008), with the primary focus being advancing student learning outcomes. It is crucial for educators to cooperate with each other to establish desired student outcomes and benchmarks for success (Reeves, 2006). Educational literature extensively covers successful school cultures that attribute their reform efforts to effect cooperation (Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). To maximize their reform endeavors, teachers need to be educated on engaging in meaningful discourse (Hanson, 2010). Cooperation signifies a shift

from working in isolation to engaging in structured teamwork aimed at refining instructional practices (DuFour, 2005). However, mastering cooperation requires intentional coaching and support for teachers (Thessin & Starr, 2011). Schmoker (2005) argues that PLCs emphasize the instrumental role of cooperation in enhancing teaching and learning. Additionally, cooperation contributes to heightened teacher morale due to the support offered by colleagues (East, 2015). Traditionally, teaching has been solitary, but there's a growing recognition that teamwork fosters successful relationships, and, ultimately, student achievement (Neuzil, 2010). Teachers often experience isolation in the classroom, hindering the development of effective relationships essential for embedded professional development (Morgan, 2010). DuFour (2004) argues that collectively working towards a shared mission is more effective than individual efforts. PLCs diminish the competitive spirit among educators by fostering cooperation. Typically, teachers can be productive of their territory and prioritize issues directly affecting them (East, 2015). Cooperation enables and encourages the acknowledgment of team achievements and setbacks, which aids in cultivating transparent and productive relationships among stakeholders (Hord, 1997). Schools that adopt team structures embrace and promote relationships as a vital component of transforming the school culture to one that values cooperation over competition (Fullan, 2001).

Effective rural principals employ a cooperative leadership style, which fosters teamwork among staff members, thereby enhancing motivation, morale, and job performance (Lock et al., 2012; Renihan & Noonan, 2012). With small staff sizes and rich social and professional networks, rural principals are well-positioned to cultivate trust, promote cooperation, and support student achievement goals (Chance & Seguar, 2009; Irvine et al., 2010). In rural Alberta, Canada, cooperative leadership was demonstrated by a principal who involved teachers in developing school goals during staff meetings and professional development sessions. Msila (2012) argued that successful principalship involved sharing leadership responsibilities with staff, while Seipert

and Baghurst (2014) discovered that rural principals in North Carolina leveraged the expertise of their staff to overcome school challenges. Bartling's (2013) doctoral research, in Wisconsin, emphasized that effective rural principals operated with a mindset of "power with" rather than "power over" staff. Studies highlighted the importance of encouraging teacher cooperation and knowledge sharing through teacher observations and oral communication during staff meetings (Wallin & Newton, 2013; Ashton & Duncan, 2012), which builds teacher pride, improves job satisfaction, and prioritizes personal well-being (Haar, 2007).

Collective inquiry is the process through which groups establish the questions they will explore together in PLCs (East, 2015). This process encourages critical thinking and collaboration among all members of the PLC as educators collectively share insights, analyze data, and develop solutions to improve their instructional practices. Through the process of collective inquiry, professional learning communities align their efforts to address specific challenges. It serves as the foundation for shared knowledge among group members as they strive to achieve their goals (DuFour et al., 2008). The concept of collective inquiry can be traced back to Dewey's idea of collective inquiry in 1929 and Schaefer's schools, with the notion further developed as "sensors of inquiry" in 1967. PLCs provide a platform for sustained professional development for teachers by facilitating self-reflection on practice and collaboration with colleagues (East, 2015). Teachers must leverage their collective knowledge and experience (DuFour et al., 2005). By doing so, they can create more effective strategies to address the diverse needs of their students, which would, in turn, enhance student achievement.

Continuous learning is the method through which teachers engage in planning, doing, checking, and acting to attain desired outcomes (East, 2015). This cyclical process offers members of PLCs an approach to consistently monitor progress in student learning. Hord and Som-

mers (2008) expand on continuous learning as a practice of seizing every opportunity and experience to acquire new knowledge. Lezotte (2005) asserts that as PLCs evolve and mature, they afford opportunities for continuous learning and create a supportive environment for professional dialogue.

Results driven emphasizes focusing on outcomes rather than intentions (East, 2015). PLC members are committed to achieving results and actively seek evidence that their practices are effective in enhancing student learning (DuFour et al., 2008). It is essential for members of a PLC to understand that their work will be evaluated based on the outcomes of their efforts. Results orientation involves recognizing what students need to learn, understanding what has been learned, and determining appropriate actions for those who have not yet mastered the material (DuFour et al., 2005). DuFour et al. (2005) argue that many groups claiming to be PLCs are not true PLCs because they do not prioritize student learning. Effective PLCs strongly emphasize reviewing and analyzing student work and making necessary adjustments to improve their instructional practices (Schmoker, 2005). Prioritizing student learning is vital for teachers and is reinforced through collaborative discussions with other teachers within the PLC (Stiggins & DuFour, 2009).

Shared leadership entails each participant having the opportunity to engage in responsibilities and decision-making within a school (DuFour et al., 2005). This inclusive approach empowers educators, while promoting a sense of ownership. It also strengthens the faculty and staff's commitment to the school's vision and goals. It represents a shift away from the notion that the principal is the sole leader, towards a collective approach where leadership is distributed among teams, with members contributing to group decision-making (Marzano et al., 2005). The principal's role as a community supporter is crucial for the success of PLCs, as they foster enhanced communication and expectations among participants (Wilhelm, 2010). Research has shown that

teachers feel a greater sense of responsibility for school goals when the principal supports their initiatives (Neuzil, 2010). Huffman and Jacobson (2003) assert that the principal's leadership style and their support for shared leadership are closely linked to the perceived success of PLCs in a school. When school leaders promote shared leadership, they create a collaborative culture that enhances professional growth and trust.

Shared mission refers to an organization's members embracing its fundamental goals (East, 2015). This collective approach promotes alignment in decision-making and guides the organization's strategic direction. It addresses how educators will achieve their objectives and guides their actions in pursuit of their common goals (DuFour et al., 2008). By establishing a clear framework, it ensures that all efforts are targeted and aligned with the school's overall vision. Establishing an effective PLC requires educators to take on responsibilities beyond their individual classrooms, sharing information and practices while prioritizing results (Seashore et al., 2011). This collaborative approach cultivates a culture of continuous improvement where educators learn from each other and collectively improve student achievement. The knowledge possessed by teachers becomes invaluable when shared with colleagues, fostering collaboration and the exchange of ideas toward a common goal and shared mission within the school (Sharpe et al., 2010). Not only does this process enhance instructional practices, but it also strengthens the sense of community, which, in turn, drives sustained progress within the institution of learning.

In recent years, there has been a rise in implementing collaborative practices within PLCs as a means of teacher professional development. Studies indicate that such practices are cost-effective and beneficial for educators (Schmoker, 2005). Collaborative practices allow educators to maximize available resources and improve teacher efficacy, which leads to improved student outcomes. With increased pressure for school improvement due to accountability standards and other reform-related concerns, educational leaders are actively seeking solutions (Schmoker,

2005). As a result, educational leaders have turned to evidence-based practices and collaborative PLCs to boost student achievement. Researchers of collaborative practices acknowledge the necessity of a mindset shift, advocating for a move from solitary work to collaborative efforts (East, 2015). This shift prompts school leaders to rethink the most effective ways for teachers to enhance their skills and improve their teaching practices.

Collaborative approaches within PLCs enable teachers to enhance their practice and boost student achievement through interaction with their peers, as noted by East (2015). A key factor in the success of these approaches lies in their proper implementation. According to Thessin & Starr (2011), despite claims of integrating collaborative practices, many schools and districts overlook this crucial step. This gap between planning and execution often results in missed opportunities. Without a structured approach to implementation, collaborative initiatives may fail to produce the desired impact on the overall goal of improved student achievement. School leaders need to deliberately cultivate the necessary skills for effective collaboration within PLCs to ensure their successful adoption in educational settings (Thessin & Starr, 2011). This requires supportive modeling at both the district and school levels, facilitated by administrators committed to implementing collaborative practices within PLCs (East, 2015).

Merely allotting time for teachers to collaborate, assuming they possess inherent collaborative skills, is insufficient without adequate guidance and support. Teachers need support from their educational leaders to provide clear direction while also providing training in analyzing data, developing common assessments, and designing lessons with intended outcomes (East, 2015). Within PLCs, collaborative practices involve educators convening regularly to identify their students' specific learning needs and exchange strategies to support those who struggle to meet academic goals (Schmoker, 2005). Ongoing discussions among the teachers promote a data-

driven culture where educators can refine their instructional practices and align their interventions accordingly. A collaborative culture is essential for teachers to effectively address student learning, as highlighted by East (2015).

With new initiatives, there will likely be benefits and barriers (Hannaford, 2010; East 2015). Hannaford (2010) argued that the successful establishment of PLCs offers numerous benefits to individuals and schools involved in them. These benefits encompass leadership opportunities for teachers, a positive impact on school culture by strengthening bonds among staff, and enhanced support for adult learning (Brucker, 2013). Further benefits outlined by the US Department of Education include improved attendance, bolstered support for school improvement efforts, reduced feelings of isolation among staff members, increased job satisfaction, and heightened confidence (Professional Learning Communities, 2011). Research consistently supports the significance of professional learning communities as critical elements in instructional improvement (East, 2015). Hence, implementing PLCs and other collaborative practices in underperforming schools is essential for school enhancement (Little, 2002). Moreover, studies have revealed that schools fostering a genuine sense of community and heightened job satisfaction lead to increased work efficacy and greater collective responsibility for student learning (Louis, 2015). The primary advantage of implementing collaborative practices with fidelity is the promotion of collegiality, which empowers teachers to effectively fulfill their roles (East, 2015). Because collaborative practices promote a culture of shared accountability, these practices can transform struggling schools into thriving institutions of learning.

As collaborative practices within PLCs become increasingly more prevalent in educational settings, more evidence of barriers to successful implementation of PLCs emerges. Limited teacher participation and buy-in are among the most common barriers (East, 2015). Effective leadership plays a crucial role in overcoming these barriers during both the initial implementation

and subsequent sustainability of PLCs (Dove & Freeley, 2011). The Annenberg Institute of School Reform (2004) identifies several additional barriers to optimal PLC success, including teachers' reluctance to share, lack of documented leadership success, issues regarding teacher trust and quality, and concerns about implementation and sustainability (Fullan, 2005).

Many schools claim to have collaborative practices within their PLCs as a form of professional development, but they fail to establish and maintain a school culture that values learning communities (East, 2015). Creating opportunities for professional growth to become ingrained in the school culture should be the goal (DuFour et al., 2005). Obstacles to implementing PLCs are numerous, with lack of teacher participation and resource constraints such as insufficient time for collaboration being commonly reported (Lujan & Day, 2010). Lujan (2009) identifies barriers such as a lack of understanding of the concepts of collaborative practices and teacher negativity. These obstacles hinder the successful implementation of collaborative initiatives by preventing educators from fully engaging in and benefiting from the collaborative process.

Despite recognizing the importance of collaborative practices, teachers often feel overwhelmed by their numerous responsibilities and lack the time and energy to participate in collaborative practices (Downes, 2008). Other critical barriers in the implementation and sustainability of collaborative practices within PLCs are teacher turnover and new hires, which are more prevalent in low-performing schools (East, 2015). Teacher turnover and new hires disrupt continuity and create challenges in maintaining a cohesive team. Relationship-building among members of a PLC takes time and is essential for success (Reynolds, 2008).

Over the past few decades, prevailing norms in schools have tended to foster isolation and secrecy, with teachers predominantly confined to their individual classrooms. This practice limited opportunities for collaboration and the sharing of best practices through collective lesson planning (Phogat, 2022). Some studies have shown that when policymakers allocate dedicated

time for teacher collaboration across departments, it yields numerous benefits as it allows for an exchange of ideas, a fostering of achievement, and addressing of disputes (Gaikhorst et al., 2019).

All individuals will not benefit from collaboration in organizational contexts. Educational leaders play a key role in organizing people to work together in accomplishing their goals using the available resources efficiently and effectively. Collaboration is important in organizations because an organization consists of interpersonal relationships that are structured to achieve shared goals, and collaboration is a joint effort to achieve that shared goal. Bi and Ehrich contend that the transformational leadership model promotes creativity, encourages innovation, and provides opportunities for problems to be approached from different angles (2012). Collaboration improves with the development of professional learning communities (PLCs) and other collaborative practices through transformational processes, and the leadership model addresses diversity to meet more effectively social, curriculum, and educational needs (Bi & Ehrich, 2012). Educational leaders play a vital role in ensuring each teacher receives the level of support needed to be successful. They determine which initiatives should be prioritized, which could range from establishing internal coherence to improving teacher attendance. Some educational researchers strongly believe that collaborative practices should be prioritized. Darling-Hammond (2017) argues that when teachers engage in collaborative activities, such as professional learning communities or team teaching, they often report higher job satisfaction levels. Educational leaders must understand that collaboration in organizational contexts is effective and sustainable when the following conditions are met: 1) there is a focus on members' collaborative intent; 2) the collaboration is structured by team members' interdependent goals; and 3) free-riders face consequences (Wang, 2022). Leaders should inspire and motivate their followers by providing a compelling vision of the future, setting high expectations, and fostering enthusiasm and commitment among followers.

Leaders who encourage critical thinking and continuous learning among their followers motivate and inspire them (Bass,1985). They also energize their followers toward meeting a shared goal, which creates a collaborative environment that is conducive to meaningful and innovative educational practices.

What steps should be taken when teachers choose not to buy-in to the collaborative culture? What if educational leaders do not have a collaborative mindset? Are some educational leaders more likely to adopt the practice? What if educational leaders and teachers want to collaborate more, but they are in a rural district with very few resources and human capital? Answers to those questions were not addressed in the empirical literature that was reviewed, but they will be addressed in this study.

While I found the literature related to effective implementation of collaborative practices to be insightful, a question remains. What would implementation with fidelity of collaborative practices look like from educational leaders in rural areas where teachers in certain content areas have no other teachers of which to collaborate? The reviewed articles do not address the levels of support available in rural school districts. Also, consideration of how support or its absence may influence the educational leaders' ability to implement collaborative practices and performance feedback with fidelity is not mentioned. This study will build on the literature while discussing the role that support from educational leaders plays in effective implementation.

Performance Feedback

Performance feedback has a rich and varied history in both organizational behavioral management and experimental psychology (Johnson et al., 2022). For instance, Ammons (1956) highlighted its early significance, exemplified by Thorndike's (1927) seminal study on the law of effect, which involved participants estimating line lengths and receiving immediate feedback. Subsequent research, such as that by Throwbridge and Cason (1932), demonstrated the efficacy

of specific objective feedback in improving performance. Edward J. Feeney pioneered one of the first comprehensive feedback systems based on behavioral principles at Emery Air Freight in the 1970s, which led to substantial cost savings (Johnson et al., 2022). This success also led to Emery being featured in the film "Business, Behaviorism, and the Bottom Line" alongside B.F. Skinner and Feeney (Jordan, 1972).

Over time, feedback has become a cornerstone of organizational behavioral management, with numerous studies confirming its effectiveness in various applied settings (Alvero et al., 2001). However, the inconsistent nature of these effects underscores the importance of carefully controlling implementation variables and identifying the most effective feedback strategies (Johnson et al., 2022). Understanding performance feedback goes beyond its widespread use; it serves as a crucial tool in maintaining desired behaviors and facilitating skill development.

Daniels and Bailey (2014) emphasize the importance of performance feedback offering impartial insights into past performance. Objective feedback serves to guide individuals towards performance-contributing factors and offers clear benchmarks for improvement (Daniels & Bailey, 2014). However, solely presenting such information may not suffice to enhance performance (Johnson et al., 2008). Supervisors typically don't merely present performance data but also integrate evaluative remarks into their feedback delivery (Johnson et al., 2022). Johnson's (2013) research underscores the necessity of both performance evaluation and objective specifics within performance feedback.

Goodman and Wood (2004) conducted a study on feedback specificity using a work simulation where participants acted as department managers. The participants received feedback on their decisions regarding job allocation goals, goals set, distribution of awards, and feedback given (Johnson et al., 2022). The study found that the impact of specificity on performance de-

pended on the type of performance (Johnson et al., 2022). Lee et al. (2014) investigated the generalization effects of global and specific performance feedback on safety performance and safety items and Park (2019) studied the effects between feedback specificity (specific vs global) and frequency of feedback (frequent vs infrequent). Park found that specific feedback was more effective than global feedback when performance feedback was infrequent; but when frequency was frequent, no differences were found in terms of specificity (2019).

To mitigate the adverse impacts of subpar evaluations, some suggest employing a feedback approach known as the "feedback sandwich" (Johnson et al., 2022), which is a method that involves placing negative feedback between two positive comments. While proponents argue that this method enhances acceptability and reduces discomfort, critics contend that it dilutes the corrective message by emphasizing positive statements (Berger, 2013; Daniels, 2009). Research by Bottini and Gillis (2021) and Choi et al. (2018) examined various feedback sequences across different contexts, with no clear consensus on the effectiveness of mixing positive and negative feedback. Interestingly, Choi et al. (2018) found that providing congruent feedback, either all positive or all negative, was more effective than blended feedback. This suggests that when offering critique or discipline, delivering negative feedback alone may be more beneficial than mixing it with positive feedback.

The accuracy of performance feedback is another crucial factor to consider. Feedback can be inaccurate for various reasons, such as inconsistent data collection, imprecise measurement of performance, supervisors' lack of attention to data, or their avoidance of delivering potentially uncomfortable evaluations (Johnson et al., 2022). Accurate feedback is generally more effective than inaccurate feedback across different settings and tasks (Brand et al., 2020). While some studies suggest that performers may not be affected by inaccuracies if they are unaware of them

(Palmer et al., 2015), the problem arises when performers realize that the feedback cannot be trusted, which can harm performance (Lee et al., 2020).

Providing performance feedback is a critical aspect of fostering growth and development in various contexts. While there are numerous benefits to offering performance feedback, there are also significant barriers that can impede its effectiveness. Whenever there is a plan for new initiatives to be implemented, educational leaders should consider the benefits and barriers of the initiative. There will likely be challenges but considering the benefits and barriers and addressing the barriers to providing meaningful and timely feedback can ultimately lead to positive outcomes for all parties involved.

Benefits of performance feedback include enhancement of employee motivation, engagement, and job satisfaction (Aguinis & Gottfredson, 2012). According to recent research (Walker & Sellers, 2021; Ehrlich et al., 2020), performance feedback can be used to maintain and improve implementation of specific instructional practices. To be beneficial, it is important for the feedback to be immediate, specific, positive, and corrective. Auld et al. (2010), Mallette et al. (1999), Morgan et al. (1992), and Scheeler et al. (2006) found that participants in their studies demonstrated implementation fidelity following intervention workshops and performance feedback sessions.

There are several barriers to educational leaders providing performance feedback to teachers who have had professional development within PLCs. Environmental considerations include not only the physical space but also the interpersonal space. The tone and the seriousness of the message should be considered when determining where and when the feedback exchange occurs. For example, negative feedback should usually be delivered in a one-on-one setting. Insufficient time and lack of direct observation are often cited as barriers to feedback and can negatively impact the learner (Jug et al., 2019). Both Walker and Sellers (2021) and Ehrlich et al. (2020)

demonstrated that training could enhance behaviors associated with better receptivity to performance feedback.

Overcoming barriers to feedback involves establishing clear performance goals, providing formal training to the educational leaders and teachers, and fostering positive interpersonal relationships between them (Reddy et al., 2015). The effectiveness of feedback hinges on the perceived credibility of the educational leader, which can be enhanced through sharing experiences and promoting positive interactions (Bing-You et al., 1997). Additionally, teachers must feel supported by educational leaders who demonstrate care, assist in setting goals, and facilitate goal achievement (Eva et al., 2012).

Understanding the components and elements of effective performance feedback is crucial, just as understanding the essential practices and procedures for delivering performance feedback is (Johnson et al., 2022). When sharing performance feedback with a recipient, leaders should share privately and confidentially (Daniels & Bailey, 2014). Various factors beyond performance should be considered when deciding whether to provide information publicly or privately (Johnson et al., 2022). For instance, in situations where individuals are performing poorly, public display of performance data may negatively affect employees, resembling a form of punishment.

The regularity of performance feedback delivery is another critical aspect. Scholars like DeNisi and Pritchard (2006) have argued that performance feedback should be a regular part of any evaluation system. This recommendation is supported by both laboratory experiments and real-world research, which have shown that more frequent performance feedback leads to improved performance (So et al., 2013). While practical limitations may restrict how often managers can personally provide feedback, the general guideline suggests that more frequent feedback is preferable, particularly for those learning new roles and responsibilities compared to those with more experience (Johnson et al., 2022).

Although performance feedback has seen numerous successes, its effectiveness has not been consistent, largely due to variations in its implementation in research and in practice (Johnson et al., 2022). The intricate components and informal aspects of performance feedback present a challenge for comprehensive understanding from practical viewpoints. With ample evidence highlighting performance feedback's ability to enhance teacher performance, this study will focus on educational leaders' perceptions of providing performance feedback after teachers receive professional development in PLCs and teachers' perceptions of the feedback that is received.

What steps should educational leaders take if they do not feel comfortable providing feedback to veteran teachers, in particular, who are well-respected in rural school districts? What strategies could educational leaders employ to support novice teachers in their efforts to become more effective in their practices? How comfortable do educational leaders feel in providing performance feedback to teachers in rural schools where the culture is different, and the community is close knit? How should teachers respond if the performance feedback does little to improve their instructional practices?

The literature on the benefits and barriers to providing performance feedback was very detailed. The empirical literature does not, however, acknowledge benefits and barriers educational leaders and teachers face in providing performance feedback in rural school districts. This study will attempt to address the gaps in literature.

Gap in Literature

Very little empirical literature addresses the perceptions of educational leaders in delivering performance feedback to teachers. The literature fails to acknowledge benefits and barriers educational leaders and teachers face in implementing collaborative practices in rural districts where they are faced with additional challenges (Preston & Barnes, 2017). Also, there is very lit-

tle empirical literature that addresses the perceptions of providing performance feedback to teachers who have had professional development within PLCs or the perceptions of teachers who have received the feedback. This study will address the gap in the literature by examining educational leaders' and teachers' perceptions of collaborative practices and performance feedback in rural school districts in Georgia.

Theoretical Framework

Recognizing that educational leaders bear the responsibility for enhancing schools, it is imperative to enhance teacher performance as their teaching methods directly impact student achievement. The core objective of any leadership approach is to enhance the quality of educational services and promote innovative teaching methodologies (Asiyal & Ogedegbe, 2023). Transformational leadership has been acknowledged for yielding positive outcomes (Day et al., 2016). This style of leadership focuses on vision, inspiration, and empowering teachers to lead in cultivating a culture that elevates teaching standards (Anderson, 2017).

This dissertation study is theoretically grounded in transformational leadership and collaboration. Transformational leadership, according to James MacGregor Burns, "is a style of leadership that transforms follower attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors to a higher realm of motivation where the leader inspires followers to be motivated to rise above and beyond current levels of achievement and performance to even higher levels" (Burns, 1978, p. 259). Transformational leadership theory is a leadership theory that suggests that leadership should focus on inspiring and motivating followers to achieve a shared vision through personal growth and development. Transformational leaders view collaboration as a key factor in achieving positive change and growth and encourage open communication and an exchange of successful strategies and ideas to the leader's followers. They promote a culture that is collaborative where educators work together to analyze student data, share best practices, and engage in professional learning (Asiyal &

Ogedegbe, 2023). They should understand, however, that collaboration in organizational contexts is effective and sustainable when the following conditions are met: 1) there is a focus on members' collaborative intent; 2) the collaboration is structured by team members' interdependent goals; and 3) free-riders are punished (Wang, 2022). Emphasizing members' collaborative intent ensures that individuals are genuinely committed to working together towards shared goals, fostering a sense of unity and purpose. Structuring collaboration around team member's interdependent goals encourages mutual accountability and reinforces the understanding that success is contingent upon collective effort. Addressing the issue of free-riders by implementing measures to deter or punish such behavior is essential for maintaining fairness and equity within the collaborative framework, which will ensure sustainable and effective collaboration over time. By understanding and facilitating these conditions, transformational leaders can cultivate a culture of collaboration that fosters innovation, productivity, and organizational success.

Transformational leadership is characterized by a leader who works with subordinates to identify the change needed, execute it with committed members, and create a vision to guide and inspire the teachers (Burns, 1978). Leaders and followers help each other to advance to a higher level of morale and motivation (Burns, 1985). According to Bernard Bass (1985), transformational leadership behaviors include the four dimensions of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation. Table 1 lists the dimensions and characteristics of each.

Table 1

Transformational Leadership Theory – Four Dimensions (Bass, 1985)

Dimensions	Characteristics
Idealized Influence	Leader is viewed as a role model and has charisma.
Individualized Consideration	Leader provides specific Performance feedback and other forms of support and encourages professional development.
Inspirational Motivation	Leader creates shared goals and motivates the teachers to achieve them.
Intellectual Stimulation	Leader fosters an environment where creativity and innovation are valued.

Idealized Influence

As shown in Table 1, idealized influence is one of the four components of transformational leadership theory. It refers to the leader's ability to serve as a role model and inspire admiration, respect, and trust among followers (Bass, 1985). Leaders who exhibit idealized influence demonstrate high ethical standards, integrity, and a strong sense of purpose. They lead by example and are perceived as selfless and trustworthy. Transformational leaders demonstrating this dimension show charisma and integrity, which motivates followers to willingly follow and trust them.

Individualized Consideration

Individualized consideration is one of the key attributes of transformational leadership theory. It refers to the leader's ability to provide personalized support, coaching, and mentorship to each follower while considering their unique needs. Leaders who demonstrate individualized consideration actively listen to their followers, offer constructive feedback, and provide opportunities for growth and development that is tailored to each person's strengths and weaknesses (Bass, 1985). When applying this dimension to performance feedback, a transformational leader would tailor feedback to the specific strengths, weaknesses, and developmental goals of each teacher within a PLC. Providing performance feedback to teachers within PLCs is crucial in the context of transformational leadership. Transformational leaders strongly believe in motivating

and inspiring teachers, which empowers the teachers and provides an opportunity for the leaders to highlight the teachers' strengths and areas in which they have shown growth. By incorporating individualized consideration into performance feedback, transformational leaders create and nurture a supportive environment where teachers feel valued and supported. More recent research suggests that transformational leaders have the vision of the future and are able to identify and transform changes within the organization (Prestiadi et al., 2020). According to Prestiadi et al (2020), "The ability of principals to move teachers, staff, and students together to utilize digital technology in the learning process will be beneficial" and through transformational leadership, the educational leader can be a "solution to keep abreast of developments in the industrial revolution 4.0 era" (p. 223). Prestiadi et al. (2020) expanded Bass's four dimensions of transformational leadership to include an emphasis on digital technology.

Inspirational Motivation

Inspirational motivation involves leaders inspiring and motivating followers to appeal to their emotions and values while encouraging them to work towards a common goal with passion and dedication (Bass, 1985). Transformational educational leaders play a key role in providing inspirational motivation and shaping whether the conditions of schools facilitate collaborative learning opportunities (Talbert, 2010). They encourage a climate that is inclusive, optimistic, and supportive (Bass, 1985). Transformational leaders motivate teachers while providing support and supervision to ensure that collaboration is purposeful. Having the ability to emotionally connect with educators is an important skill for educational leaders to possess. When teachers lack an emotional bond with educational leaders, demotivation and emotional exhaustion could be the result, particularly if teachers feel that the educational leaders are more transactional than they are transformational (Wang, 2020).

Intellectual Stimulation

Intellectual stimulation occurs when transformational educational leaders are willing to use their creativity to coach, mentor, and provide feedback in a manner that is consistent with the needs of each individual while also challenging teachers to achieve their goals and embrace new ways of thinking (Bass, 1985). Transformational educational leaders can be characterized by their willingness to take risks, set high expectations, articulate goals, place an emphasis on collective identity, and believe in social justice. Leaders who employ intellectual stimulation encourage critical thinking and continuous learning among their followers (1985).

Collaboration

The use of collaborative practices, such as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), were used by Brown and Wynn (2007) to address social isolation, but they could also be used as a system to provide support to all teachers, regardless of their levels of expertise. Collaborative practices in education have a rich historical background. As early as the 19th century, educational pioneers, such as John Dewey (1933), emphasized the importance of social interaction and cooperative learning in the educational process. Dewey's ideas laid the foundation for collaborative practices by highlighting the value of cooperative learning and group work in the educational process. Over time, scholars and researchers further explored the benefits of collaboration, which has led to the development of various collaborative models and frameworks. In the mid-20th century, scholars like Lev Vygotsky (1978) further contributed to the understanding of collaboration in education. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasized the role of social interaction and collaboration as integral components of cognitive development. He proposed that learning occurs through collaboration as individuals engage in shared activities, negotiate meaning, and co-construct knowledge.

Barriers to teacher collaboration should be considered and addressed. The Social Academic Learning Study (Rimm-Kaufman, 2006) identified three barriers to collaboration that are

shared most frequently by teachers: a lack of collegial time, a lack of personal time, and not being considered a priority by administrators. The SALS findings indicate that collaboration is more likely, despite the barriers, when teachers share the same goals and values (Sawyer & Rimm-Kaufman, 2007). Without facilities where collaboration can take place, interventions with teachers to collaborate are not successful (Vangrieken et al., 2015). If educational leaders provide an environment that supports collaboration, teachers are more likely to work together (OECD, 2016). Bush and Grotjohann's study (2020) examined collaboration in teacher education where the researchers investigated the teachers' performance of collaborative actions and their attitudes toward them and intentions of performing the behavior. Educational leaders that cultivate collaborative practices have found some success in retaining quality teachers. In a study conducted by Brown and Wynn (2009), the researchers used semi-structured interviews of twelve school principals to identify common characteristics and strategies principals use to retain teachers. Results showed that professional learning community activities composed of same-subject, same-grade teacher teams could achieve significant improvements in teacher effectiveness. Results from this study also suggest there is a positive relationship between structured collaboration and teacher effectiveness.

The type of collaboration is important. Increasing the amount of professional learning opportunities has little effect if they are not relevant or practical to the teachers. It is essential that professional development relates to and is aligned to the specific curriculum and contexts within which educators are expected to work. In a study by Liu and Liao (2017), the researchers examined the effect of professional development on teacher efficacy. The researchers wanted to examine how content, format, duration, and quality of the PD are statistically correlated with overall teacher efficacy. This study found PD programs in the formats that promoted job-embedded, inquiry-oriented, and collaborative learning and that offered contents for curriculum, instructional

skills, school management, and technology were statistically correlated with the subscales of teacher efficacy (Liu & Liao, 2017). As for PD duration and quality, this study found the teacher-perceived quality and the length of PD were positively associated with some of the teacher efficacy variables. Patrick (2022) used the distributed leadership theory to frame his study on organizing schools for collaborative learning. Patrick found variation in frequency across context (e.g., school level, geographic context, district size) and that collaborative planning time consistently predicts how often teachers collaborate. When accounting for frequency, teachers rated their collaboration as more helpful in schools with higher ratings of professional climate/leadership and lower ratings of administrative oversight over collaboration (Patrick, 2022).

When working within high-functioning professional learning communities, teachers will have the opportunity to address the teaching of specific curriculum content and focus on student learning. Educational leaders should create opportunities for teachers to be able to quickly apply what they have learned (Curry & Killion, 2009). According to an analysis of data from the National Staff Development Council's 2007-2009 Standards Assessment Inventory (Killion & Roy, 2009), teachers in the states of Arizona, Georgia, Kansas and Missouri reported little opportunity to collaborate with other teachers in their schools (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009, p. 25).

While collaborative practices offer numerous benefits, they also come with challenges that could impact teacher retention. One challenge is the potential for conflicting viewpoints and disagreements within collaborative groups (Little, 2002). Conflicts among teachers can lead to dissatisfaction and frustration, which may drive teachers to leave their positions or to seek employment in schools with a less collaborative culture. Moreover, time constraints and resource limitations can hinder effective collaboration (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Teachers are already under time constraints, and the extra time required for collaboration can be perceived as burdensome. Balancing collaborative activities with others can be challenging.

Collaborative practices also require effective leadership and administrative support to succeed. When educational leaders do not provide clear goals or structure for collaboration, it can lead to confusion and frustration among teachers (Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990). According to Wang, emotions such as confusion and frustration or a lack of an emotional bond with educational leaders could lead to demotivation and emotional exhaustion, (Wang, 2020). Furthermore, teachers may not receive adequate recognition or compensation for their collaborative efforts, which can undermine their motivation to participate in such activities (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

The ability to collaborate is considered a social competence. Studies that focus on future teachers' social competencies have been conducted to examine the future teachers' willingness to collaborate. In one study, researchers found that many pre-service teachers score low on social competence tests and, therefore, are faced with a higher risk of teacher burn-out later in their teaching careers (Schaarschmidt & Kieschke, 2007). Based on their findings, the researchers have argued that there should be more focus on these skills in teacher preparatory programs. Rothland (2010) and Frey (2008) were unable to confirm Schaarschmidt and Kieschke's findings. In their studies, Rothland (2010) and Frey (2008) found that pre-service teachers have high social competences when compared to postsecondary students from other fields of study.

Little (1990) identified help and assistance, storytelling, sharing, and joint work as the four types of collaboration. According to Little (1990), storytelling and help and assistance are the types of collaboration that flow in only one direction. In storytelling, one person communicates. In help and assistance, one person helps if asked by another person. In sharing, mutual learning exists as two individuals share their opinions and ideas with each other. Joint work is work that is more collective (Little, 1990). Little's concept was refined into three levels: exchange, division of work, and co-construction. Sharing was renamed to exchange and joint work

was separated into division of work and co-construction (Grasel et al., 2006), where exchange is the lowest level of collaboration and co-construction is viewed as the highest.

What seems apparent from the literature review is that there are issues that must be addressed. The first issue that should be addressed is the perception of transformational leaders on collaborative practices within PLCs. The second relates to transformational leaders' perceptions on performance feedback within PLCs. This study will add to the current body of literature on support from educational leaders by focusing on educational leaders' and teachers' perceptions of performance feedback and collaborative practices within PLCs in rural school districts through the lenses of the transformational leadership theory, particularly the dimensions of inspirational motivation and individualized consideration, and the construct of collaboration. This study will address research questions related to perceptions of collaborative practices in PLCs and performance feedback in a rural school district in Northwest Georgia.

Collaborative Practices in the Educational Setting

Collaborative practices in education have been traced back to as early as the 19th century. Educational pioneers, such as John Dewey (1938) and Vygotsky (1978), emphasized the importance of social interaction and cooperative learning in the educational process. Dewey's foundational ideas for collaborative practices highlighted the value of cooperative learning and group work in education. Collaborative environments provide teachers with the opportunities for professional growth, increased autonomy, and improved working conditions. Collaboration, according to Ingersoll & Strong (2011), often leads to a sense of fulfillment and contributes to the teachers' willingness to remain in the profession. In terms of individual and team performance, performance feedback could significantly benefit employees by enhancing employee motivation, engagement, and job satisfaction (Aguinis & Gottfredson, 2012).

There are significant benefits associated with educational leaders who embrace and advocate for collaborative leadership approaches (Preston & Barnes, 2017). Collaborative leadership rests on the principle that individuals are the most valuable asset of any organization or community. Educational leaders who foster collaborative relationships within their school community can effectively address the challenges faced by many rural communities in the 21st century (Harmon & Schafft, 2009). These challenges include declining student enrollment, high teacher turnover, shortages of specialized educators, and transportation issues. By tapping into the knowledge, skills, and experiences of all members within the school community, educational leaders can cultivate a productive, well-informed community capable of collectively addressing such challenges and ultimately celebrating success (Preston & Barnes, 2017).

Performance Feedback in the Educational Setting

Imparting meaningful performance feedback can be transformational as it can foster growth, enhance skills, and strengthen relationships. According to recent research, performance feedback can be used to maintain and improve implementation of specific instructional practices (Cornelius & Nagro, 2014; Auld et al., 2010, Mallette et al., 1999). It is important for the feedback to be immediate, specific, positive, and corrective. In a study conducted by Cornelius and Nagro (2014), eight single-subject studies were identified where they examined the effects of performance feedback in preservice teachers to determine the evidence base for this practice with seven of the eight studies reporting positive findings. Auld et al. (2010), Mallette et al. (1999), Morgan et al. (1992), and Scheeler et al. (2006) found that all participants demonstrated implementation fidelity following intervention workshops and performance feedback sessions. Barton and Wolery (2007) found that all teachers demonstrated some increase in the use of expansions at the beginning of the intervention, but then all began to decrease again toward the end of the intervention. Capizzi et al. (2010) and Rathel et al. (2008) had mixed results where there were both

positive impacts and no increase among participants. Based on these findings, the authors concluded that performance feedback should be considered as an evidence-based practice and be used to increase implementation fidelity of instructional practices (Cornelius & Nagro, 2014).

Educational leaders must be strategic in creating opportunities for teachers to receive performance feedback. Data from the National Staff Development Council's 2007-2009 Standards Assessment Inventory found that opportunities for teachers to observe each other's classroom instruction were not common. Only 40% of teachers reported being able to engage in peer observations. The opportunity to give each other feedback after observations were also low with only 57% of teachers stating that they received feedback (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009, p. 25). Depending on the academic background of educational leaders, some may lack confidence or comfort providing performance feedback to their teachers. Some educational leaders have struggled with providing performance feedback as the knowledge and skill required to give quality feedback may be beyond the practical knowledge of the people charged with providing it.

Mentor teachers and those teachers who have a desire to participate in peer observations must be afforded the opportunity to do so. Collaborative structures, like mentoring and peer support, provide avenues for teachers to provide feedback to each other while sharing experiences and coping strategies, which fosters a sense of community and emotional support (Ronfeldt et al., 2015). This support, in turn, may provide teachers with the support that is needed to enhance their resilience and their overall job satisfaction.

Connections between Theoretical Framework and Research Questions

Transformational leaders view collaboration as an important factor in achieving positive change and growth and to encourage open communication and an exchange of successful strategies and ideas. In PLCs, transformational leaders promote a culture that is collaborative where educators work together to analyze student data, share best practices, and engage in professional

learning. According to Bass' transformational leadership theory, inspirational motivation involves leaders inspiring and motivating followers by providing a compelling vision of the future, setting high expectations, and fostering enthusiasm and commitment among followers. Leaders who employ intellectual stimulation encourage critical thinking and continuous learning among their followers (1985). By integrating inspirational motivation into PLCs, transformational leaders energize followers toward meeting a shared goal, which creates a collaborative environment that is conducive to meaningful and innovative educational practices.

Providing performance feedback to teachers who have had professional development within PLCs is crucial in the context of transformational leadership. Transformational leaders strongly believe in motivating and inspiring teachers, which empowers the teachers and provides an opportunity for the leaders to highlight the teachers' strengths and areas in which they have shown growth. Individualized consideration is one of the four dimensions of Bass' theory of transformational leadership (1985) that involves recognizing and addressing the individual needs of each follower. When applying this dimension to performance feedback, a transformational leader could tailor feedback to the specific strengths, weaknesses, and developmental goals of each teacher. The feedback provided by the transformational leader could offer targeted guidance on how the teachers could leverage their strengths and overcome specific challenges. By incorporating individualized consideration into performance feedback, transformational leaders create and nurture a supportive environment where teachers feel valued and supported. This personalized approach could enhance motivation and engagement and contribute to improved teacher performance long after the teachers receive professional development training within their PLCs.

Collaborative practices can positively impact teacher retention in school districts by increasing teacher satisfaction and providing social and emotional support. The literature suggests that teachers who engage in collaborative practices often report higher levels of job satisfaction

and well-being, which could potentially lead to increased teacher retention. However, it is essential to acknowledge and address the challenges associated with collaboration. As educational policy makers and educational leaders seek to provide additional administrative support, understanding the perceptions of collaborative practices and performance feedback from educational leaders and teachers is crucial. This research explores the specific mechanisms through which administrators provide educators with support in the form of collaborative practices and performance feedback in rural school districts, since a lack of support has been cited as a major factor in educators leaving the profession (Talley, 2017).

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

The research design for this study is a qualitative case study. A qualitative case study design was chosen to provide an in-depth consideration of collaborative practices and performance feedback among middle and high school teachers and educational leaders. In this chapter, I detail why a qualitative study was the best way to approach this study. I also describe why specific participants were chosen, how the relationship between the researcher and participant was established, how I gained access to participants, and how interviews were conducted. Measures used to protect each participant from harm are discussed in this section and a description of the instruments used for data collection.

Qualitative research is the study of a phenomenon, which tends to be more exploratory in nature, or research topic in context (Hays & Singh, 2012). Instead of deductive analysis, which focuses on testing preconceived hypotheses, the qualitative researcher studies the data inductively, which allows the researcher to gather the data and then attempt to draw generalizations. To develop a deep understanding of the context of the relationship, if any, between transformational leadership and collaborative practices and performance feedback, a Merriam and Tisdale (2015) qualitative case study methodology was selected. A case study approach was chosen instead of a narrative or an ethnography because of the desire to examine the perceptions of multiple participants to gain different perspectives on collaborative practices and performance feedback. Also, the study was conducted in a natural setting with extensive time being spent collecting and analyzing data.

Qualitative Research Design

I employed qualitative methodology to extensively describe and analyze educational leaders' and teachers' perceptions as recommended by Merriam (2015). Since the study aimed to

gather individual perceptions, a qualitative approach is ideal as it involved thorough data collection (Creswell, 2012). The qualitative research design aligns with the study's goal of examining educational leaders' and teachers' perceptions of collaborative practices and performance feedback within rural school districts. This design enabled detailed examinations and provided deeper insights into the phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). Using qualitative methods allowed for the exploration of topics of interest, which generated rich narrative data. It also allowed an objective view of educational leaders' and teachers' perceptions.

While grounded theory and narrative research were considered, they were not suitable for this study. The goal was not to develop a theory nor was it to explore the life of an individual. Because I did not attempt to understand the essence of the educational leaders' and teachers' lived experiences, a phenomenology was not a suitable research design for the current study. The quantitative research design was not the correct approach of this study because it did not allow for an explanation and clarification of the meanings associated with different perceptions. Thus, a qualitative case study approach best suited the study's aim of understanding educational leaders' and teachers' perceptions of collaborative practices and performance feedback in rural school districts. I gathered data for this study from educational leader interviews, teacher interviews, and document analyses. The transformational leadership theory and the collaboration construct were the bases for developing interview questions for the educational leaders and teachers:

RQ1: How do transformational leaders in rural schools perceive the role of collaboration within PLCs?

RQ2: How do transformational leaders in rural schools perceive the importance of providing performance feedback to teachers who have had professional development within PLCs?

Participants

As a district science coach, the research was not conducted using current science teachers in the district. Instead, educational leaders and other content area teachers, of which there is no direct influence, were selected as the participants of this study to avoid researcher biases. The qualitative case study was conducted at schools in a rural school district in Northwest Georgia. Four teachers were contacted to schedule the teacher interviews, and four educational leaders were contacted to schedule educational leader interviews. Data was also collected from document analyses.

In this study, sampling was purposive as only the perceptions of middle and high school educational leaders and teachers in a rural school district in Northwest Georgia suited the purpose of the study, and the characteristics of the sample are more important than the quantity of the sample. Probability sampling gave every participant the opportunity to be selected in the study because it aimed to make sure that the sample is representative of the population, which would allow for generalization of the findings (Etikan et al., 2015). Probability sampling would not have aligned with the purpose. The purpose of purposive sampling is to maximize information and not to facilitate generalizations. Participants were deliberately chosen because the teachers in rural school districts have certain characteristics or experiences of interest to the study.

Data Collection

Data was collected from face-to-face semi-structured interviews with four middle and high school educational leaders, face-to-face semi-structured interviews with four middle and high school teachers, and document analyses of documents that were provided by the educational leaders. Potential participants were contacted via email to be granted permission to interview them. This study's purpose was discussed with the participants and written consent secured before the interview process. Audio recording to record responses was used when interviewing partici-

pants. A password-protected device to which only the researcher has access was used to store information from the interviews. A file cabinet to which only the researcher has access was used to store hard copies of the documents. All data will be destroyed after five years.

Each interview lasted approximately one and a half hours and was audio recorded and transcribed after receiving an informed consent form from each participant. In qualitative research, the semi-structured interview involves the collection of data through direct verbal interaction of individuals while allowing the researcher to control the direction of the interview (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Kallio (2016) created a five-step process to develop semi-structured interview questions and argues that this form of interviewing fundamentally influences the results of the study. According to Borg and Gall (1989), interviewing has several advantages over other methods of survey research. It has adaptability; permits follow-up of leads thus enabling interviewers to obtain more data and greater clarity; permits greater depth than other methods of collecting research collecting research data; and makes it easier to obtain information that the subject would not have revealed under any other circumstances (Kallio, 2016). Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated: In the semi-structured interview, the problem is defined by the researcher before the interview. The questions were formulated ahead of time and the respondent answered in terms of the interviewer's framework and definition of the problem with the flexibility to ask more questions. This type of interview is the mode of choice when the interviewer knows what he or she does not know and can therefore frame appropriate questions to find it out (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 268-269). I drew on previous studies around the transformational leadership theory and the cooperation construct, collaborative practices, and performance feedback to design the semi-structured interview protocol.

Documents such as PLC meeting agendas, pacing guides, and common assessments were analyzed in the study and were thought of as texts equivalent to the information a researcher collects during an interview. The documents were redacted to remove the identifiers of the participants. These sources reflect the beliefs of people in a comparable way to the data a researcher would collect from observations and interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Audio recording to record responses was used when interviewing participants to ensure all comments were captured. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym that was used while data was being collected (Creswell, 2012). A journal was used to document key points. Table 2 provides a list of the participants from each school zone in the district. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the school district, school zones, educational leaders, and teachers.

Table 2

Magnolia County Schools Participants

School Zone	School	Participant Name	Role
Barley	Barley High School	Dr. Taylor Dr. Jones	Academic Coach Teacher
Hamper	Hamper Middle School	Ms. North Ms. Jordan	Academic Coach Teacher
Marks	Marks High School	Ms. Paul Ms. Braxton	Special Education Director Teacher
Cambridge	Cambridge High School	Ms. Stillman Ms. Williams	Academic Coach Teacher

Researcher's Positionality

Because I have served in a supervisory role for science teachers in the school district in which I have been employed for nearly three years, science teachers were not selected to be my

participants. In my role, I work primarily with science teachers at the four different high schools in the district, which would have made it difficult to avoid biases. Although qualitative research design minimizes bias and maximizes reliability of the data that will be studied, researchers may find difficulty in separating themselves from the data. Participant bias, in the form of social desirability bias, and researcher bias, in the form of leading questions and wording and confirmation biases, are common biases in qualitative studies. To avoid participant biases, questions were framed to allow the participant to feel accepted regardless of responses to the questions. In order to minimize researcher biases, the data collection process excluded any leading questions, and all gathered data underwent thorough analysis to ensure objectivity and accuracy in the findings. Also, the research participants were involved in member checking to confirm the results, which allowed the research participants to verify the accuracy and authenticity of the findings based on their experiences. This process ensured that the interpretation of the data aligned with their perspectives and enhanced the validity of the study. Instead, the data was collected from teachers of which I have no influence. As shown in Table 2, participants were selected from one middle and three high schools.

Data Analysis

Data analysis serves as a critical juncture where data is transformed into actionable insights. With meticulous examination and interpretation, researchers delve into the complexities of the data, revealing underlying themes, patterns, and nuances (Merriam & Tisdale, 2015). After becoming familiar with the data by reviewing transcripts, notes, and recordings to understand the content, first-level coding began. During this phase of the analysis, data was reviewed, line by line, to identify initial codes. Each code segment of data related to the theoretical framework of the study.

During second-level coding, relationships, patterns, and connections between codes were identified at a deeper level, and new codes or subcategories were generated to capture nuanced aspects of the theoretical framework. Then, comprehensive themes were developed that encapsulated the key findings and insights derived from the coding process. Patterns that either supported or challenged the propositions of the framework were identified to contribute to a deeper understanding of the theoretical constructs. Themes were refined to ensure they were supported by the data and accurately represented the collected information. This refinement process ensured that themes are consistent with theoretical propositions and contribute to the theoretical discourse. The data were managed using NVivo software to facilitate the coding process. The transcript function of NVivo created transcripts that were reviewed and corrected by hand. The software's coding features identified keywords appearing throughout the transcripts and provided a means to identify themes. Documents, such as observation notes and PLC agendas, were also uploaded to NVivo to identify specific keywords, which allowed the researcher to develop codes and themes. The researcher was able to address the purpose of the case study on the perceptions of collaborative practices and performance feedback and how they are perceived by transformational leaders and teachers in rural school districts using the findings of this data analysis.

Trustworthiness and Reliability

To enhance the trustworthiness of this qualitative study, strategies such as establishing credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were employed to strengthen the quality of the research. These approaches helped to validate the study's findings, ensure credibility, and increase the overall rigor of my research. Dependability was ensured by providing adequate details about the topics of collaborative practices and performance feedback, by having multiple data collection procedures and techniques, and by having a well-documented analysis of the data.

Data collection procedures, including unbiased questions during the interviews, document reviews, and digital recordings to ensure all data is considered in the analysis, were used to increase the dependability of the study. The study used a semi- structured, open-ended case study protocol (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The semi-structured interviews were followed by document analyses.

Member checking (Birt et al., 2016) was conducted with the participants during and near the end of the data collection and analysis processes. The participants were asked to review the major themes produced from the analysis and then post-interviews were conducted to confirm the fit between the themes and the participants' reported experiences. The qualitative researchers' most effective defense against the chance of being subjective is to reinforce what they have observed or collected with material that reinforces these data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, the three different methods of collecting the data allowed the data to be analyzed using the method of triangulation. To ensure transferability, descriptions were provided that allowed readers to assess the applicability of the study's findings to similar settings. Lastly, an audit from outside reviewers, including other interviewers and experienced qualitative researchers, was completed.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were upheld throughout the study, which adhered to the fundamental principles of the Belmont Report. Respect for individuals, justice, and maximizing benefits guided every stage of the research process. Given that the study involved adult human subjects, specific standards such as confidentiality, privacy, and consent were guaranteed in the views expressed. Participants were given a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. All materials generated during the research, including data recordings, transcripts, and participants' identities, were securely stored in a locked cabinet to ensure privacy. Digital information was stored on a password-

protected device and in a locked cabinet. Initial informed consent documents were included as part of the initial selection process, which informed the participants of their consent to be part of the sample selection process. Additionally, participants were given the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time. Before conducting interviews, a second consent form was provided electronically to participants for signing and returning, ensuring full understanding and voluntary participation.

Expectations

This study's main expectation was to gain comprehensive insights from both educational leaders and teachers regarding collaborative practices and performance feedback at middle schools and high schools in a rural school district in Northwest Georgia. In addition, it is expected that this study will be used to identify any discrepancies or areas of alignment between the perspectives of the educational leaders and the teachers in rural school districts. Lastly, I expect the study to contribute to advancing the knowledge of educational leaders and teachers as it could be used to inform the development of more effective strategies for implementation of the practices within PLCs, while also providing the level of support that could be used to increase teacher satisfaction and teacher motivation.

CHAPTER 4 RESULTS

A qualitative case study approach allowed the researcher to provide an in-depth analysis of collaborative practices and performance feedback in a manner that was more exploratory in nature than other methodologies. In this chapter, I will summarize and review the main findings from the semi-structured interviews and document analyses of the eight educational leaders and teachers in a rural school district. The interviews were conducted in my office to maximize confidentiality as the participants provided information about colleagues that are employed in the district.

Four sites were reviewed for this study, which included data from educational leader interviews, teacher interviews, and document analyses with the abundance of the data being collected from the interviews. While the district has adopted policies that support collaborative practices and have strongly encouraged performance feedback, each site presented differences and commonalities among educational leaders and teachers. By seeking the perceptions of collaborative practices and performance feedback of educational leaders and teachers within a rural school district, I sought to provide an insight into how these practices influence instructional effectiveness, leadership development, and student outcomes, while also addressing the unique challenges and opportunities present in rural school districts. This study aimed to explore the roles of collaboration and feedback in fostering a supportive school culture, which, in turn, could enhance teacher efficacy and promote student achievement in resource-limited environments.

The findings for this study are reported in three ways. The first portion provides details related to the case findings. In the case findings section, the background of each school as well as an overview of the educational leaders and teachers will be introduced. The second portion of the findings provide a discussion of the data's connections to the two dimensions of transformational leadership – inspirational motivation and individualized consideration. The third portion of the

findings provide information related to the themes that emerged during the educational leaders' and teachers' interviews and the document analyses.

Case Findings

To establish an understanding of the rural school district and the educational leader and teacher at each school zone, each site will be examined first to allow the reader to develop a unique perspective of the conditions each individual faces. By examining each individual site, the reader will be able to develop a deeper understanding of the perceptions of educational leaders and teachers on collaborative practices within professional learning communities. Readers will also be able to develop an understanding of the perceptions of educational leaders on providing performance feedback, and the perceptions of teachers receiving it. Although all four educational leaders considered themselves to be transformational leaders, at least one, according to the perception of one teacher, lacked characteristics of a transformational leader. Table 3 represents the themes and codes that were identified through the coding process for research question 1.

Table 3

Themes Identified from Data Analysis for Research Question 1

Questions	Data Source	Themes	Codes
1. How do you perceive the role of collaboration in fostering interdependence among PLC members? (Inspirational Motivation)	Interview	Shared Goals Mutual Trust	"When collaboration happens and there is a leader, it forces the PLC to work with a tandem and have shared goals."
2. Can you share examples of collaborative practices that have effectively supported interdependent goals within professional	Interview & Document Analysis	PLC Meetings Collaborations	"I have seen some very formal collaborative

Table 3 Themes Identified from Data Analysis for Research Question 1 (continued)

learning communities (PLCs)? (Inspirational Motivation) some informal collaborative practices."			practices, and I have seen
3. How do you navigate potential conflicts related to interdependent within the collaborative structure of PLCs? (Inspirational Motivation)	Interview	Communicate Expectations	"If anybody comes to a place where we see a conflict, sort of like classroom management, we allow them to talk through it, respectfully."
4. How do you define and interpret collaborative practices within the context of PLCs? (Inspirational Motivation)	Interview	Intentional Support	"This year was more intentional. Support and stipend and it is discipline specific.
5. Can you provide examples of collaborative practices where intent among PLC members has been evident? (Inspirational Motivation)	Interview & Document Analysis	Pacing Guide Common Assessments	"So a lot of collaboration has been centered around planning learning around understanding the curriculum (pacing, curriculum maps.
6. What strategies do you employ to foster and encourage collaborative intent among members within the collaborative structure of PLCs? (Inspirational Motivation)	Interview & Document Analysis	Protected Time for Shared Tasks	"I email out reminders about collaborating within our mandated

			PLC time."

Table 3 Themes Identified from Data Analysis for Research Question 1 (continued)

7. What have been some barriers to collaboration? (Inspirational Motivation)	Interview	Time Personality Conflicts	"Another barrier is time. I think teachers see it not necessarily as a good use of their time." "Time barriers would constitute a lot of the confines. When they have personality conflicts, that is a barrier."
8. How have you overcome those barriers? (Inspirational Motivation)	Interview	Collaboratives Focus on Positives	"Take a day of PLCs and do an ice-breaker to get everyone involved." "She doesn't focus on the negative things. Focus on the positive."

Table 4 represents the themes and codes that were identified through the coding process for research question 2.

Table 4

Themes Identified from Data Analysis for Research Question 2

Questions	Data Source	Themes	Codes
1. How do you perceive the role of providing performance feedback to teachers within PLCs?	Interview	Support Growth	"These are the things I've seen and this

(Individualized Consideration)			is where I think you can make changes."
2. How do you interpret and apply transformational leadership principles, particularly individualized consideration in the context of of providing performance feedback? (Individualized Consideration)	Interview	Differentiated Support Tailored to Specific Needs	"When individualizing, make teachers feel that you are looking at them specifically and you know exactly what you are talking about."
3. What specific strategies do you employ to tailor performance feedback to unique needs and develop-Ment areas of individual educators? (Individualized Consideration)	Interview Document Analysis	Coaching Mentoring	"Being involved in the entire process from the lesson planning to the assessment."
4. Can you share examples of performance feedback you've provided to teachers? (Individualized Consideration)	Interview Document Analysis	Specific Constructive Feedback	"I use specific phrases to build towards positive progress."

Magnolia County Schools

Magnolia County Schools is a rural school district in Northwest GA with a county population of approximately 100,000. The school system is comprised of four school sites that each have at least one elementary school, one middle school, and one high school with a total enrollment of nearly 9,000 students in grades PreK-12 with a student-teacher ratio of 14:1. Two of the four school sites receive Title I funding to improve educational opportunities for students who are at risk of school failure and are from low-income families.

Dr. Johnson has been the district leader of Magnolia County Schools since 2020. Prior to his appointment to the position of superintendent, Dr. Johnson served as the Student Services Director and the principal of the highest performing school in the district. Dr. Johnson has spent his entire career in the district, and he is proud of the success he achieved while serving as a principal of one of the district's blue-ribbon schools.

Barley Schools

Barley is one of the most affluent school zones in the county. Children of the local hospital's doctors and nurses are some of the students in the area. Dr. Taylor is an educational leader in the Barley School Zone. Before her current role in the district, Ms. Taylor served as an educator for 15 years specializing in ELA. Dr. Jones has taught for 30 years with 15 of those years being served in the Barley School Zone.

Hamper Schools

Hamper is one of the least affluent school zones in the county, but it has not always been. Up until nearly ten years ago, the local mill employed many of the residents of the area. When it closed, the socioeconomic statuses of the residents changed. Ms. North is an educational leader in the Hamper School Zone. Before Ms. North accepted her position in her current role, she served as an educator for 22 years, with most of her experience coming from teaching at the elementary level. Ms. Jordan is a new teacher in the district. Prior to accepting a position in Magnolia School District at Hamper Middle School, she taught for three years in a neighboring district.

Marks Schools

Marks School zone has been the highest performing zone in the district. The teacher retention rate in Marks is very high because once teachers are hired there, they rarely express a desire to leave. Ms. Paul has served as an educational leader for over 10 years. Before becoming an educational leader, Ms. Paul spent over 20 years supporting students with exceptional needs. Ms.

Paul has spent her entire career at Magnolia County Schools and has expressed that she couldn't see herself doing anything else at this point in her career. Ms. Braxton has been teaching for nearly 30 years. She has spent her entire career at Marks High School. Ms. Braxton believes that Marks is the best school in the district, so she has never had a desire to transfer elsewhere.

Cambridge Schools

Cambridge School zone had been the lowest performing zone in the district. Over the last couple of years, however, Cambridge has demonstrated tremendous growth in every subject area with one subject improving its proficiency by 35% points, which many considered to be very impressive with the zone's rapidly changing demographics. Ms. Stillman is an educational leader at Cambridge High School. Ms. Stillman spent most of her career, 19 years, teaching in a neighboring district, but she has been in her current position for four years. Ms. Stillman has a history of improving student achievement in each of her previous roles. Ms. Williams is new to Cambridge. Education is Ms. Williams' second career as she began her professional career in the corporate sector. Before joining the faculty of Cambridge, Ms. Williams served as an educator in one of the largest districts in the state of Georgia. Ms. Williams made the decision to relocate to a rural area and secured a job in the Cambridge school zone over the summer of this year.

Connections

This section provides an opportunity to examine the findings of the study more deeply and to establish relationships across all sites. The connections that will be discussed in this section will be based on two of the four dimensions of the transformational leadership theory – inspirational motivation and individualized consideration. Quotes from the interviewees and references to the documents provided will be included to provide greater insight and to provide a synthesis of the connections between the findings of the study.

Inspirational Motivation

Educational leaders have the daunting task of motivating teachers. Some teachers are intrinsically motivated, but others must be motivated by others to reach their full potential. Transformational leaders motivate teachers while providing support and supervision to ensure that collaboration is purposeful. Having the ability to emotionally connect with educators is an important skill for educational leaders to possess. Leaders that are transformational use their charisma and their strong personalities to motivate teachers to implement strategies to help the teachers to grow professionally, which, in turn, could lead to higher student achievement.

Serving in a rural school district, educational leaders do not have the option of allowing teachers to collaborate during their planning periods. The teachers do not have common planning, and most teachers operate as singletons. As a result, educational leaders that support collaborative practices in the district must approach the plan differently. Educational leaders and teachers at their respective schools were asked about their perceptions, examples, and barriers of collaborative practices. Each of the four educational leaders had positive perceptions of collaborative practices, but they shared different examples and some different barriers that have prevented them from supporting teachers through collaborative practices in their PLCs. Dr. Taylor, an educational leader at Barley High School, believes that collaboration is important because it provides an opportunity for educators to learn from others. "So, if you could get out of four walls, you can get different ideas from other people. You could hear about how something went, and it’s a good way to keep learning." Ms. Paul shares Dr. Taylor's sentiments. She also believes that collaboration provides an opportunity for educators to learn from each other. " The more we share, the more we learn." Ms. Paul acknowledged that each of them had their strengths and their weaknesses but remaining isolated from each other only limited their professional growth. Isolation, particularly in rural areas, is a common complaint. This lack of connection often leads to limited access to resources and collaborative opportunities, which could prevent both personal

and professional growth. Ms. Stillman has experienced both formal and informal approaches to collaboration. She believes there is a need for both, depending on the needs of the teachers within their PLCs. "When collaboration happens and there is a leader, it forces the PLC to work within a tandem and have shared goals." Examples of collaborative practices that Ms. Stillman has supported include providing the opportunity for teachers to work together to create common assessments, which has proven to be a very effective strategy. Ms. North provided the opportunity for teachers to collaborate to complete their pacing guides for the upcoming school year instead of doing it for them. "I was seeking input and teachers felt more comfortable and they felt that they had a voice in the decision-making process." This allowed the teachers to take ownership, which likely led to increased buy-in with other initiatives.

Interviews from the teachers appeared to validate the educational leaders' responses regarding their perceptions of collaborative practices. Dr. Jones, a teacher at Barley High School, expressed a positive perception of collaboration and the support provided by his educational leader, but only when the collaboration is "purposeful and intentional". He finds little value in allowing teachers to come together when there is no strategy, and everyone involved in the process does not share similar mindsets. Ms. Williams, a teacher at Cambridge High School, spoke highly of the collaborative practices that have been implemented in the school where she works. "We do them exactly how they should be done." She, like her educational leader, believed that it is important for them to "take that time together to share good news, share things that have happened, and share good things that are happening in the classroom and things that are not."

As with any new initiative, there will be those who are in support of implementing collaborative practices and those who choose to resist change. The refusal to support the initiative could stem from experiencing multiple failed initiatives, or it could be that those who will be responsible for implementing it simply choose to resist change. Educational leaders and teachers

discussed barriers to implementing collaborative practices in a rural school district with fidelity. Dr. Taylor considers time to be the number one barrier to implementing collaborative practices. "With teachers, we don't want to pull them out too much. They have planning days within their buildings but not district wide. Considering that many teachers within the rural districts operate as singletons, schoolwide collaboration without teachers having the opportunity to discuss strategies and data with teachers of the same content is not as effective as district wide collaboration could be. For their schoolwide collaboration, it is an expectation that teachers meet during their 25-minute lunch breaks to engage in collaborative practices because meeting before or after school is not an option due to some teachers' other obligations. Ms. Stillman also believes that time is a barrier to implementing collaborative practices. She doesn't think teachers see it as a good use of their time and trying to convince them that collaboration is a practice that could potentially change them as a professional has been difficult for her. In addition, she argued that teachers should have an open mind. "I think the biggest barrier was that teachers that had never done it all did not want to do it. They do not want to listen. They do not have the open mind to really learn from others." Ms. Stillman said that she has noticed the resistance more in the more experienced teachers that she has attempted to support.

Teachers in the district had different responses when they were asked about barriers to implementing collaborative practices. Dr. Jones stressed that the main barrier is the school's size and that the district is not necessarily focused on pedagogy. “Our school is too small to have shared planning. Who are you going to collaborate with if you’re the only person teaching ELA or the only person teaching Algebra 2?" Dr. Jones also asserted that the district "is more finance-driven rather than concerned about pedagogy." In addition to being too small to effectively collaborate with other teachers of the same subject, the philosophies of educational leaders within the school and the district do not align with his. Ms. Braxton’s was optimistic when providing

her response to barriers of collaborative practices. “Don’t focus on the negative things. Focus on the positive things." She believes, by doing so, eventually their icy layers will break down. Ms. Braxton highlighted a common complaint among teachers in rural school districts, the feeling of isolation. Collaboration, in her opinion, is a process that could be used to help them to avoid feeling as if they must face challenges alone. Ms. Jordan has experienced barriers to collaborative practices, but she has chosen to focus on the effect that collaborative practices have on student achievement. She expressed that some of the barriers that she has experienced have been with seasoned teachers who consider their way to be the only way. “In the past, it has been difficult to work with people who aren’t flexible and don’t want to deviate from what they are doing." She argued that she is the type of person who is willing to try anything once, if it has benefits, and if she thinks it will help her students to achieve at higher levels.

Observation notes provided deep insights into some of the educational leaders' perception of and approach to collaborative practices and reinforced data collected from the educational leaders. For example, Ms. Stilman, the educational leader at Cambridge High School, discussed why she considered time to be a barrier to collaborative practices. Ms. Stillman provided a copy of an agenda that she used during a collaborative session that she facilitated. The collaborative was effective because each member of the PLC had been approved for time off to attend the collaborative session, Insights from Ms. Stillman's interview aligned with her document analyses, highlighting consistent themes of collaboration and a commitment to foster student success.

All four educational leaders that were interviewed expressed dedicated support for providing teachers with opportunities to collaborate, and they held the opinion that collaboration plays a crucial role in motivating teachers to enhance student learning. Based on their responses,

each educational leader found value in developing teachers, not just professionally, but personally as well. They focused on inspiring and empowering educators and students to achieve their full potential while fostering a positive and supportive school culture.

Regarding transformational leadership, each of the four educational leaders demonstrated the qualities characteristic of inspirational motivation. Leaders at Barley High and Hamper Middle communicated clear visions for the teachers they supported, as indicated by the document analyses, while encouraging staff and students to strive for excellence by setting goals for improved student achievement and engagement Based on the data collected from teacher interviews, educational leaders at Marks High and Cambridge High used positive and empowering language to inspire the teachers they supported to believe in their abilities while highlighting strengths and progress rather than focusing primarily on their deficits. Each educational leader set high expectations and inspired teachers to engage in collaborative practices to provide an opportunity for them to engage in continuous learning. Lastly, they promoted a sense of unity and emphasized shared goals and teamwork so that no teacher felt as if they were in isolation. The leaders' abilities to communicate their visions for improving student achievement while motivating the teachers to participate in collaborative practices align with transformational leadership theory's tenet of inspirational motivation. According to the theory, transformational leaders motivate teachers while providing support and supervision to ensure that collaboration is purposeful.

In reviewing the documents that were submitted by the educational leaders and considering their responses from their interviews, it became clear that some educational leaders excelled at fostering a collaborative culture by creating environments where teachers actively work together to achieve common goals. These leaders understand that collaboration enhances problem-solving, promotes the sharing of best practices, and builds a stronger sense of community within the school. In contrast, other leaders seem to focus more on providing teachers with the resources

needed to complete tasks individually, rather than facilitating teamwork and professional dialogue. While offering resources is important, it can limit opportunities for teachers to engage in meaningful collaboration that leads to innovation and improved instructional practices. Leaders who prioritize collaboration recognize its value in motivating and empowering educators, which aligns with transformational theory's pillar of inspirational motivation. Educational leaders shared documents of pacing guides and PLC agendas to serve as evidence of the collaborative practices that are fostered within the rural school district, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5

Document Review Notes

Document	Pillar of Transformational Leadership	RQ Alignment
Pacing Guide	Inspirational Motivation	RQ1
Observation Notes	Individualized Consideration	RQ2
PLC Agenda	Inspirational Motivation	RQ1

Individualized Consideration

Individualized consideration refers to a transformational leader's ability to provide personalized support, coaching, and mentorship to each follower, while considering their unique needs. Leaders who demonstrate individualized consideration listen actively listen to their followers, offer constructive feedback, and provide opportunities for growth and development that is tailored to everyone's strengths and weaknesses (Bass, 1985). When applying this dimension to performance feedback, a transformational leader would tailor feedback to the specific strengths, weaknesses, and developmental goals of each teacher within a PLC. Providing performance feedback to teachers after they receive professional development in their PLCs is crucial in the context of transformational leadership. Transformational leaders strongly believe in motivating and inspiring teachers, which empowers the teachers and provides an opportunity for the

leaders to highlight the teachers' strengths and areas in which they have shown growth. Transformational leaders can build relationships that benefit both the leader and their followers while leveraging the abilities and expertise of others. By helping teachers to discover their unique talents and strengths, transformational leaders assist each teacher in contributing to school improvement. Providing individualized support to teachers, depending on their specific needs, can be crucial in achieving the academic goals of each school.

Educational leaders were asked about their perceptions of providing performance feedback to teachers, and teachers were asked about their perceptions of receiving it. Dr. Taylor shared her perceptions of performance feedback while expressing that her primary goal is to improve student achievement. "My role is a nonevaluative one. So, mine is more of a grows and glows situation." Dr. Taylor stated that she focuses on the positives, but she also addresses the individual teacher's room for growth. "I always try to start with something good. I really like the way you did this in that lesson. Then I go into what they need to tweak to make it a little bit more aligned to the standards." Ms. Stillman shared her perceptions of performance feedback and examples of performance feedback that she has provided to teachers. Unlike Dr. Taylor, who provided performance feedback after observations, Ms. Stillman provided performance feedback based on student achievement data. She had the teachers make predictions based on the students' historical data from previous years. When the students' Milestone scores become available in the Spring, Ms. Stillman calls each teacher in, one by one, to discuss their results. "I brought historical data to the table and entered it into the spreadsheet. Then we sit down and actually go through their students, and we look at the trends. Look at what you did. This student has never made a 3, and this student made a 3 this year." With over 30 years of experience in education, Ms. Paul's perception of providing performance feedback was a little bit more specific as she

provided details of what the teachers expect to receive from the performance feedback. She asserted, “I think you have to have good examples so that when you’re giving them good feedback, using specific details and observations or test scores, they know exactly where the feedback came from." Ms. Paul believes that transparency is key. "They want to know exactly what should be done.” Ms. North discussed her perception of providing performance feedback to teachers after they receive professional development in their PLCs and emphasized why she feels there is a need to consider each teacher’s individual needs. “Teachers crave it. I can’t make it out of the classroom without them wanting to know what they did and what they need to work on." Ms. North said that she has to approach teachers differently, and she understands the importance of establishing relationships. "There are some of which I have to be more delicate. I talk about the good things I saw rather than what needs to be changed. I understand that the results can’t happen without building relationships first. I am trying to improve everyone.”

When the teachers were asked about their perceptions, there were mixed responses. Dr. Jones was not as enthusiastic about the concept of being provided performance feedback. “It doesn’t happen very often. I don’t know if I’ve ever had an administrator who had any kind of background that could evaluate my content knowledge. They just have to take it for granted that I know what I’m doing. Overall, I think it’s pretty poor. No teachers want to be observed or evaluated.” Ms. Braxton's perception of performance feedback was different. She said that she has been at the same school throughout her career and is very pleased with her administration team. Ms. Braxton believes that "feedback is crucial in the educational realm". She stated that she wants people to watch her. "I want them to help me to determine what I am doing wrong, what I am doing right". Ms. Braxton believes that if teachers expect students to continue learning, then the teachers should be learning too. Ms. Williams, having worked at different school districts over the course of her career, shared her perception of receiving performance feedback. "I think

constructive criticism is needed. There are always ways to improve. If everything is always sunshine and rainbows, you don't grow."

Educational leaders and teachers were asked about specific strategies employed to tailor performance feedback to unique needs and development areas of individual educators. Ms. Paul went into great detail when asked about the specific strategies that she employs to tailor performance feedback to the unique needs and development areas of individual educators. "During observations, I take detailed notes. I write down specific things that are said. "After observations, I have something to reference." The detailed notes, according to Ms. Paul, are used to support her during the post-observation meeting when she discusses the presence or absence of effective instructional strategies.

The teachers stressed the importance of the educational leaders taking the time to establish relationships with them and being specific when providing performance feedback. Ms. Braxton said that the principal and assistant principal at her school are really good at giving feedback, especially when they are doing walkthroughs. She discussed strategies they used to build a positive culture within the school. "They do things such as have surprise luncheons; but their feedback, even if they have negative feedback, they always put it in a positive light. It is not a beatdown." Ms. Braxton said she has been very fortunate to have great administrators who have "wanted to build you up, encourage you, and support you." Ms. Jordan reflected on an experience during an observation that she considered to be very helpful. "I usually focus on whole group instruction first and then small groups." Ms. Jordan was advised by her educational leader to "survey the room to see who looks like they don't know what is going on exactly", which would allow her to see who could potentially benefit from small group instruction. The specific feedback made her feel that the leaders were not simply checking off boxes. Instead, they were intentional in helping her to develop by pinpointing exactly what needed to be addressed.

The document analyses aligned with the interview insights. In observation notes, Ms. North, the educational leader at Hamper Middle School, provided evidence of the performance feedback she shared in a supportive, yet constructive manner. As shown in Table 5, observation notes are aligned with individualized consideration. She focused on strengths and areas for growth, which demonstrated her ability to encourage teachers to improve rather than only pointing out the teachers' deficits. The educational leader's feedback was not generic, which demonstrated her understanding of the importance of recognizing each teacher's unique challenges and strengths. These documents were reviewed through the lens of individualized consideration.

Individualized consideration is an area that could be developed more in some of the educational leaders in the district. Although each educational leader had positive perceptions of providing performance feedback to teachers after they received professional development within their professional learning communities, some educational leaders felt much more confident and comfortable providing performance feedback to teachers than others. Based on interviews and document analyses, the educational leaders at Hamper Middle School and Cambridge High School demonstrated confidence and comfortability in providing performance feedback. Ms. North provided individualized feedback during PLC meetings, after conducting classroom observations, and during data review sessions. Ms. Stillman also demonstrated her ability to provide feedback during PLC meetings and during data review sessions. Educational leaders at Barley High and Marks High did not feel as comfortable providing performance feedback after conducting classroom observations, but they both demonstrated confidence in providing performance feedback to the whole group during PLC meetings. Their idea of providing performance feedback to teachers they supported, however, was sharing what others had been able to accomplish. They appeared to steer clear of mentioning any deficiencies that the teachers demonstrated. While it is important for transformational leaders to understand the strengths and aspirations of

each teacher, mentoring and coaching, while demonstrating empathy, may be needed for some to grow. To truly be transformational, educational leaders should encourage a culture where mistakes and areas of weakness are viewed as opportunities for learning. This would reduce the fear of failure and foster resilience among not only the staff members, but the students as well.

Three of the four teachers interviewed shared that their educational leaders actively fostered environments where the teachers could engage in collaborative practices and routine receive performance feedback. The participants also discussed the barriers to collaboration and performance feedback, such as time constraints and varying teaching philosophies, and emphasized the importance of navigating potential conflicts to ensure that these practices remain productive and that the focus remains on improving student achievement. It is important to note that the one teacher that shared his negative perceptions of collaborative practices and performance feedback had a school leader that would not consider himself to be a content area specialist. The teacher has retired and is no longer employed with the system.

After analyzing the interview transcripts and observation notes, it became evident that the transformational leaders in the rural schools of the district have positive perceptions of the importance of providing performance feedback to teachers who have had professional development within PLCs. It was also apparent that some leaders provided individualized feedback more effectively than others. Performance feedback appeared to be an integral part of the leadership approach in the district as the practice fosters a culture of continuous improvement and professional growth. Through the practice of providing performance feedback, the leaders not only offered constructive insights but also ensured that teachers are aware of their performance expectations and areas for development. This commitment to feedback, which aligns with transformational theory's pillar of individualized consideration, enhances instructional practices and contributes to the overall effectiveness of the educational environment. Table 6 shows the connections made by

participants of the study and the documents that were analyzed along with their alignment to the two pillars of inspirational motivation and individualized consideration.

Table 6

Connections by Participants and Documents

	Inspirational Motivation	Individualized Consideration
Educational Leaders	Protected collaboration time Transparency with data Vision for success Goal-setting Teacher empowerment	Frequent observations Immediate feedback Personalized support Mentoring relationships
Teachers	Teamwork Mutually beneficial relationships Overcoming challenges	Professional growth Resistance
Documents	Collective responsibility	Model Mentor Peer observations

Inspirational motivation and individualized consideration were used to draw conclusions about the perceptions of collaborative practices and performance feedback. After becoming familiar with the data by reviewing the transcripts, notes, and recordings to understand the content, first-level coding began. During this phase of the analysis, data was reviewed, line by line, to identify initial codes. Each code segment of data relates to the theoretical framework of transformational leadership.

During second-level coding, relationships, patterns, and connections between codes were identified at a deeper level, and new codes were generated to capture nuanced aspects of the theoretical framework. Comprehensive themes were developed that encapsulated the key findings and insights derived from the coding process. Patterns that supported the framework were identified as well as patterns that challenged the proposition of it. Themes were refined to ensure they were supported by the data and accurately represented the collected information. This step in the

process also ensured that themes were consistent with theoretical propositions and contributed to the theoretical discourse. Transcripts were created using NVivo to identify specific keywords, which provided the opportunity to develop codes and themes. Using the findings of this data analysis, the purpose of the case study on the perceptions of collaborative practices and performance feedback in rural school districts were addressed. Table 7 represents the three overarching themes that emerged.

Table 7

Themes and Categories

Shared Goals	Personalized Support	Protected Time
Collaboration	Coaching	PLC Meetings
Improve Student Achievement	Mentoring	Collaboratives

Shared Goals

Transformational leaders understand the unique challenges of rural education, such as limited resources and geographic isolation, so they provide an opportunity for the teachers to work collaboratively to create a shared vision and shared goals. As shown in Table 7, shared goals bring educators together around a common purpose, which promotes collaboration, while allowing educators to utilize their diverse strengths and perspectives to address challenges and achieve meaningful change in rural education. This collaborative approach that involves teachers in the goal-setting process empowers teachers to collectively develop innovative solutions and ensures that all voices are heard and that the goals reflect the needs and aspirations of the staff and the students. As Ms. Stillman stated, “When collaboration happens and there is a leader, it forces the PLC to work within a tandem and have shared goals. What, how, when, reflect on them and then talk about good and the bad and what they learned from it.” By setting goals that focus on ongoing teacher support, transformational educational leaders help educators build their instructional capacity, implement best practices, and adapt to the diverse needs of their students.

These leaders often champion differentiated instruction and other innovative approaches to ensure that every student has access to high-quality learning experiences, regardless of their background or challenges.

Collaboration in the rural school district has proven to be challenging because some teachers in the district do not have anyone within their schools that teaches the same subject, or they may be the only teacher of a particular subject in the school. Dr. Jones shared, "A lot of times there has been only one teacher per subject. For many years, I have had multiple preps, but I have not been able to collaborate. Where we have collaboration set up purposively and intentionally has been really helpful." Leaders that have a transformational mindset have had to be creative to motivate teachers at their schools to collaborate with others with the overall goal being to improve student achievement.

Improving student achievement is the primary goal of school leaders. Transformational leaders invest in the professional development of their staff to provide the training, resources, and support needed to achieve their shared goals. By enhancing the skills and knowledge of teachers, teachers directly improve instructional quality, which in turn, improves student achievement. By trusting teachers to take collective ownership of the shared goals, transformational leaders empower them to implement creative solutions. This empowerment fosters a sense of autonomy and responsibility, which motivates staff to improve student outcomes. This practice aligns with transformational leadership theory's pillar of inspirational motivation.

Personalized Support

Personalized support from transformational leaders is essential in fostering growth and development among educators within schools. When paired with meaningful performance feedback, personalized support helps educators identify their strengths, address their areas for improvement, and refine their practices to become more effective educators. This combination not

only enhances individual teacher effectiveness but also contributes to a culture of continuous learning and collective success within each of the schools in rural school districts. Transformational leaders recognize that individualized strategies, such as personalized coaching, are key to addressing the unique needs and aspirations for each educator.

By offering personalized coaching, transformational leaders help educators set goals tailored to their specific areas of improvement, whether it's classroom management, instructional strategies, or student engagement. This level of attention helps to build trust and motivates teachers to embrace continuous improvement because it helps teachers to believe that they have a leader who is invested in their success. Ms. Braxton expressed, "There are always ways to improve. If everything is always sunshine and rainbows, you don't grow." Coaching plays a critical role in this process as it allows transformational leaders to provide direct guidance, feedback, and encouragement, which aligns with transformational leadership theory's pillar of individualized consideration. Regular coaching sessions give teachers opportunities to reflect on their practices, explore new strategies, and receive performance feedback in a safe and supportive environment. Ms. Paul asserted, "I want people watching me. I want them to help me to determine what I am doing wrong, what I am doing right." By fostering this growth mindset, transformational leaders not only enhance the professional development of individual teachers, but they also strengthen the overall instructional quality of the school.

Mentoring is another vital component of personalized support from transformational leaders. It provides teachers with a trusted confidante who can offer insights, share experiences, and provide emotional support during challenging times. This type of sustained, one-on-one relationship empowers teachers to develop professionally and personally. Ultimately, when teachers feel supported and valued through coaching and mentoring, they are more likely to stay motivated and impact student learning in meaningful ways.

Protected Time

Protected time refers to a designated, uninterrupted period allocated to educators for participation in collaborative practices that is institutionally safeguarded from non-instructional duties, administrative interruptions, and unplanned meetings to ensure that teachers can engage in high-quality instructional preparation and continuous professional growth. Providing protected time for teachers in rural school districts is a critical responsibility of transformational leaders, as it allows educators to focus on professional growth and collaborative problem-solving without the distractions of daily classroom duties. When leaders prioritize and protect time for teachers to engage in these activities, it signals a deep commitment to their professional development and well-being. This dedicated time enables teachers to reflect on their practices, plan more effective lessons, and analyze student data. Without this protected time, teachers may feel overwhelmed by the demands of their work and unable to engage in the meaningful process. Dr. Taylor emphasized, "Time is probably the number one barrier. With teachers, we don't want to pull them out too much. They have planning days within their buildings but not district wide. So, finding the time to pull them together and providing the time for them to meet has been a barrier."

Protected time is particularly important for participation in professional learning communities (PLCs). PLCs are structured opportunities for teachers to come together and collaboratively analyze student work, discuss best practices, and develop strategies to address common challenges. PLC meetings allow teachers to identify gaps in student achievement and work together to develop targeted interventions. By dedicating time to PLCs, transformational leaders ensure that teachers can collaborate and be innovative in ways that positively impact student learning outcomes, which aligns with transformational leadership theory's pillar of inspirational motivation. Providing protected time aligns with the pillar of inspirational motivation and the collaboration construct by creating an environment where educators feel valued and empowered

to engage in meaningful professional growth. This dedicated time will foster collaboration among teachers, which will allow them to work together toward shared goals while being inspired to innovate and improve their practices.

Additionally, transformational leaders who facilitate collaborative opportunities across schools, not just within individual buildings, amplify the impact of protected time. By organizing or supporting cross-school collaboratives, teachers are given the chance to connect with colleagues from different schools to share insights and explore new strategies. The exposure to different teaching approaches, particularly among teachers that operate as singletons within their schools, enriches teachers' practices and ultimately benefits students by enhancing the quality of instruction across the district.

In summary, educational leaders are directly responsible for the quality of the teachers in their schools. Therefore, it is crucial that they provide relevant professional learning opportunities aimed at improving student achievement. Educational leaders and teachers in rural school districts face additional challenges due to limited human capital, which prevents them from engaging in activities common in larger districts. As a result, educational leaders must be more innovative and creative when planning professional learning opportunities. In addition to the common practices of creating shared goals and providing personalized support, educational leaders in rural school districts must be willing to protect the time of teachers. By doing so, they will ensure that teachers are afforded the opportunity to collaborate with other teachers, which would align with Bass's two pillars of inspirational motivation and individualized consideration. A discussion of the study's findings, including the study's implications, limitations, and recommendations, will be discussed in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore transformational educational leaders' perceptions of collaborative practices and performance feedback in rural school districts and to understand how teachers' receptiveness to collaborative practices and performance feedback influence implementation and effectiveness. Teachers in rural school districts, who may already be grappling with limited resources, often find themselves isolated, both professionally and geographically, from colleagues who could provide support or constructive collaboration. One of the primary challenges teachers face is the lack of collaborative opportunities due to some schools employing only one teacher per grade level or subject area. The feeling of isolation significantly impacts teachers' ability to engage in meaningful dialogue, share strategies, or co-plan lessons, all of which are practices that are essential for professional growth and student achievement.

Because of the additional needs of teachers in rural school districts, educational leaders in rural districts must be capable of motivating teachers to accomplish their shared goals and be willing to provide support to teachers depending on their individual needs. For this reason, this study was conducted through the lens of the transformational leadership theory while focusing on the two pillars of inspirational motivation and individualized consideration. Interviewing and analyzing documents from four educational leaders and four teachers from the middle and high school levels in a rural school district in Northwest Georgia provided context for the qualitative research when answering the two research questions.

In addition to transformational leadership, this case study was also framed through the concept of collaboration, which underscores the importance of shared goals, mutual respect, and communication. Purposive sampling was used to select the educational leaders and the teachers who met the requirements for the study. Semi-structured interviews and document analyses were

the methods used to collect data to understand the levels of support provided by the educational leaders to the teachers in the district. The focus of the interviews and the document analyses was to determine if the educational leaders were transformational in their approach to contributing to the teachers' professional development.

In this study, I examined the perceptions of four educational leaders and four teachers, where I specifically focused on their experiences with collaborative practices and providing (educational leaders) and receiving (teachers) performance feedback after professional development to assess the effectiveness of their implementation. The results of this study indicated that educational leaders at all four school zones were transformational in their approach to providing support to their teachers as each of the leaders provided inspirational motivation and individualized consideration. Their claims were corroborated by three of the four teachers interviewed and the documents that were submitted for analyses. Only one of the eight participants had a negative perception of collaborative practices in PLCs and of receiving performance feedback after receiving professional development.

Key findings of the study indicated that educational leaders in the rural school district, while recognizing that many teachers in the district operated in isolation, held favorable views toward collaborative practices. Findings also indicated that educational leaders in the rural school district valued providing performance feedback to teachers, based on the teachers' individual needs, following professional development sessions. These findings highlighted the importance of fostering collaborative environments to enhance professional growth and instructional practices among educators in rural schools. Additionally, the emphasis on performance feedback underscored its role in reinforcing the application of new strategies and sustaining teacher development. Building on these insights, the study's implications extended to theoretical frameworks, practical applications in schools, and educational policy considerations.

Theoretical Implications

This study allowed me to extend existing theories (Baloche & Brody, 2017; DuFour et al., 2005; Hannaford, 2010; Le et al., 2018; Roy & Hord, 2006) that found that there are seven common characteristics of effective collaborative practices. The seven characteristics of existing theories include action orientation and experimentation, cooperation, collective inquiry, continuous learning, results orientation, shared leadership, and shared mission (Hannaford, 2010). In addition to the seven common characteristics of collaborative practices on which researchers agree, it is important to consider protected time to collaborate as a characteristic. Figure 1 shows the added characteristic of protected time.

Figure 1

Eight Characteristics of Collaborative Practices

The inclusion of protected time extends the transformational leadership theory by emphasizing the leader's role in creating structured opportunities for collaboration and professional growth.

Transformational leaders inspire and motivate their staff by fostering shared goals and professional development. By ensuring protected time for teachers to engage in meaningful dialogue, reflect on practices, and implement new strategies, leaders demonstrate a commitment to removing barriers that hinder growth. This practice aligns with the theory's focus on intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration. Because some educational leaders may not have a background in one of the four major content areas of math, ELA, science, or social studies, they may lack confidence in providing performance feedback, especially if the teacher being observed is considered a content specialist. After taking the necessary steps to develop trust with the teachers, educational leaders could use the feedback sandwich method (Johnson et al., 2022) as a strategy to highlight the teachers' strengths while also discussing the teachers' deficits. Figure 2 provides information that educational leaders, regardless of their academic background, could use to support their teachers during observations, which could then be used when providing subsequent performance feedback.

Figure 2

Guide for Performance Feedback

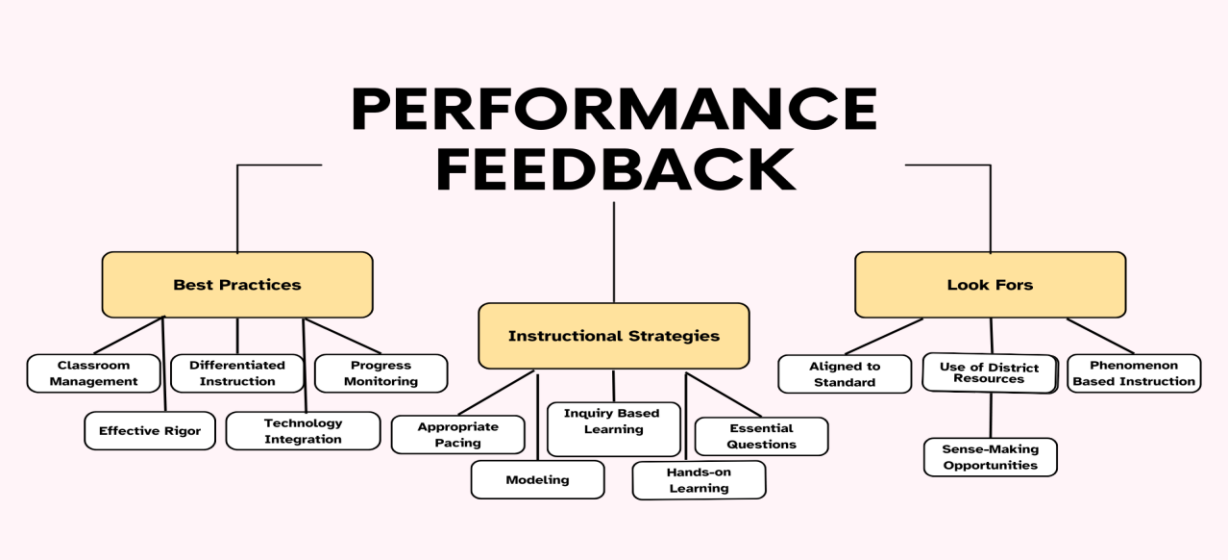
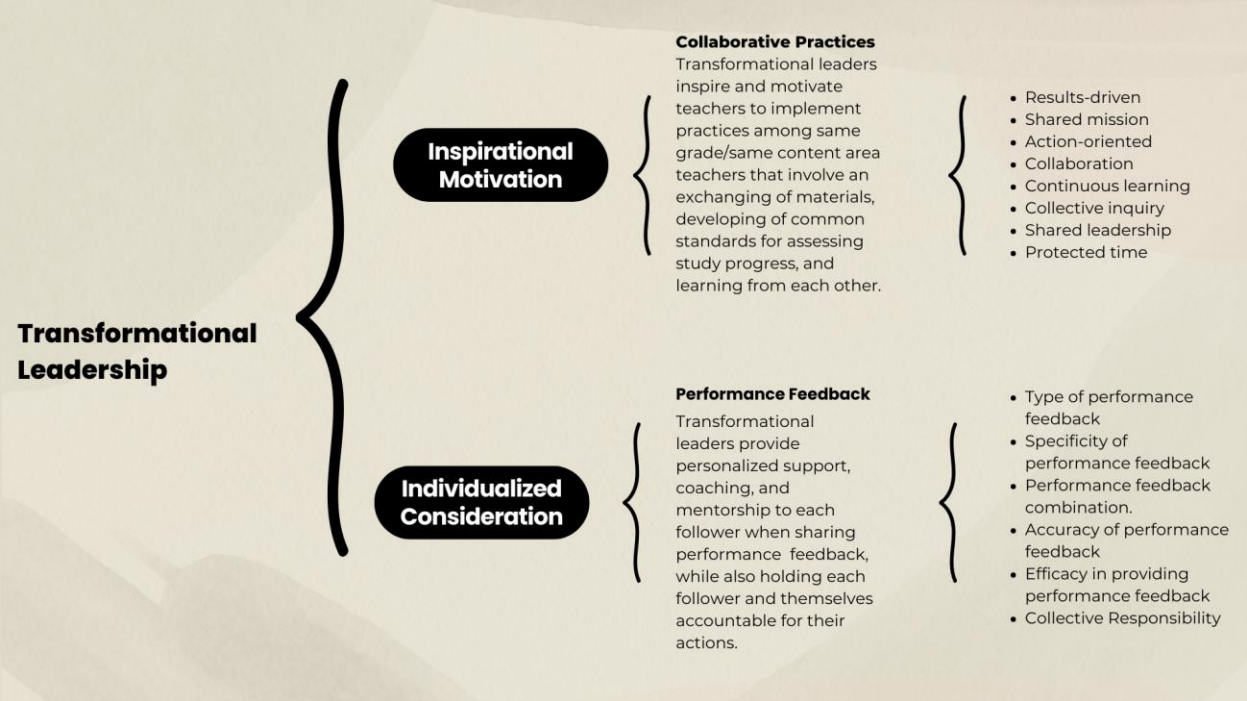


Figure 3 presents the theoretical framework and the concepts of collaborative practices and performance feedback. Collective responsibility has been added to the list of factors that determine the effectiveness of individualized consideration. Transformational leaders must stress collective responsibility because if the educational leaders do not hold the teachers accountable, they will be unable to motivate and inspire them in a manner that will be sustainable.

Figure 3

Transformational Leadership Theory with Dimensions Specific to the Study



Practical Implications

As mentioned earlier, insights from this study will be helpful to educational leaders in rural school districts because it extends the research on how transformational leadership influences positive changes in leaders and teachers regarding collaborative practices and performance feedback (Bass, 1985), which could ultimately lead to higher student achievement. It also provides educational leaders and teachers with strategies that have been effective in similar schools or districts. The eight characteristics of collaborative practices is a model that

could be used to enhance team effectiveness, foster inclusive decision-making, and improve student outcomes by promoting a culture of shared responsibility and mutual support among educators (Baloche & Brody, 2017; DuFour et al., 2005; Hannaford, 2010; Le et al., 2018; Roy & Hord, 2006). The performance feedback model provides information that educational leaders, regardless of their academic background, could use to support their teachers during observations, which could then be used when providing subsequent performance feedback. This study has several implications for both school and district leadership, especially in rural school districts. It could be used to help both school and district leadership to promote a culture of collaboration, refine their feedback strategies, and improve teacher development, which would ultimately benefit teacher performances and student learning outcomes (Walker & Sellers, 2021; Ehrlich et al., 2020). Although no two school districts are the same, rural school districts face similar challenges of fewer resources and a lack of administrative support; therefore, implications from this study include highlighting areas where school and district leaders could support teachers in rural school districts who may need additional training for support and informing resource allocation decisions tailored to the needs of educators in rural school districts. Collaborative professional development that features joint workshops, virtual learning communities, and leadership training enhances the capacity of educational leaders and educators to drive systemic improvement. In addition to professional development collaboration, collaborative practices such as resource sharing (teacher, technology, and curriculum), community partnerships (after-school, mentoring, and volunteer programs), and curriculum alignment and assessments (standardized assessments and interdisciplinary units) could be used to maximize educational opportunities despite geographic challenges.

Educational leaders play a crucial role in ensuring teachers have protected time for collaboration. Educational leaders could allocate structured, non-teaching time in the schedule for

lesson planning, collaboration, and reflection. They could also designate common planning periods for grade-level or content-area teams. Lastly, they could provide structured coaching sessions without impeding teachers' individual planning time.

Just as some educational leaders and teachers find it challenging to make time for collaboration, there are also some educational leaders that struggle to provide performance feedback. One of the initial steps an educational leader should take is to provide training for faculty and administrators on adopting and understanding an instructional framework. The core practices of the framework would foster more consistent feedback, enabling educators and educational leaders to focus on a shared set of exemplary strategies. Depending on the academic background of educational leaders, some may lack confidence or comfort providing performance feedback to their teachers. As leaders, they want to believe or may think that their teachers believe that the educational leaders should be experts. Figure 3 provides information that educational leaders, regardless of their academic background, could use to support their teachers during observations, which could then be used when providing subsequent performance feedback. There should not be a one-size-fits-all approach to providing performance feedback. Most educational leaders understand that feedback should be specific, actionable, timely, and related to an individual teacher's learning outcomes, but feedback can still be perceived negatively if it is not successfully calibrated to a teacher's abilities. Because feedback may be perceived as criticism, it may be necessary for educational leaders to use the "feedback sandwich" (Johnson et al., 2022) method to provide performance feedback in a manner that encourages teacher growth and development. Sandwiching challenges between praises may be perceived as being more motivating and encouraging than bland statements such as "good job on your classroom management" that offer no strategies for professional growth. Leaders can implement the "feedback sandwich" method by structuring the

conversation to begin and end with positive reinforcement, while addressing areas for improvement in the middle. For example, educational leaders could begin the conversation by acknowledging the teacher's strengths, achievements, or successful practices. This sets a supportive tone and helps the teachers feel valued. "Your engagement strategies have been exceptional, and it is clear that your students are benefiting from your creativity." Leaders should then transition to discussing specific areas where growth is needed, ensuring the feedback is constructive and actionable. "One area to focus on could be incorporating more formative assessments to gauge student understanding throughout the lesson.". Educational leaders should conclude with reaffirmation of the educator's potential, while being sure to outline next steps for improvement and their willingness to offer additional support. "I'm confident that with a few minor adjustments, you will see an increase in student achievement. Let's schedule a follow-up within the next two weeks." By using the "feedback sandwich" method, educational leaders could create a balanced approach that focuses on each educator's individual needs while maintaining a positive relationship. In addition to using the "feedback sandwich" method, Table 8 provides a list that educational leaders could use as a guide when providing performance feedback.

Table 8

Do's and Don'ts of Performance Feedback

Do	**Don't**
Be specific and evidence based.	Be overly critical.
Provide timely feedback.	Issue vague comments.
Balance strengths and areas for growth.	Compare teachers to colleagues.
Set clear expectations.	Micromanage every solution.
Encourage reflection.	Delay feedback.
Be supportive and collaborative.	Use feedback as punishment.
Follow up.	Overload with too much feedback.

For district leadership, utilizing inspirational motivation and individualized consideration has significant implications for cultivating a culture of growth, collaboration, and shared vision

across the schools in a rural school district. By employing inspirational motivation, district leaders can communicate a compelling vision for success that resonates with the unique challenges and opportunities within rural schools in a district. This vision could unite principals, teachers, and staff around the common goals of enhancing teacher practices and improving student achievement (Archer, 2012). By setting high expectations, district leaders inspire the different schools in the district to embrace collaboration and continuous improvement, which could energize the school leaders, teachers, and staff to overcome the isolation and other resource constraints that are often experienced in rural school districts. Individualized consideration allows district leaders to provide personalized support and resources tailored to the specific needs of each school. By offering targeted professional development, customized coaching, and individualized performance feedback, district leadership can address the unique needs faced by school leaders in rural districts, which would allow the school leaders to better support the educators within their schools. This approach ensures that school leaders feel valued and supported, which enhances morale and improves retention. By recognizing individual contributions and offering differentiated support, district leaders create an environment where educators and educational leaders can thrive, which ultimately leads to better teaching practices and improved student achievement across the district. Together, the pillars of inspirational motivation and individualized consideration foster a motivated, collaborative district culture that supports sustained growth and success.

Policy Implications

There are significant policy implications for school and district leadership using inspirational motivation and individualized consideration to shape how educational environments are structured to support teachers. This study has policy implications for leadership development, collaborative practices, and feedback practices. These implications highlight the need for targeted

training programs that equip educational leaders with strategies to cultivate effective collaboration, deliver meaningful feedback, and drive professional growth among their staff.

Leadership Development

From a policy perspective, rural school districts should prioritize leadership development initiatives that provide training to educational leaders on the school and district levels to effectively communicate a clear and inspiring vision for staff and students (Thessin & Starr, 2011). This focus on leadership development could include workshops, mentoring programs, and ongoing professional learning opportunities that are designed to equip educational leaders with the skills necessary to foster a culture of collaboration. By investing in such initiatives, rural districts can address unique challenges, such as limited resources and staff retention, while empowering leaders to drive meaningful change.

Collaborative Practices

Educational leaders should prioritize collaborative practices. Promoting collaboration among educators fosters shared accountability, improves instructional strategies, and enhances student achievement. Collaborative practices are necessary in rural districts where teachers may feel disconnected from their colleagues. An emphasis on inspirational motivation can help foster a shared commitment among teachers within the district to meet their educational goals, which, ultimately, improves teacher satisfaction.

Policymakers could support this by mandating protected collaboration time and funding training programs on effective PLC facilitation. Collaboration time can be scheduled during pre-planning, post-planning, or professional learning days to avoid the cost of hiring substitutes in rural districts with limited resources. Training programs should include accountability measures to equip leaders with the skills to track and report how often teachers receive their protected time and how to assess whether the teachers feel that their time is being protected. Key areas that

should be examined to effectively track the impact of protected time include scheduling and implementation, teacher perceptions and satisfaction, instructional impact, and leadership accountability. Utilizing metrics to evaluate scheduling and implementation would ensure that protected time is scheduled and uninterrupted. Using surveys to measure teacher perceptions and satisfaction would evaluate how teachers experience and utilize their protected time. In the area of instructional impact, educational leaders would assess whether protected time leads to improved lesson planning and student outcomes. Utilizing metrics such as leadership self-assessments and administrator reviews would hold school leaders accountable for honoring and supporting protected time. Leaders could also establish district or school-wide policies that prohibit scheduled meetings during teachers' protected time.

Feedback Practices

Policies that focus on individualized consideration establish practices by school leaders that are inclusive and responsive to the unique needs of educators (Johnson et al., 2022). Policymakers could implement policies within the district that require school leaders to engage in one-on-one coaching, individualized feedback, and targeted professional development. These policies would encourage school leaders to provide individualized feedback based on each teacher's unique needs, rather than applying a one-size-fits-all approach. To effectively implement these policies, it is crucial for district leaders to provide professional development opportunities for educational leaders, which would equip them with the skills to assess teacher performance, offer individualized performance feedback, and foster a culture of continuous improvement among educational leaders as well as the educators they support.

Limitations of the Study

Although qualitative research design minimizes bias and maximizes reliability of the data, I found difficulty in separating myself from the data. Participant bias, in the form of social

desirability bias, and researcher bias, in the form of leading questions and wording and confirmation biases, are common biases in qualitative studies. To avoid participant biases, questions were framed to allow the participant to feel accepted regardless of responses to the questions. With the study being conducted in a homogeneous rural school district, participants may have felt the pressure to align their responses with perceived expectations, which could have led to social desirability bias where participants provided what they considered to be more acceptable instead of their true perceptions. Familiarity bias may have also skewed the data, as the close-knit nature of rural communities could have resulted in participants being familiar with each other, which could have led to less critical responses regarding leadership.

Because the district is relatively small and close knit, participants may have shared experiences and cultural backgrounds, which could have led to a narrow range of responses and reduced the richness of the data. The participants consisted of four educational leaders and four teachers in a rural, racially homogenous district as there is little diversity on the staff in the district in which the study was conducted. With all participants being Caucasian, this study lacks diversity in racial and cultural perspectives, which could limit the generalization of findings to districts that are more diverse where experiences and approaches to collaboration and performance feedback may differ. The demographics and rural environment might have shaped the participants' perceptions differently than in an urban or more diverse setting.

Isolation, limited access to professional development resources, and protected time could have affected perceptions of collaboration and performance feedback differently than in suburban or urban school districts or rural school districts with non-Caucasian participants. Therefore, insights gained from this study may not be easily transferable to larger, more diverse school districts. For educational leaders and policymakers looking to apply the findings in broader contexts, the lack of demographic diversity in the study's participants could reduce the relevance

of the study's recommendations.

Limitations specific to a qualitative study on transformational leadership include challenges in measuring the long-term impact of transformational leadership behaviors and dependence on self-reporting by the study's participants. A limitation specific to performance feedback is that external factors, such as school culture or educational leadership changes, may have influenced participants' experiences with performance feedback during the study period. The quality of leadership may have also influenced the effectiveness of the performance feedback. These factors could have introduced variability in how feedback was perceived and applied, potentially affecting the consistency and generalizability of the study's findings.

Suggestions for Further Research

Given the limitations of this qualitative case study, there are several suggestions for further research on the perceptions of collaborative practices and performance feedback. With all participants of the study being Caucasian, the study lacks diversity in cultural and racial perspectives. Future research on this topic could include a comparative case study across urban, suburban, and rural school districts with a mix of racial, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds to address the limitation of homogeneity. This research would provide a wider range of perceptions and could examine how diversity may influence perceptions of collaborative practices and performance feedback. Research could also explore the experiences of African American or Hispanic educators in predominantly Caucasian rural school districts to examine how their perceptions may differ.

Equity in feedback practices and leadership development programs are some other suggestions for further research. Equity in feedback practices involves ensuring that all teachers, regardless of their level of experience, background, or demographic characteristics, receive perfor-

mance feedback that is fair, constructive, and tailored to their individual needs. This is particularly important in rural school districts where teachers may feel isolated or underserved. Research in this area could explore whether feedback is provided equitably and how it impacts the professional growth of diverse groups of teachers. Leadership development programs play a crucial role in preparing educational leaders to deliver meaningful performance feedback that fosters growth and encourages collaboration. Research in this area could focus on how these programs equip leaders to navigate the complexities of offering individualized performance feedback while promoting a collaborative culture among educators.

Future research could build on the study's theoretical contribution of protected time as a component of transformational leadership. By exploring how the allocation and the use of protected time directly impact individualized consideration and inspirational motivation, researchers could investigate the specific ways in which protected time allows educational leaders to engage more deeply with teachers and provide tailored support. Additionally, studies could examine the relationship between protected time and the development of shared goals within schools, which would assess whether this practice enhances the educational leader's ability to inspire and motivate staff. Lastly, longitudinal research could track the long-term effects of protected time on teacher retention, student achievement, and overall school culture, which would contribute to a more comprehensive view of how protected time for educators influences educational outcomes.

Concluding Remarks

This study explores the perceptions of educational leaders and teachers on collaborative practices and performance feedback in a rural school district through the lens of the transformational leadership theory and the construct of collaboration. Key findings indicated that collabora-

tive practices, such as PLCs and district-wide collaboratives, are perceived as crucial for providing support to teachers in rural districts while reducing teacher isolation, which is a common issue in rural districts. Findings also indicated that, while feedback is essential for each teacher's professional growth, it must be constructive and personalized to be effective. Challenges such as a lack of time and differences in educational philosophies often hinder the effectiveness of collaborative practices and performance feedback, but policies can be implemented to combat such barriers. The research presented in this study suggests that policy adjustments are necessary to strengthen feedback mechanisms and enhance collaboration, especially in rural school districts where resources may be strained.

Early in my teaching career, I was very much in my own bubble, and I focused primarily on what was happening within the four walls of my classroom. All of my energy was poured into my students, and I often felt like their success rested solely on my ability to make a difference in their lives. Over time, however, I realized that staying within the confines of my classroom limited my growth as a professional. One moment that really stands out was when I was selected to lead a professional learning community during the pandemic. I listened to the other teachers' experiences and shared some of my own personal challenges. Suddenly, I no longer felt isolated. In addition to walking away with new instructional strategies, I also left with a renewed sense of energy. The support and collective knowledge were invaluable, not just for the educators involved in the community, but also for the success of my students.

Regardless of a teacher's level of experience, there is always room for improvement. I remember a time when I received feedback from an educational leader that completely changed the way I approached my instructional practices. I had been teaching a unit that I believed was hitting every benchmark. The students were fully engaged, and I shared almost everything I knew about

the topic. During an observation, however, my educational leader pointed out that while my lessons were very thorough and well planned, I failed to provide opportunities for student discourse and for them to take ownership of their learning. Initially, I did not know how to receive the feedback that she provided. As I reflected, however, I realized that my educational leader was correct. My educational leader did more than just improve my instructional practice. She transformed my classroom environment.

This personal narrative aligns with the tenets of the transformational leadership theory, which emphasizes the role of leaders in serving as sources of inspiration and motivation, while also fostering professional growth among their followers. Leaders that are transformational are deeply invested in the professional development of their team members. They can create environments where teachers feel empowered to excel on much higher levels, which, ultimately, leads to greater student outcomes.

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Appendix A:

Educational Leaders' Interview Guide

Community & Location _____

Date/time_____

Participant_____

My name is Latasha Lampkin, and I will be facilitating this interview. The goal of this project is to explore educational leaders' and teachers' perceptions about collaborative practices and performance feedback in rural school districts. As a District Science Coach, I value your opinions and insights. Ultimately this study will inform educational leaders and teachers on the benefits and barriers of collaborative practices and performance feedback. The information gained from this effort will be shared with various stakeholders including school and district administration.

You were selected through a purposeful sampling process in which I evaluated which educational leaders identified as transformational leaders in rural school districts. Up to 4 participants will be interviewed during this process. Before the interview, you were sent an introductory letter and two consent forms (one to sign and return and one to keep) before the session today. The interview will take 1.5 hours. Do you have any questions? If there are no further questions, let us get started with the first question.

The transformational leadership theory has four dimensions: inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, idealized influence, and individualized consideration. For this study, inspirational motivation and individualized consideration will be the dimensions used to understand your perception of collaborative practices and performance feedback in your school.

1. How do you perceive the role of collaboration in fostering interdependence among PLC members regarding shared goals? (Inspirational Motivation)

2. Can you share examples of collaborative practices that have effectively supported interdependent goals within professional learning communities (PLCs)? (Inspirational Motivation)

3. How do you navigate potential conflicts related to interdependent goals within the collaborative structure of PLCs? (Inspirational Motivation)

4. How do you define and interpret collaborative intent within the context of PLCs? (Inspirational Motivation)

5. Can you provide examples of collaborative practices where intent among PLC members has been evident? (Inspirational Motivation)

6. What strategies do you employ to foster and encourage collaborative intent among members within the collaborative structure of PLCs? (Inspirational Motivation)

7. What have been some barriers to collaboration? (Inspirational Motivation)

8. How have you overcome those barriers? (Inspirational Motivation)

9. How do you perceive the role of providing performance feedback to teachers within PLCs? (Individualized Consideration)

10. How do you interpret and apply transformational leadership principles, particularly individualized consideration, in the context of providing performance feedback? (Individualized Consideration)

11. What specific strategies do you employ to tailor performance feedback to unique needs and development areas of individual educators? (Individualized Consideration)

12. Can you share examples of performance feedback you've provided to teachers? (Individualized Consideration)

Appendix B:

Teacher's Interview Protocol

Community & Location _____

Date/time_____

Participant_____

My name is Latasha Lampkin, and I will be facilitating this interview. The goal of this project is to explore educational leaders' and teachers' perceptions about collaborative practices and performance feedback in rural school districts. As a District Science Coach, I value your opinions and insights. Ultimately this study will inform educational leaders and teachers on the benefits and barriers of collaborative practices and performance feedback. The information gained from this effort will be shared with various stakeholders including school and district administration.

You were selected through a purposeful sampling process in which I identified middle school and high school social studies teachers in a rural school district. Between 4-8 participants will be interviewed during this process. Before the interview, you were sent an introductory letter and two consent forms (one to sign and return and one to keep) before the session today. The interview will take 1.5 hours. Do you have any questions? If there are no further questions, let us get started with the first question.

The transformational leadership theory has four dimensions: inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, idealized influence, and individualized consideration. For this study, inspirational motivation and individualized consideration will be the dimensions used to understand your perception of collaborative practices and performance feedback in your school.

1. How do you perceive the role of collaboration in fostering interdependence among PLC members regarding shared goals? (Inspirational Motivation)

2. Can you share examples of collaborative practices that have effectively supported interdependent goals within professional learning communities (PLCs)? (Inspirational Motivation)

3. How does your educational leader navigate potential conflicts related to interdependent goals within the collaborative structure of PLCs? (Inspirational Motivation)

4. How do you define and interpret collaborative intent within the context of PLCs? (Inspirational Motivation)

5. Can you provide examples of collaborative practices where intent among PLC members has been evident? (Inspirational Motivation)

6. What strategies does your educational leader employ to foster and encourage collaborative intent among members within the collaborative structure of PLCs? (Inspirational Motivation)

7. What have been some barriers to collaboration? (Inspirational Motivation)

8. How has your educational leader overcome those barriers?

9. How do you perceive receiving performance feedback from educational leaders after you have had professional development within PLCs? (Individualized Consideration)

10. How do your educational leaders interpret and apply transformational leadership principles, particularly individualized consideration, in the context of providing performance feedback? (Individualized Consideration)

11. What specific strategies do your educational leaders employ to tailor performance feedback to the unique needs and development areas of individual educators? (Individualized Consideration)

12. Can you share examples of performance feedback you've received from educational leaders? (Individualized Consideration)

Appendix C

Email

Dear Educator,

You are invited to participate in a confidential research survey entitled, "Perceptions of Collaborative Practices and Performance Feedback in Rural School Districts". The study is being conducted by Latasha Lampkin from Georgia State University and has been approved by Georgia State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). This research is being conducted as part of the dissertation for Latasha Lampkin.

The survey comprises a one-page paper questionnaire that will take about three minutes to complete. Your replies will remain confidential. Participation is completely voluntary. If you choose to withdraw or not participate there is no penalty or loss of benefits; you may either return or discard the blank survey. You may choose to not answer any question by simply leaving it blank. By completing this survey, you are also confirming that you are 21 years of age or older. **Please return the completed survey to the survey collection box in your school office by the end of the second work week following receipt of this letter.** Thank you for your assistance with this survey. If you have any questions about the survey, you may contact me by phone at (901) 550-5600 or by email at llampkin1@student.gsu.edu. If you have questions concerning the rights of teachers participating in this research process, you may contact Dr. Yinying Wang, principal investigator for this study at ywang103@gsu.edu.

Please see the survey links: Participant Interest Survey - Teacher;

Participant Interest Survey - Educational Leader

Thank you,

Latasha Lampkin

APPENDIX D: Member Check Form

Member Check Questions	Educational Leader 1	Educational Leader 2	Educational Leader 3	Educational Leader 4
Was the transcript accurate?				
Were the participants' views accurately displayed?				
Do you agree with the themes that were found based on the participants' responses?				
Would you add any additional themes, information, etc.?				

Member Check Questions	Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Teacher 4
Was the transcript accurate?				
Were the participants' views accurately displayed?				
Do you agree with the themes that were found based on the participants' responses?				

APPENDIX E

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Georgia State University

Department of Educational Policy Studies

Title: Perceptions of Collaborative Practices and Performance Feedback

Principal Investigator: Dr. Yinying Wang

Student Principal Investigator: Latasha R. Lampkin

Survey Link: Participant Interest Survey - Teacher; Participant Interest Survey - Educational Leader

Introduction and Key Information

You are invited to participate in a research study. The decision to participate in the study is up to you. In this study, I will examine the perceptions of educational leaders and teachers on collaborative practices and performance feedback in a rural school district. You are invited to participate in this study because you are an educational leader or a middle school/high school teacher in the selected district. Your role in this study will last up to three hours over two months. During the data collection process, you will be asked to do the following:

- Participate in an up to 90-minute face-to-face audio-recorded interview, which will be transcribed for your review. The review should take an additional 60 minutes. To maintain your confidentiality, the interview will be conducted in a quiet, private location that is mutually agreed upon by the researcher and the participant.
- Provide a copy of documents with redacted identifying information to include PLC agendas, pacing guides, and common assessments.

Purpose

The study examines educational leaders' and teachers' perceptions of collaborative practices and performance feedback in a rural school district. You are invited to participate in the research study because you are an educational leader or a teacher in the selected school district. Up to eight people will be invited to participate in the study.

Procedures

Participation in the study will consist of an interview with each educational leader and teacher with a total time commitment of 2.5 to 3 hours. If you decide to participate, you will be expected to participate in the following study-related activities:

- Up to a 90-minute face-to-face audio-recorded interview, which will be transcribed for your review (educational leaders).
- Up to a 90-minute face-focus audio-recorded interview, which will be transcribed for your review (teachers).
- A document analysis that will consist of an analysis of documents created during collaborative practices, such as PLC meeting agendas, pacing guides, and common assessments that will require participants to redact any identifiers from the documents.
- Participate in transcription meeting to review the major themes produced from the analysis to confirm the fit between the themes and the participants' reported experiences.
- Complete Participant Interest Survey - Teacher or Participant Interest Survey - Educational Leader

Future Research

To maintain confidentiality, researchers will remove any identifiable information if participant data is used for future research. If the decision is made to conduct further research with participant data, the researchers will not seek additional consent from the participants.

Risks

Participants of the study will not have more risks than those on a normal day of life. No injury is expected from this study, but if participants believe they have been harmed, contact the research team as soon as possible. Funds to compensate for any injury have not been set aside by Georgia State University and the research team.

Benefits

There is no direct benefit to the participants. This study may benefit the participants by improving the knowledge and skills of the participants through the process of reflection while strengthening the participants' capacity to support others.

Alternatives

The alternative to participating in this study is to not participate in the study.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal

The decision to participate in this study is solely up to the participant. If a participant decides to participate in the study and then decides not to, the participant has the right to stop participating at any time. You may also skip questions. Deciding not to participate in this study or skipping questions will not cause a participant to lose any benefits to which the participant is entitled.

Confidentiality

We will keep participant records private to the extent allowed by law. The following people will have access to the information participants of the study provide:

- Dr. Yinying Wang and Latasha Lampkin
- GSU Institutional Review Board
- Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP)

A study participant pseudonym rather than names of participants will be used on study records. The initial interest surveys will be emailed via the district email server. The audio recording of the interview and the transcripts will be stored on separate USB drives and erased from the original device once uploaded. The files used for coding and data analysis will be stored on a password-protected computer in the student investigator's office. Participant code keys will be stored in a locked filing cabinet, and physical paper copies of the interview transcript will be

stored in a separate locked filing cabinet. Both locked filing cabinets will be stored in the student investigator's office. The electronic files, USB drives, and physical copies of information will be destroyed after five years. Names of participants, participants' schools, or districts will not be used when the study results are published.

Contact Information

Contact Dr. Yinying Wang at ywang103@gsu.edu or Latasha R. Lampkin at 901-550-5600 or llampkin1@student.gsu.edu if there are any questions about the study or your part in the study, or if you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about the study. Georgia State University's IRB reviews all research that involves human participants. Participants can contact the IRB if there is a need to speak to someone who is not directly involved with the study. Participants may also contact the IRB for questions, concerns, or problems, or if there are questions about a participant's rights as a participant. The IRB can be contacted at 404-413-3500 or irb@gsu.edu.

Signature _____

Date_____