A Call for Action: Challenging Educator Beliefs and Structures to Support Significant Student Learning

Bryan E. O'Black

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A CALL FOR ACTION: CHALLENGING EDUCATOR BELIEFS AND STRUCTURES TO SUPPORT SIGNIFICANT STUDENT LEARNING AS A MATTER OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

A Dissertation
Submitted to the School of Education

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

By
Bryan E. O’Black

December 2014
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A CALL FOR ACTION: CHALLENGING EDUCATOR BELIEFS AND STRUCTURES TO SUPPORT SIGNIFICANT STUDENT LEARNING AS A MATTER OF SOCIAL JUSTICE  

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ABSTRACT

A CALL FOR ACTION: CHALLENGING EDUCATOR BELIEFS AND STRUCTURES TO SUPPORT SIGNIFICANT STUDENT LEARNING AS A MATTER OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

By Bryan E. O’Black

December 2014

Dissertation supervised by Dr. Connie M. Moss

This Call for Action investigates the complex issue of challenging current teacher beliefs through evidenced-based approaches to cultural change and does so as a matter of social justice. This call for action makes the argument that to truly improve student learning and raise student achievement, educators at all levels of practice must engage in intentional learning experiences that call their beliefs and practices into question and engages them in meaningful discourse. The argument is made that this type of professional learning happens at a belief altering level, should be pursued as a matter of social justice and is critical in the quest to create a sound learning environment for all learners.

It utilizes a critical analysis of the issue through the integrated lenses of relevant theory and research, and effective educational practice. It makes the case that the purposeful fusion of
theory, research, and effective practice ensures ethical inquiry to produce sound conclusions and suggest actions that educators can pursue with integrity.

Finally, the call for action provides a clear and focused road map for the pursuit of meaningful evidence-based professional learning for educators (principals and teachers).
DEDICATION

To my Parents

Chuck and Robin O’Black

To my late Grandmother

Betty Bischof
ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The road to achievement within this Doctoral Program has been paved with the assistance and efforts of the many who worked diligently to assist me as I honored the struggle during the process. Without these individuals who comprised my dissertation committee, this would never have been possible. This truly has been the highlight of my professional career.

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Preface:
Purpose Statement of the Dissertation in Practice

"Everyone thinks of changing humanity; no one thinks of changing himself. Our world is hungry for genuinely changed people."
__Tolstoy

The Carnegie Project for the Education Doctorate (CPED) uses the following criteria to frame the work of a dissertation in practice. The product must:

- Identify a researchable, complex problem of practice.
- Demonstrate use of rigorous and appropriate methods of inquiry to address the identified complex problem of practice.
- Demonstrate potential for positive impact on the identified complex problem of practice.
- Demonstrate the integration of both theory and practice to advance professional knowledge and to impact the field.
- Demonstrate the scholarly practitioner’s ability to act ethically and with integrity.
- Demonstrate the scholarly practitioner’s ability to communicate effectively to an appropriate audience to advance professional knowledge and impact the field. (CPED, 2014).

The call for action described and supported in this dissertation in practice focuses on the complex issue of meaningful, embedded professional learning in schools. It provides a clear analysis of and causal explanation for the problem through the integrated lenses of relevant theory and research, and effective educational practice. The fusion of theory, research, and effective practice ensures ethical inquiry to produce sound conclusions and suggested actions that can be pursued with integrity.

Additionally, the call for action contains a road map for the pursuit of meaningful professional learning for educators (principals and teachers). This type of learning happens at a
belief-altering level as a matter of social justice. The call for action makes the argument that to truly improve student learning and raise student achievement, educators at all levels of practice must engage in intentional experiences that call their beliefs and practices into question and hold them up to collective scrutiny. In other words, to improve student learning, educators must first improve themselves.
Chapter 1:
Problem of Practice
Beliefs about the Nature of Teaching and Learning And Socially Just Educational Practice

_We do our best discernment in community, where many eyes, ears, sets of experiences, and voices can sort out the wheat from the chaff. That’s how every mode of human knowing proceeds, including science. All of us together are smarter than any one of us alone—especially if we listen to the dissenters and to the people raising critical questions._

__Parker Palmer__

America’s public schools have historically been considered the great equalizer of its society (Henig, Hula, Orr, & Pedescleaux, 1999). And while schools have equipped generations of US citizens for productive lives, many question whether they can adequately prepare present and future generations for 21st century challenges that include surviving and thriving within a global economy (Brown, 1993; Murphy & Hallinger, 1992). If today’s students can prosper in an internationally competitive economy, then America’s schools must fundamentally change. These changes require serious, meaningful, and are to be pursued as a matter of social justice (Lucas & Valentine, 2002; Mitchell & Tucker, 1992).

During the past several decades, efforts to reform schools have yielded limited progress and failed to close the achievement gap as well as the other “gaps” that exist in America’s schools. Educationally relevant health disparities, lower than average parental involvement, and lack of teacher preparation from colleges and universities all contribute to the differences in achievement that are regularly tolerated in our classrooms. All students deserve the highest quality education. And while America’s schools were designed to be the great equalizer, nearly two centuries after the first public school became a reality, America’s educational system has yet to achieve the dream of equal educational opportunity. This failure is not one that can be “fixed” by a surface level reform initiative. Rather, it must be pursued as a matter of social justice.
Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, framed it this way: “I believe that education is the civil rights issue of our generation. And if you care about promoting opportunity and reducing inequality, the classroom is the place to start. Great teaching is about so much more than education; it is a daily fight for social justice” (Duncan, 2009).

**Personal Beliefs and Social Justice**

For most people, changing beliefs can be excruciating. And, it is even more painful for experts. Willingness to change does not come easily to experts. Experts feel sure of what they know, they form their identities on what they know, and they link their success to what they know (Sinatra & Pintrich, 2003). Changing all of that does not come easily or happen quickly. That is why, when expertise is threatened, experts—even those with expertise in leadership—will take steps to nullify or reject new information in order to protect the status quo.

Pursuing excellence and equity in education for all students is a matter of challenging the beliefs that educators hold about what counts as evidence that all students are learning and that all students have the opportunity to learn. Data have the ability to inform, but pieces of information seldom inspire dispositions toward social justice. Unless data are connected to our lives in compelling and meaningful ways, they cannot motivate us to care or to act (Moss, Brown, Miller, Hopson, & McCown, 2006).

Enacting one’s beliefs across contexts and overtime without the promise of reward or the threat reprisal (Freeman, 2003; Murrell & Foster, 2003) must be cautioned against. The impacts that leaders have, the combination of what leaders actually do in their practice, and the resulting outcomes of those actions—are best gauged across performances and can often be found to diverge from a leader’s’ “intent.” Educators can hold positive beliefs about the learning potential of all students on one hand, and still
degrade the quality of learning for their students of color or perpetuate structural inequality in their practice and pedagogy. For example, a teacher might enact as a disposition the stereotypical belief that Black children come from disorganized and undisciplined homes by requiring the Black children in her classroom to do comparatively more individual seatwork, perhaps pedagogically justifying the practice as an effort to provide discipline through more focused individual effort for those children. In this example the disposition is the regular and consistent differentiated requirements for Black students that the teacher gives overtime [and the principal observes and does not question]…based on a belief concerning the home lives Black students’ experience. (Murrell & Foster, 2003, p. 47)

Leadership always involves the use of power. Building or classroom level educational leaders, therefore, must be aware of the beliefs that they hold and the actions that they take based on those beliefs, so that they intentionally define and promote principles of democracy, equity, and social justice. And when the impact of one of their actions causes harm—even if that harm is unintended—the socially just educators must "lead by outrage" (Sergiovanni, 1992).

To truly improve learning opportunities for children, we must find ways to improve the educators who design and deliver those opportunities. To do that, “we have to find individuals who are willing to challenge their beliefs and taken-for-granted knowledge. These individuals must be willing to accept that the foundation for their beliefs may be flawed, or based on inadequate knowledge, especially where related to others different from themselves” (Brown, as cited in Moss, Brown, Miller, Hopson & McCown, 2006, p. 16). For educators, therefore, a pursuit of social justice becomes a constant pursuit of socially just practices for which each educator holds him or herself responsible.
Although no universal definition of “socially just educational leadership” has emerged from the literature, Karpinski and Lugg (2006) attempted to lend a coherent (if not comprehensive) summary description when they suggested, “Social justice for [educators] means pursuing policies, practices, and politics (educational, social, and economic) that enhance the lifetime opportunities for all children, particularly those children who have been historically marginalized” (p. 279).

Educators and leaders must see themselves as morally-driven social change agents rather than objective perpetuators of the current system. Dantley (2005) asserted that: “Leadership of this nature is not only transformative but is also principled and purposive…Principled leadership emanates from a sense of the need to ground the work of education in a context of morality and meaning, two concepts that seem foreign to this area” (p. 15). Issues of school improvement cannot be seen as improving practices that are objective, neutral, and/or detached from social issues and relationships. In this vein, the work of Paulo Freire – especially his seminal Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970) —has had an especially important influence on the field of education and suggests that educators seek social justice.

Freire (1998) explained that a person’s actions can remain (or become) purpose-filled and meaningful. He wrote, “The future is seen not as inexorable but as something that is constructed by people engaged together in life, in history. It’s the knowledge that sees history as possibility and not as already determined” (p. 72). By challenging the beliefs that educators hold about the merits and barriers in the education they offer students at the lesson-level, it is possible to help each educator intentionally act in ways that are purpose-filled, meaningful, and fulfill public expectations of equity and excellence for all children.
Administrator Beliefs and Social Justice

A principal walking into a school this year will find little that resembles the educational landscape from five years ago. Today, state and federal governments demand increased evidence of student achievement and hold individual schools directly responsible for student progress (Lashway, 2003). In this age of accountability, schools have a renewed interest in attracting and retaining high quality teachers since student achievement strongly correlates with high quality teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Just as important, explorations show that teacher quality strongly relates to the quality of the principal (Farkas, Johnson, Duffett, Foleno, & Foley, 2001). Though findings are mixed, principals can have a positive effect on student achievement when they properly identify a specific focus for improving the school and when they monitor and adjust their leadership practices to promote the changes they are leading (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003).

Principals often come to their jobs from university programs that can lack relevance. Specifically, critics charge that universities fail to prepare graduates for the real life of schools, a life where principals face shifting and evolving challenges (Daresh, Ganter, Dunlap, & Hvizdak, 2000) as well as mounting pressures for accountability (Sebring & Bryk, 2000). And while an argument can be made that universities must change their approach, if universities expand the academic knowledge base in their programs, they would still scratch the surface of the ever-growing foundation of what principals need to know. Conversely, if universities look to the school districts to offer increased field-based experiences, they run the risk that candidates will only witness and learn existing practices, even the best of which will not equip them for future reforms (Daresh, 2002). Another strategy is for universities to connect their program designs to high quality standards. While there are obvious benefits to adopting quality standards, mere
adoption does not ensure program quality. Programs can link courses to new standards and still deliver the same content, with the same methods, and measure progress using the same performances and the assessments (Norton, 2002).

Changing direction might have to start at a more seminal place—in the minds of principals themselves as they go about their daily practice. Perhaps those who wish to transform how principals learn and grow should embrace a more relevant definition of the contemporary principal—one that characterizes the principal as the leading learner in the school. Would that conceptual change encourage administrators to re-think, re-conceptualize and re-culture their professional learning cultures and, perhaps most importantly, their roles within them? Would they approach partnerships with teachers focused on school improvement in ways that are more meaningful?

Often principals see themselves as the “evaluator-in-chief” who are in charge of the professional development of teachers and, in doing so, fail to recognize their own need to learn and improve (Moss & Brookhart, 2013). Recent cognitive research emphasizes the role of a learner’s intentions in knowledge change (Sinatra & Pintrich, 2003) and recognizes that the impetus for transformation is within the learner’s control (Pintrich, Marx, & Boyle, 1993). Change at the belief-altering level requires mindfulness on the part of the learner. This kind of vigorous, self-referential work is essential to reach for what Jim Collins (2001) terms “Level 5 Leadership”: a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will. Level 5 Leaders have ambition, but their ambitions are primarily for the learning community and not for themselves.

Effective leaders possess and continuously develop the essential elements of effective inquiry that includes seeing patterns and meanings not apparent to others and having in-depth
knowledge organized and structured in ways that are most useful. Their knowledge base is not a linear set of acquired facts, but rather a relational, sophisticated, transferable knowledge network applicable to a variety of situations. In other words, effective leaders develop intentional level cognitive processes—thinking dispositions—that are under their conscious control and that they can internally initiate (Perkins, Tishman, Ritchhart, Donis & Andrade, 2000) to retrieve knowledge and learn new information in their fields.

School districts must find better ways to engage principals in meaningful professional learning. Research shows that principals who benefit from targeted professional development programs are more likely than others to enact instructional leadership (Camburn, Rowan, & Taylor, 2003). Specifically, when principals become better able to interact with teachers around the area of student achievement their impact can raise student achievement. In fact, increasing the principal’s ability to interact effectively to improve classroom practices can be more important than engaging principals in programs focused on deepening their specific content knowledge (Spillane, Hallet, & Diamond, 2003). This is especially true in middle and secondary schools where the realities of multiple disciplines make it highly unlikely that a principal can provide substantive content support for each member of the faculty. Rather, the literature points to the promise of developing principals who emphasize improving classroom and school learning environments by supporting and fostering the use of strategic instructional strategies (Halverson, Grigg, Prichett, & Thomas, 2007; Silins & Mulford, 2004). Moreover, research underscores that professional development for administrators will leverage more teacher skill development in the classroom than will working with classroom teachers individually. Without administrator support, efforts will be idiosyncratic to particular teachers and classrooms. Without administrator support for change, the conventional evaluation-focused classroom environment—based on the
teacher’s authority to grade—will remain in place in most classrooms (Moss & Brookhart, 2009; Moss, Brookhart & Long, 2011, 2013).

**Teacher Beliefs and Social Justice**

All educators must be guided by a belief system that supports quality education for all students. Educational researchers now recognize that teachers’ beliefs and knowledge influence educators’ classroom practices (Borko & Putnam, 1996). Teachers’ beliefs exist on many global and personal levels and serve as overarching frameworks for understanding and engaging with the world. They can be thought of as guiding principles teachers hold to be true that serve as lenses through which new experiences can be understood. Teachers' beliefs may be formed without evidence and sometimes in the face of contradictory evidence. They are a part of teachers' identities. Beliefs, and their influence, tend to be unexamined by teachers because many are implicit, unarticulated, or unconscious. The literature suggests failing to examine beliefs can have negative consequences as they guide practice and priorities, determine what is ignored, influence decision making, and shape what types of interactions are valued (Pajares, 1992).

The set of beliefs and knowledge that teachers have constructed throughout a lifetime of educational experiences, both as students and teachers, act as a lens through which they view their practices. This lens can either facilitate or hinder teachers’ efforts as they set about altering their actions in the classroom. What they choose to do or not do for their students depends on the extent to which their existing beliefs overlap with the philosophical underpinnings of proposed changes in their practice. That means that educators can sit through mandated professional development that suggests new strategies or classroom practices, but when the classroom door
closes, they will choose the strategies that fit into their belief systems and discard the suggestions that do not.

Beliefs also determine how educators approach students of different cultures, races, religions, socio-economic status, genders, and religions.

Teacher beliefs form the foundation of the child/educator relationship. The expectations teachers have, their beliefs about the educability of children and their personal racism, overt or covert, impact their interactions with students. Unfortunately, an array of research on teacher beliefs provides us with two doses of bad news. First, teachers—in particular White teachers—often have negative beliefs about children of color. Secondly, these beliefs matter. School practices and policies are shaped by the conceptions teachers and administrations have about the children in their care. If these stakeholders harbor limiting beliefs, these beliefs will be reflected in the programs and policies they create Ullucci. (2009)

It is critical to note that while the literature speaks to the concept of teacher beliefs, the majority of the literature on this construct has been based predominantly on studies of white, middle class, female teachers (Woolfolk Hoy, Davis, & Pape, 2006). Teachers from underrepresented or marginalized populations may hold different beliefs about teaching minority students and, therefore, view themselves and their tasks very differently. One African American principal quoted in a study by Lisa Delpit (1995) expressed her experience of being ill-represented in the literature and the majority of her colleagues using this literature to ignore her perspective. The principal was quoted as saying: “If you try to suggest that's not quite the way it is, they get defensive, then you get defensive, then they'll start reciting research. I try to give
them my experiences, to explain … they don't really hear me” (p. 22). Delpit argues, alternative, and perhaps transformative, perspectives of minority teachers are not represented in the research base and deserve to be voiced.

**Educator Beliefs and Classroom Assessment**

Educator beliefs and their perceptions of diverse student populations do not simply exist as abstract concepts. They are at the heart of the daily operation of schools. One of those daily practices—classroom assessment—has recently come to the foreground of efforts to support equity and excellence for all learners. Although little research has addressed teachers’ beliefs about assessment practices, it stands to reason that their evaluative practices are likewise influenced by their conceptions of what constitutes proper classroom assessment. It also follows that when a reform effort attempts to use assessment as a vehicle for improving instructional practices (e.g., Wiggins, 1989), these conceptions will come into play in determining the paths teachers take. The type of assessment and learning that occurs in our everyday classrooms is often derived and driven by our own belief structures, not necessarily by what is best of the overall learning of our students. This way of thinking has hindered the achievement and outcomes of countless students over the past century and cannot continue to occur.

Martin Haberman (1991), a professor at the University of Wisconsin, coined the phrase “pedagogy of poverty” to describe the outcomes of unquestioned beliefs regarding classroom assessment. Based on his observations in thousands of urban classrooms, Haberman described the tightly controlled routine he witnessed time and time again: classroom teachers dispense, and then test students on factual information, assign seatwork; and punish noncompliance. It is a regimen, he said, “in which learners can ‘succeed’ without becoming either involved or thoughtful” –and it is noticeably different from the questioning, discovering, arguing, and
collaborating that is more common (though by no means universal) among students in suburban and private schools. Teachers in urban districts believe that these methods are the ones that students of poverty and students of color need to succeed, even though years of research continues to offer resounding evidence to the contrary.

Haberman goes on to discuss that those who demand that we “close the achievement gap” generally focus only on results, which in practice refers only to test scores. In her review of over 50 years of research on classroom summative assessment, Connie Moss (2013) found a dangerous and enduring gap between educator confidence in their ability to effectively summarize student achievement and their actual levels of competence related to testing and summarizing what students know and can do. Moss goes on to state,

Achievement does not occur in a vacuum, nor can it be increased through testing alone. Children do not live their learning, or raise their achievement one standardized test to the next. Rather, students live their learning one lesson and teacher at a time in their neighborhood school. Educators enter schools with the intention to do no harm, yet well-intentioned people can turn a blind-eye to unequal conditions or view them as impossible to change. (in press)

Too often, high-quality instruction is defined by whatever raises standardized achievement scores. Yet there is little agreement about what constitutes appropriate instruction.

**Changing Educator Beliefs**

Early research on teachers’ cognitions demonstrated that their thought processes influence their actions in the classroom. Teachers’ thinking, planning, interactive decision making (the very act of instructing and assessing their students), and implicating beliefs are interwoven facets that impact classroom practices everyday (Clark & Peterson, 1986). By
extension, then, their implicit theories and beliefs about assessment inform thinking and planning, and consequently, shape classroom assessment practices. Understanding teachers’ beliefs and theories about their work is necessary, as Clark and Peterson (1986) comment, in order to “make explicit and visible the frames of reference through which individual teachers perceive and process information” (p. 287). Because these “frames of reference” are tacit, teachers may not be aware of the possible conflict between their underlying beliefs and the philosophical underpinnings of proposed changes to their practices. Yet, these frames provide the organization for their existing knowledge.

Beliefs, therefore, are the best predictor of leadership actions and leaders, like all human beings, do not set about to do what is right. Rather, each day they do what they believe to be right. In a very real sense leaders’ actions and decisions are shaped by the beliefs leaders hold and the beliefs that hold them. What is most troubling is that these beliefs are often hidden and work at the subconscious level. That makes beliefs very difficult to change. Research tells us that human beings tend to hold fast to their beliefs, even in the face of contradictory evidence (Schreiber, Moss, & Staab, 2007). As a matter of fact, unless an individual is presented with a situation that agitates his or her belief to the point of causing them mental discomfort, that person will go through live holding fast to that belief.

By agitating these belief structures and analyzing teacher and student learning, educators can begin to increase the amount of attention they place on student learning and the role that achievement plays within the context of the school system. Teachers’ beliefs, practices and attitudes are important for understanding and improving educational processes. These beliefs are closely linked to the strategies teachers choose in order to cope with both professional challenges and challenges to their general well-being (OECD, 2009). Moreover, the beliefs teachers hold
shape the quality of the learning environments they engineer for their students. Those environments—the cultures of their classrooms—have a significant impact on student motivation to learn, and in a very real way, determine levels of student achievement.

But what does it take to agitate beliefs and promote belief change? Moss and Schreiber (2005) state, “When we encounter the unknown when something unexpected happens to us or when we encounter some new theory or practice, we suddenly find ourselves in a strange situation where our traditional knowledge is non-functional.” This questioning of traditional knowledge is the key to transforming teacher beliefs and is pivotal to improving the effectiveness of teaching practice. As the present and future needs of students change, what teachers are called upon to do becomes more complex. Traditionally accepted practices no longer work and teachers must move beyond traditional knowledge to equip themselves with relevant understanding of how to best meet student needs. It is up to today’s educational leader to find ways to challenge the traditional beliefs that are at the root of what happens in today’s classrooms. Without working at a belief-altering level, any reform initiative will meet the same fate of its predecessors.

In summary, teacher beliefs are intimately tied with teachers' sense of self (be it their personal identities or teaching identities) is consistent across the literature, and, for this reason, beliefs tend to be resistant to change. In the face of information that challenges their beliefs, such as policy inducement to reform, to modify/include new populations of students, or to innovate with new classroom practices and technologies, teachers tend to feel threatened (Fecho, 2001; Gregoire, 2003). This reaction constitutes a fundamental challenge and the paradox of professional development for teachers. The problem is to figure out how to encourage teachers to
approach research in education, professional development, and policy reform with open minds and to embed it in the everyday approach to their own practice.

Literature in the field of education often suggests that the ideal conditions for belief change include: a) bringing pre-existing beliefs to consciousness, b) creating conditions in which pre-existing beliefs break down, c) helping teachers to judge the conflict as challenging rather than threatening (Gregoire, 2003), and 4) providing teachers with the necessary time to reflect on their beliefs and reconcile them with the field and their current teaching context (Davis, 2006).

The purpose of this dissertation in practice is three-fold. First, it explores ways that educational leaders can engage teachers in professional learning initiatives that cause them to question the beliefs they hold, replace those that no longer hold up to scrutiny, and adopt working assumptions that allow them to raise the achievement of all learners. Second, it examines a theoretical framework for educational change that operates at the belief altering level for both individual educators and professional learning communities. And, finally, it promotes the idea that raising the effectiveness of America’s teachers and raising the achievement of America’s students is a matter of social justice.

**A Theoretical Framework for Educational Change**

The theoretical framework that frames this dissertation in practice draws heavily on Fullan’s educational change theory (Fullan, 2007). Fullan’s theory promotes the idea that real change happens when teachers and administrators collaborate. Organizations can increase their capacity for meaningful change by increasing their capacity for shared meaning. Fullan suggests that successful organizations achieve shared meaning through the cultivation of relationships, rather than by mandating top-down reforms (Fullan, 2007). In other words, individuals and organizations can create an atmosphere where an emphasis on relationships and values, rather
than structural change, results in significant changes in the culture of classrooms and schools. Moreover, this shared culture enables the school community to contribute to the global transformation movement (Fullan, 2007).

What makes educational change theory so well suited to the present educational landscape is that it recognizes that innovation is a complex, multidimensional process, comprised of three critical components: (a) the use of new or revised materials (e.g., curriculum or new technology), (b) the probable use of new teaching approaches (e.g., teaching strategies or activities), and (c) the transformation of beliefs (e.g., pedagogical changes) (Fullan, 2007, p. 30). Meaningful changes in educational practice are only achieved when these three components are implemented simultaneously and with fidelity across all levels of the school community. According to Fullan, many reform initiatives crash and burn because they fail not only to honor the complexities involved in the change process but they also neglect the behavioral and conceptual implications of change.

Yet, change across Fullan’s three critical dimensions is particularly difficult because it requires a transformation of established practices, core values and understanding that are steeped in traditional beliefs and practices pertaining to the purpose of education (Fullan, 2007). For any educational reform to be "deep" and have significant impact, it must occur when educators not only know how to implement the suggested changes, but also understand and can articulate why the change is necessary (McLaughlin & Mitra, 2000).

Changes that occur in the first dimension (beliefs and understanding), are considered foundational for achieving sustainable reform. Fundamental changes in conception (beliefs) eventually relate to skills and materials (the first dimension) and are pertinent for the establishment of Professional Learning Communities (Ball & Cohen, 1999): the McLaughlin &
Abandoning these former beliefs and understandings, while assuming new ones, establishes an increased capacity to plan valuable learning opportunities. In other words, changing practices requires a change in beliefs.

Effective learning organizations emerge when educators demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of the importance of changing their beliefs as a critical part of the change process. Knowledgeable educators serve as the catalyst for continuous improvement in their organizations because they are capable of persistent adaptation and the promotion of progress. Organizations that focus on a continuous improvement process, concentrate on the discovery of successful implementation strategies for critical student learning goals. Operating in a methodical fashion, these organizations focus on learning, employing a persistent, collaborative and effective approach that facilitates reflection among all members of the learning community (Fullan, 2007).

In order to sustain critical changes in beliefs, Fullan (2007) suggests that learning organizations establish the following interconnected fundamentals for any professional learning process: revamped standards, incentives, qualification systems and renovated teachers’ working conditions (p.283). Practices and standards that are continuously re-assessed help replace a dysfunctional culture with new criteria and methods of collaborating. These changes can only emerge, however, when profound reciprocity between individual and social (shared) meaning is the objective (Fullan, 2007). That means that the ultimate goal of any change initiative should be for all stakeholders to envision themselves as shareholders consistently seeking meaning in an intact system. According to Fullan (2007) "Meaning is motivation; motivation is energy; energy is engagement; engagement is life" (p.303).
Figure 1.1 below illustrates the theory for educational change that grounds this dissertation in practice. The model adapts Fullan’s work by clarifying the role that professional learning communities play in knowledge sharing, knowledge production, and belief change. Additionally, the model makes clear that those who work collectively to pursue that level of change do so as a matter of social justice.

Figure 1.1 – Social Justice and Equity in Education

Social Justice and Equity in Education

Evidence-Based Professional Learning Communities (PLC)

Revamped instructional standards, curriculum and qualification systems

Relationships with and among faculty members and community with a shared vision of change

Belief changes knowledge production, knowledge sharing as a matter of educational improvement

Assessment strategies that get at the heart of student learning and assessment

Goals of the Literature Review and Definition of Terms

The literature review that follows seeks to further support the utility of this theoretical framework for leading educational change efforts. It highlights pertinent educational research into the impact of individual and collective beliefs on student learning and achievement.
Several concepts related to the call for action to create embedded professional learning processes in the everyday life of schools to promote belief change aid in the examination of the literature. These same terms also help to clarify the action steps suggested and the claims that these steps would promote generative impacts.

**Evidence-based:** Making decisions about beliefs, practices and lesson design. Utilizes current research that focus on continuous improvement and utilizes evidence that is observable and challenges status quo.

**Evidence-based Professional Learning:** Educator learning that is both inquiry and evidence-based; that encourages educators to involve themselves as learners; to think about, and be able to explicate what they learned as they draw on theory, research, and their own experience to produce and integrate new knowledge.

**Instructional Rounds:** Educator learning that is focused on conducting walk-throughs by fellow educators with a lens on student learning. Everyone is obliged to be knowledgeable about the common task of instructional improvement, and everyone’s practice should be subject to scrutiny, critique, and improvement (Teitel, 2009; City, Elmore, Fiarmen, & Teitel, 2009).

**Formative Walk-throughs:** Grounded in a learning target theory of action (Moss & Brookhart, 2012) educators look-for evidence of student learning from the student’s-eye-view by responding to the following: If the student completes everything the teacher asks them to do in this lesson, what would be the quality of the learning that results and what evidence did the students produce to justify that conclusion? Data collected from the formative walk through
process is reviewed and used to shift the beliefs of principals and teachers as an intentional and continuous process of self-improvement (Moss & Brookhart, in press).

**Generative Impacts:** A change in the systematic approaches and belief structures that teachers and principals have in looking at practices to increase student learning as a matter of improvement.

**Formative Assessment:** “An active and intentional learning process that partners the teacher and the student to constantly gather evidence of student learning with the express goal of raising student achievement” (Moss & Brookhart, 2009, p. 6).
Chapter 2
Beliefs, School Culture, And Leading For Change

The only thing that interferes with my learning is my education.  __Albert Einstein

Imagine entering a school. What do you see? What do you hear the teachers and other staff members saying? What do the bulletin boards look like? How easy was it to enter the school? What are the children saying and doing? How noisy is it? Do you feel welcome or afraid? What is the general “feel” of the environment? All these questions and more pertain to the underlying stream of values and beliefs that pervade schools. This underlying stream is the culture of that particular school. Culture is the stream of “norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals built up over time” (Peterson & Deal, 1998). It is a set of tacit expectations and assumptions that direct the activities of school personnel and students. And it is the public artifacts that both reveal and sustain those shared beliefs.

School culture is not a static entity. Educators, students, parents and the community constantly construct and shape that culture through their interactions with each other and through their individual reflections on life and the world in general (Finnan, 2000). School culture becomes the guide for all behaviors that are shared among members of the school at large. And, while this culture is shaped by the interactions of the personnel, the interactions of the personnel constantly reshape and redefine the culture. It is a self-repeating cycle that is constantly shaping those within it and being re-created in the process.

The research on teachers’ beliefs spans more than 50 years and runs the gamut of research methodologies, theoretical perspectives, and identification of specific beliefs about any number of topics. Initially researchers sought to establish teacher beliefs as a clear psychological construct to provide an explanatory and predictive mechanism for explaining the differences in
teachers’ practice (e.g., Abrami, Poulsen, & Chambers, 2004), outcomes with students (e.g., Muijs & Reynolds, 2002), and experiences (e.g., McAlpine, Eriks-Brophy, & Crago, 1996). That goal, however, was never fully realized. “Although the published empirical research on teachers’ beliefs includes more than 700 articles, the lack of cohesion and clear definitions has limited the explanatory and predictive potential on teachers’ beliefs” (Fives, 2012 p. 471).

Researchers concluded that beliefs might eventually prove to be the most valuable psychological construct for teacher education (i.e., Pintrich (1990) as cited in Moss & Schreiber, 2006). Despite the spotty and ill-formed nature of teacher beliefs, they are at the very heart of teaching (Kagan, 1992 as cited in Moss & Schreiber, 2006) and may be the best indicator of the decisions that teachers will make in their practice (Rokeach, 1968 as cited in Moss & Schreiber, 2006). Despite the central role that teacher beliefs play in the daily life of the school, little has been done to place emphasis on understanding teacher belief structures, the relationship that they have to the overall culture of learning within a given school, and how leaders can create learning environments that help teachers reveal and challenge their working assumptions. After all, the actions teachers take to advance the learning of all students is both driven and limited by the tacit and explicit beliefs that teachers hold.

Clearly, such human tendencies create dilemmas. To move forward, educators must have the ability and will to transform and sometimes detach themselves from the present and past beliefs that dictate the ways that they think, feel and practice. Most importantly, educators must develop the ability to change or accommodate their ways of thinking to suit the world instead of changing their representation of the world to assimilate it to their ways of thinking. In the best of circumstances, educators are capable of exploring the unknown and enlarging of the educational knowledge-base to find some action that is practical and favorable. In the worst of
circumstances, educators are caught in the chaos that defines the unknown. Consequently, teacher beliefs are in a state of flux, not inevitable and final products, but rather, representing possible realizations of nearly infinite possibilities. These possibilities lie at the heart of any serious reform effort since perhaps the most important—and difficult—thing to reform is the beliefs that shape what educators do and what they determine should be the focus of their reform efforts.

**Beliefs and Reform Efforts**

In her study of the interplay between the culture of the reform model and school/classroom cultures, Finnan (2000) identified five underlying assumptions that influence the success or failure of reform implementation. These assumptions are things that are taken for granted and blindly accepted as truth. They include the assumptions about: students and student learning, leadership and decision-making, adult roles and responsibilities, best practices and structures for educating students, and the value of change.

These assumptions are tacit understandings that are rarely brought to the fore in school cultures. On the other hand, most reform models (whether total school or just one aspect of the curriculum) are usually accompanied by an explicit set of shared assumptions. In order for reforms to be accepted by schools, the assumptions between the reform model and the school must be compatible (Finnan, 2000). This means that the culture of the schools involved in the reform process must be analyzed and brought to the conscious level of teachers and administrators. Today’s educational leader, then, must have the skill and the will to nurture the beliefs that drive effective educational environments and challenge the beliefs that derail them.

Educational leaders may question how we begin to agitate, and therefore change, the belief structures of teachers within a school or district. First and foremost, educational leaders
must understand that this is difficult and challenging work. The main focus of this work must be led and fully understood by the principal, the instructional leader within the building. While this may seem like a natural fit for any building leader, it takes a great deal of time and commitment to identify and develop the shared belief system that will be within a school or district.

**Identifying and Challenging Beliefs**

It is imperative that the principal identifies the beliefs that permeate the school and be able to fully articulate and support the desired shift in culture within the institution. Changing beliefs does not come easily and requires a deep understanding of the culture, the community, students, parents, and to which district leadership are committed. Improvement work can only truly occur when the principal fully conceptualizes and articulates the needs for a desired change and has clearly defined belief structures in place.

Changing a teacher’s beliefs requires that new information be presented consistently over time in a way that leads the person into a state of disequilibrium where the person begins to sense discomfort between his or her current beliefs and new information (Jensen, 1998; Nuthall and Alton-Lee, 1993). Whether the new information is presented through reading, dialogue, classroom observations, or assigned tasks, successful professional development efforts help teachers acquire or develop new ways of thinking about learning, learners, and subject matter (Borko and Putnam 1995).

But belief change does not happen quickly. Even following the most zealous efforts to target teacher beliefs through consistent professional development, some teachers may still need months and even years to fully accomplish a change in behavior (Loucks-Horsley and Stiegelbauer, 1991; McCarty, 1993). That’s partly because successful teachers usually have a record of success behind them, providing a cushion to fall back on in the event of failure.
Teachers who do not have that cushion are much more likely to avoid change because it places them too much at risk (McCarty, 1993). Changing teacher behavior is no easy task because it must be preceded by a change in the beliefs that direct those behaviors. By becoming familiar with the process of belief change and the reasons why teachers resist change, instructional leaders can gain a better understanding of how to proceed. The change process involves a slow progression through stages that lead to eventual readiness for change. Only by patiently and persistently aiming professional development toward changing teacher beliefs will lasting behavioral changes in teachers likely occur.

In addition, educational leaders should recognize the myriad of factors that inhibit culture change in schools. In our current culture of standards and assessments, many reforms are being mandated for the schools at the state and federal level. Fullan (1997) points out that mandated change, however, is unlikely to be effective. “Mandates alter some things, but they don’t affect what matters. When complex change is involved, people do not and cannot change by being told to do so” (p.38). Again, even mandated change will not be implemented if the culture of the schools does not correlate with the mandates. Hargreaves (1997) sums up the literature on failed reforms to note nine factors that cause educational change to falter or fail:

- The change is poorly conceptualized or not clearly demonstrated. It is not obvious who will benefit and how. There is no clear communication regarding how the change will impact student achievement.
- The change is either too broad and ambitious so that teachers have to work on too many fronts, or it is too limited and specific so that little real change occurs at all.
• The change is either too fast for people to cope with, or so slow that they become impatient or bored and move on to something else.

• The change is poorly resourced or resources are withdrawn once the first flush of innovation is over and as a result there is not enough money for materials or time for teachers to plan.

• There is no long-term commitment to the change that carries people through the anxiety, frustration, and despair of early experimentation and unavoidable setbacks.

• Key staff who can contribute to the change, or might be affected by it, are not committed. Conversely, key staff might become overinvolved as a group of administrative or innovative elite from which others feel excluded.

• Parents oppose the change because they are ill-informed or are kept at a distance from it.

• Leaders are either too controlling, too ineffectual, or cash in on the early success of the innovation to move on to higher things.

• The change is pursued in isolation and gets undermined by other unchanged structures.

Educator beliefs play a critical role in any reform effort. The educational landscape is littered with the ghosts of well-intentioned reforms that were abandoned because of a deadly combination of these negating effects. Understanding the role that beliefs play during a change initiative further solidifies the need for examining the culture of schools and the beliefs that create and sustain those cultures before and during the change process.
Chapter 3: Designs for Action
Pushing Beyond the Traditional Practices Fostering a Culture of Learning

“Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better do better.”
—Maya Angelou

Based on the research on teacher beliefs and the change process there appears to be three embedded processes that hold particular merit for raising teacher quality and deepening student understanding while promoting changes in educators’ beliefs. These processes, Evidence-Based Professional Learning Communities, Formative Walk-throughs, and Instructional Rounds focused at the lesson level may be happening to some degree in individual schools. What makes the model proposed in this call for action unique is that it requires and promotes that the three processes occur simultaneously and are used reciprocally to inform each other and to push for cultural change (See Generative Impacts, Figure 4.5, pp.75-78). The three processes are described below in turn.

**Foundations of an Evidence-Based Professional Learning Community**

A Professional Learning Community (PLC) model (DuFour & Eaker, 1998), moves beyond a peer study group or a collaborative discussion to embed a specialized format for collective inquiry into an organization's structure. Quality PLCs encourage teachers to focus their work on their own classroom practices and organizational behaviors. What is critical is that teachers learn from what is happening (or not happening) in their classrooms to advance student learning and raise student achievement. This occurs when teachers focus their efforts on developing lessons and curriculum that identify what is important for students to understand and complete and then work together to create formative and summative assessments that yield timely and present evidence of student progress. This allows teachers to follow the progress of individual students and recognize patterns across student groups. Teachers can compare and
contrast assessments to discover areas of student strength and areas of student need. Based on what they learn from this inquiry into their own classroom level practices, teachers “help each other develop and implement strategies to improve current levels of student learning…[and] are engaged in the kind of professional development that builds teacher capacity and sustains school improvement” (DuFour, 2004, p. 25).

Professional Learning Communities are considered a vital component of the contemporary education community (Stoll & Seashore –Louis, 2007) because they encourage inclusive, broad connections between theory, research and practice. The power of a PLC rests on its ability to help teachers focus their efforts on the cultivation of learning through quality interactions between both teachers and administrators who seek to improve learning outcomes for themselves and their students (Kruse, Louise & Bryk, 1994).

DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many (2010) identified five components that characterize effective PLCs. These components are illustrated in Figure 2.1 and include: (a) a laser-like focus on student learning; (b) a collaborative culture with the intentional outcome of learning for all (students, teachers, and administrators; (c) collective inquiry into evidence-based practices that work to raise student achievement within the current reality of the school; (d) a preferred orientation toward action that recognizes need for “learning by doing”; (e) a shared commitment to continuous improvement; and (f) a results orientation where everyone has the moral obligation to pursue publicly identified outcomes. Additionally, the figure particularly identifies the implications that an evidence-based approach focused by evidence from student learning at the lesson level will have in the Professional Learning Community model.
**Components of Effective Professional Learning Communities**

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<tr>
<th><strong>A Focus on Learning</strong></th>
<th>Evidence-Based approach focused on student learning</th>
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<tr>
<td>The very essence of a learning community is a focus on and a commitment to the learning of each student.</td>
<td>• That focus and commitment is guided by evidence from student work that demonstrates learning progress.</td>
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<th><strong>A Collaborative Culture with a Focus on Learning for All</strong></th>
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<td>A Professional Learning Community is composed of collaborative teams whose members work interdependently to achieve common goals for which members are mutually accountable.</td>
<td>• Those goals are focused on specific areas of identified student learning needs and members are held accountable for their work actually impacting student learning and achievement based on evidence from student work that demonstrates learning progress.</td>
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<th><strong>Collective Inquiry into Best Practices and Current Reality</strong></th>
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<td>The teams in the Professional Learning Community engage in collective inquiry in regards to what has been observed through walk-throughs and instructional rounds.</td>
<td>• Discussions are based on observable evidence gathered through formative walk-throughs and instructional rounds. Evidence is consistently gathered at the student learning level and used to evaluate the impact of teacher practices on student learning and achievement.</td>
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<th><strong>Action Orientation: Learning by Doing</strong></th>
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<td>Members of Professional Learning Communities are action oriented: they move quickly to turn aspirations into action and visions into reality.</td>
<td>• The actions of the Professional Learning community are focused in learning what actually works in classrooms to deepen student learning and raise student achievement by gathering evidence from students to support the impact of current practices and the beliefs that drive them; change practices that do not work, and replace them with practices that do work as supported by evidence gathered from students at the daily lesson level.</td>
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<th><strong>A Commitment to Continuous Improvement</strong></th>
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<td>Inherent to a Professional Learning Community are a persistent disquiet with the status quo and a constant search for a better way to achieve goals and accomplish the purpose of the organization.</td>
<td>• This persistent disquiet with the status quo is focused on continuous improvement at the lesson level. Through thoughtful reflection, challenging dialogue and a shift in core beliefs will begin. Educators begin challenge their beliefs about practices that deepen student learning and create systemic change within the school.</td>
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<th><strong>Results Orientation</strong></th>
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<td>Members of the Professional Learning Community realize that all of their efforts must be assessed on the basis of results rather than intentions.</td>
<td>• Through the use of formative walk-throughs and instructional rounds educators continuously evaluate lessons to determine areas of needed improvement support their conclusions about what works through observing and collecting evidence from students engaged in high quality work that increased student achievement.</td>
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</table>
Professional Learning Communities Promote Embedded Learning

PLCs promote the kind of embedded learning that has a significant impact on teaching practices and student learning outcomes. That is because quality PLCs constantly gather and learn from analyzing formative and summative data to guide their instructional practices. This consistent analysis of real-time evidence from the classroom level emerges in collaborative and collegial environments and promotes increased student outcomes as well as increased teacher capacity to modify classroom practices with the expressed outcome of raising student achievement (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2005; Hord & Sommers, 2008). These actions promote and sustain a professional development model that encourages teachers to engage in discourse that is topic-specific, pertains to a particular innovation among colleagues from the same school or district, and promotes successful implementation (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001).

And while discrete professional learning communities help all collaborators acquire higher levels of knowledge and experience, increased professional learning opportunities happen when PLCs combine with other groups within and across the building or district to move discussions and shared learning beyond traditional boundaries and encourage learning as a social system. These professional communities of practice “overlap” in that they are representative of a broad range of constituents including teacher leaders, school and district administrators, central office staff, parents, business and community partners, and students. Like traditional professional learning
communities, they share a mission, vision, and values focused on improved practice and student outcomes. For example, while school-level professional communities engage teachers in implementing the goals of a new literacy framework, a group of principals meets to discuss effective strategies for observing practice and giving feedback to teachers on their use of the framework. At the same time, area administrators are meeting regularly to reflect on the impact of innovation on changing roles and responsibilities in providing support to schools, and a cross-role team including parents and community members insures coordination and alignment of central office resources to provide support. These diverse areas of focus are united by the common goal of building individual and collective capacity with a focus on improving teaching and learning (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2005).

Such overlapping professional learning communities require reciprocal support and involvement at all levels of the educational system. In overlapping professional learning communities, everyone looks at promising and disappointing outcomes to understand what they do not know and to ask how they can improve their own practice and help students achieve. These groups engage in dialogue, inquiry, and reflection for the purpose of collectively constructing new meaning and knowledge that result in action. In moving beyond the individual, collective learning allows an organization to become more adaptable through the depth of knowledge of its personnel as well as through a culture dedicated to continuous improvement. This collective approach to learning may also help to facilitate the orientation of individuals new to the system while extending the learning of more experienced practitioners and supporting them during various stages of their careers (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001).
And while PLCs certainly have many desirable impacts on a school and its faculty, they do require a significant commitment on the part of all stakeholders. Many find that working as a PLC presents three significant challenges that present themselves when members of a school system. First, working together effectively is both a skill and a disposition that takes nurturing over time. To develop and apply shared knowledge and then critique and evaluate its impact requires a level of trust and an atmosphere of supported risk-taking. Second, change is hard work and sustaining any change initiative requires embedded supports that teachers can feel and believe are important. Finally, it is never easy to transform a culture—a process that can be measured in years rather than days. Committing to sustained change requires a community of learners who share the need for the change and support each other when the process becomes challenging (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2005).

**Promoting a Principals Professional Learning Community (PLC) through the Formative Walk-through Process (Moss & Brookhart, 2015) and Instructional Rounds (Teitel, 2009; City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009)**

Although they say it in different ways, researchers who have examined educational leadership agree that effective principals are responsible for establishing a school-wide vision of commitment to high standards and the success of all students. Consistent, well-informed support from educational leaders in general, and the principal in particular, can have a significant influence on student achievement (Hallinger, 2005; Mosenthal, Lipson, Tornell, Russ & Mekkelson, 2004). If schools are serious about challenging educator beliefs and disrupting deeply engrained traditional practices, then principals must play an active role in that process.
In today’s climate of high standards and accountability it is important that instructional leaders are able to spend considerable time in the classrooms collecting data, coaching, and supporting quality classroom instruction (Johnston, 2003). Educational leaders must ask themselves, “do my teachers truly know what good instructional and assessment practices look like?” Educational leaders must challenge outdated practices, lack of content knowledge, and experiences that are demotivating to students. Leaders must be willing and able to engage in difficult and honest conversations regarding research-based and evidence-based instructional practices that best meet ever-changing student needs. Pennsylvania’s newly adopted Teacher Effectiveness Model clearly promotes this level of conversation and holds both teachers and their principals accountable for replacing ineffective practices with those that produce increased student achievement. That means that leaders must be able to hold conversations that confront untested beliefs and help teachers base their practice on evidence rather than on personal myths about “good teaching.”

Two models for learning through classroom visitations provide potential for galvanizing principals within a school, across a district, and among school districts: Formative Walk-Throughs (Moss & Brookhart, 2012, 2013; Brookhart & Moss, 2013; 2014) and Instructional Rounds (Teitel, 2009; City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009). Each will be examined in turn to point out their characteristics and potential impacts on an evidence-based professional learning community.

**Formative Walkthroughs.** Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school and its impact on their achievement (Leithwood et al., 2004; Moss, Brookhart, & Long, 2013). Noyce and Hickey (2011) summarized reports of ten formative assessment projects in
three subjects—mathematics, literacy, and science—and concluded that the committed leadership of principals, district administrators, and department heads was essential to accomplishing formative assessment goals. Such leadership included valuing a broad range of student learning, not just performance on standardized tests, prioritizing formative assessment as a school goal; and leveraging school and district resources like time, professional development, technology, and support for collaboration. Similarly, the National Conference of State Legislatures’ task force on exemplary principals, exemplary schools, and policy options found a need for continuing professional development for school leaders in the areas of student assessment, how to use data, instructional leadership, and curriculum (NCSL Task Force, 2002). Clearly, well-informed support from high-quality principals can make a significant impact on student achievement (Hill, 2011; Mosenthal, Lipson, Torncello, Russ, & Mekkelson, 2004).

As leaders engage in the important work of challenging the belief structures that they hold and helping teachers confront their belief structures as well, one process that holds particular promise is designing a walk-through experience that focuses principals on recognizing and gathering evidence of effective teaching. Such a process, formative classroom walkthroughs (Moss & Brookhart, 2009, 2012, 2015; Moss, Brookhart & Long, 2013) are based on a learning target theory of action (Moss & Brookhart, 2009; 2012). In their study of principals who were moving from traditional walkthroughs to adopting a formative orientation to classroom walk-throughs, Moss, Brookhart and Long (2013) drew three conclusions:

- To lead formative assessment in their buildings, administrators need to view their role as the leading learner.
• To learn about formative assessment themselves, administrators need to look for and analyze what students are actually doing and learning in classrooms in their buildings.

• To know what to look for and analyze in classrooms, administrators need to understand formative assessment at a deep level themselves. (p. 213-215).

But not all principals know or can explain the formative processes that make a lesson effective. Formative walk-throughs then are designed to help principals look for and understand the qualities that deepen student learning and raise student achievement. These processes are based on research that underscores the role of the student supported by current research that identifies student self-assessment as the number one factor that raises student achievement (Hattie, 2009; Moss & Brookhart, 2012). Based on a learning target theory of action (Moss & Brookhart, 2012), formative classroom walk-throughs encourage principals, teachers, instructional coaches, and others who walk-through classrooms, to view visits as opportunities to expand their own professional learning—either as individuals engaged in self-study or as part of an evidence-based professional learning community. To gather evidence of the quality of student learning and the effectiveness of instruction, observers are encouraged to take the “students-eye-view” (Moss & Brookhart, 2013, 2015) by watching what students “do, say, make and write” in order to learn during the lesson. Those students actions are assessed by responding to the following: If the students completed everything the teacher asked them to do in this lesson, what would be the quality of the learning that would result, and what evidence did
the students actually produce to substantiate claims that the lesson improved their understanding? To learn more about the quality of student learning and the effectiveness of instruction during the lesson, the formative classroom walkthroughs asks those who visit classrooms to look for seven formative processes that are high-leverage, raise student achievement, and produce assessment capable students (Moss & Brookhart, 2015).

First, observers look for the characteristics of a worthwhile lesson—Does it teach to important standards, does it engage students in important content, and does the content meet students’ needs? Second, observers look for a shared learning target that is more than a sentence written on the board. Simply put, if students aren’t aiming for a target and assessing their own progress against it the lesson does not have a learning target. Third, observers are encouraged to look for a “performance of understanding”—what the students do, say, make, or write during the lesson that both deepens their understanding of the content and skills they are supposed to master and produces evidence of their growing competence. In other words, a performance of understanding has both an instructional and a formative assessment purpose. Fourth, observers look for “student look-fors”—do students have success criteria to look-for in their work that helps them assess and regulate the quality of their work as they are producing it? Fifth, observers look for effective feedback that provides the students with forward looking information that helps them understand where they are now in relation to the learning target and helps them see their way forward to improving their work. Sixth, observers are asked to look-for assessment capable students—students who can achieve the learning target by regulating the quality of their own work and being able to explain exactly what they did to get exactly where they are. And finally, observers are asked to look-for effective
Moss & Brookhart, (2012) argue that a key indicator of an effective lesson is what they term a “performance of understanding” (p. 5). “Without understanding the characteristics of a strong performance of understanding, a principal can walk through 100 classrooms each day and never notice when those characteristics are missing. That’s because what an educator counts as evidence of student learning and achievement depends on what he or she believes is important” (Moss & Brookhart, 2012, p. 147).

Only when a leader is in the classrooms observing the instructional process is he or she able to evaluate the effectiveness of the teacher and if the culture of learning is making marked improvement. The type of learning that is critical is at the student level—are they truly learning and are they able to demonstrate the learning that is occurring in the classroom? This type of formative approach—looking for evidence of learning by watching the student— is very different than the traditional walk-through methods that focused solely on what the teacher is doing and comparing it to a list of “best practices.” Moving toward a formative approach to classroom walk-throughs is the first step in a design for action that will yield improvement.

According to Moss and Brookhart (2012), “If formative assessment is to become part of regular classroom practice, building principals, instructional supervisors, and district curriculum administrators must understand what formative assessment looks like in the classroom and be able to coach teachers in its effective use.” “Formative classroom assessment is an active and intentional learning process that partners the teacher and the students to continuously and systematically gather evidence of learning with the express goal of improving student achievement” (Moss & Brookhart, 2009, p. 6). To further
explain this concept, Moss & Brookhart operationalize formative assessment in the following way, “When teachers join forces with their students in the formative assessment process, their partnership generates powerful learning outcomes. Teachers become more effective, students become actively engaged, and they both become intentional learners” (p. 5).

This design for action is a strong recommendation that districts support ongoing professional learning opportunities for principals in the form of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) model focused on the use of formative assessment and adopting a formative classroom walkthrough protocol (i.e., Moss & Brookhart, 2015). Principals who have the opportunity to engage in targeted professional development programs are more likely than others to enact the kind of instructional leadership that makes a difference in student achievement (Camburn, Rowan, & Taylor, 2003). Professional learning that increases the principal’s ability to interact with teachers around the area of improving classroom practices and challenging teacher beliefs can more effectively impact student achievement than professional development programs aimed at deepening the principal’s specific content knowledge (Spillane, Hallet, & Diamond, 2003). This is especially true in middle and secondary schools, as it is highly unlikely a principal holds deep knowledge and understanding of each specific content area that he or she is responsible for evaluating.

While one might think that this lack of content knowledge puts a principal at a disadvantage while observing a teacher, see it more as an opportunity. What better position to be in when observing a teacher? While visiting the classroom and conducting an observation you are able to identify the intended learning target and have an understanding of what the content matter is with very little background knowledge then
one could suspect that significant learning is occurring. Much like students, principals need to take the opportunity to evaluate if they are able to learn from their own teachers. Again, this is a push beyond our typical approach to walk-throughs but allows the principal to truly assess if learning and understanding is occurring (Moss & Brookhart, 2015).

Integrating this research-based approach will not only support the notion of enhanced classroom environments, but will also support the district in other strategic decisions occurring and allow the principals to be a catalyst for change. When principals put themselves in the role of the learner they are finally able to truly evaluate if significant learning is occurring in the classroom (Moss & Brookhart, 2012, 2015). As a part of this design, district level administrators will be required to challenge the belief structure of the principals. Principals have traditionally been asked to observe student behavior and teaching practices while visiting classroom and then critique them against a list of best practices. We frequently hear educators talk about how well the lessons went, without reference to what students were actually doing and without citing the visible evidence of what students actually learned as a consequence of the teaching. Mostly, the lesson has “gone well” when it has gone according to plan, without any specific reference to what students do or do not know as a consequence of the teaching.

The formative walk-through process (Moss & Brookhart, 2012) asks that principals look for what the students are actually doing during the lesson to learn and what evidence they are producing that supports conclusions about their level of mastery. The single biggest observational discipline we have to teach people in our networks is to look for evidence on top of the students’ desks rather than watching the teacher in the front of the room to critique instructional strategies. The only way to find out what
students are actually doing is to observe what they are doing, not, unfortunately, to ask teachers what students have done after the fact or to look for scores on tests that are administered after the fact. Brookhart and Moss (2013) indicated that, “Principals who looked at what students were actually doing got a better picture of the learning that was going on in classrooms than principals who observed student behavior, which they sometimes characterized as “seeing if students were on task.”

Traditionally classroom walk-throughs were conducted for the principal to gain visibility and to see “what” the teacher was doing rather than observing “how and what” the students are learning. In most cases the walk-through consisted only of a list of activities and best practices for the principals to observe. These lists do little to indicate what, if anything, students actually learned. For example, even though a teacher may have integrated a student-centered learning activity into a particular lesson, is the activity appropriate for the content? Does it push the students to a higher level of thinking? If the answer is no, then it did not foster student learning even though the activity was a best practice.

Principal beliefs about the nature of “best practices” and their use as evidence of effective teaching and meaningful student learning must be challenged. In order for principals to disrupt their own belief structures as well as the belief structures of the classroom teachers they observe, they must focus on student learning when conducting walk-throughs. By focusing solely on the instructional practice of the classroom teacher, principals oftentimes can draw in accurate conclusions of teacher performance. Brookhart and Moss (2013) describe one principal’s experience, “Looking at what the students were doing caused one principal to change his thoughts about a teacher he had previously called ‘such a great teacher’ because he had an engaging presence. However,
when he looked at what students were actually doing in that classroom, he said, ‘The kids never did anything except listen to the teacher and occasionally shake their heads when he asked, ‘Does anybody have a question?’ ’ ” (p.16)

The notion of a formative walk-through process grounded in research and shifting the focus to student learning is critical in increasing student achievement in our schools. Moss and Brookhart (2009) state, “When principals changed their focus from watching the teacher teach to watching the students learn, they got more information about teaching and learning — and realized what they had been missing before.” The classroom walk-through process must be focused on student learning rather than instruction. They continue to describe this by saying, “Principals who are able to see themselves as learners were best able to lead a shift toward a culture of learning in the school. Conversely, principals who do not see themselves as learners, but as supervisors, lead buildings where an evaluative culture still prevailed.” (p. 16). In their extensive work in schools the authors consistently challenge principals to sit a classroom and ask themselves what they learned during the course of the lesson. If no knowledge was gained from the instruction that occurred then the principal should assess how and what needs to be addressed differently (Moss & Brookhart, 2012; 2013; 2015).

Principals need to be equipped with the skills to engage in conversations regarding student learning vs. instructional design. The formative nature of this type of walk-through is critical in increasing student achievement. Moss and Brookhart (2009) suggest that principals who engage in the formative walk-through process should ask themselves the following: “1) If I were the student in this classroom, what would I think was important for me to learn today, and how well would I believe that I had to learn it? 2) If I did everything the teacher asked me to do during this lesson, what would I actually
learn, and what kind of evidence would I produce that I had learned it?” (pp. 49) These two questions are critical in addressing the goal of changing the culture of learning in our schools. How often have we gone into classrooms and asked the student the following question, “what have you learned today?” and the student aimlessly stares at you?

We often fail to engage our students in their learning and use outdated assessment strategies that produce the results that we are look to obtain. Homework continues to be an assessment strategy that many teachers use through a child’s schooling career. Can a teacher truly assess a students’ knowledge of a particular concept on the quality of the students’ homework? Does one’s ability to answer multiple problem sets demonstrate a true understanding of a particular math concept? If a student does not complete homework does that mean that the student has not demonstrated knowledge and understanding? As educators we must challenge the beliefs teachers hold about the ways they are asking students to demonstrate learning. Additionally, we must challenge the beliefs principals hold about the value of the traditional approach of observing and evaluating instruction and then inferring evidence of student learning. Formative walk-throughs that require evidence from what the students actually do during a lesson is a critical component in addressing the beliefs we hold about effective instructional practice in our classrooms. In the course of the PLC, principals must become increasingly familiar with what high quality formative assessment looks like in the classroom. This goes beyond what has been expected from principals and will allow for continued dialogue among and between administrators. And, it will force principals to describe the visible and invisible workings observed in the classroom.

This type of focused walk-through will require a strong will and commitment, but its potential to significantly impact learning environments cannot be overstated. Noyce
and Hickey (2011) summarized reports of ten formative assessment projects in three subjects—mathematics, literacy, and science—and concluded that the committed leadership of principals, district administrators, and department heads was essential to accomplishing formative assessment goals of improving student achievement.

Key to the development of this professional learning community for principals is the development of a formative classroom walk-through (Moss & Brookhart; 2015; Brookhart and Moss, 2013; Moss & Brookhart, 2009; 2012) instrument and appropriate descriptors. “A traditional list of best-practices look-fors asks the principal to gather frequent “snapshots” of teacher actions, including how well the teacher differentiates the lesson, integrates technology, manages the classroom, uses specific instructional strategies, and provides academic rigor. Even when these forms and structures invite principals to describe what students are doing, they are directed to look for something called “student engagement.” What principals “look for” in the classroom is exactly what they see and will continue to see. That is because teachers will continue to demonstrate behaviors and practices that they know their principals are looking for” (Moss & Brookhart, 2010, p. 150).

Disrupting this traditional and outdated process requires that a walk-through evaluation containing targeted, observable and meaningful things for principals to look for that actually can be considered evidence of student learning. This requires all educational leaders within a district to share a common language about instruction, achievement, curriculum and rigor. Having this shared knowledge and understanding of what is important and determined to be critical is essential in implementing the formative walk-through process in a school. As part of the professional learning community of principals the elements that principals look-for in their walk-throughs should be research-
based, discussed and decided upon as a group. In their study on effective formative walk-throughs, Moss and Brookhart (2014) utilized the following formative assessment criteria as powerful look-fors that not only helped principals literally look for student learning, but also helped principals gather useful evidence to confront existing beliefs about lesson quality:

- Whether the lesson itself was worthwhile (based on content, curriculum and students’ needs), indicated by 8 choose-all-that-apply statements and a space for notes.
- Whether the teacher shared a learning target with students, indicated by a 3-level rubric and a space for notes.
- The strength of the match between learning target and what the students were actually doing, indicated by a 4-level rubric and a space for notes.
- The extent and variety of the ways in which the teacher shared the learning target, indicated by 6 choose-all-that-apply statements and a space for notes.
- The extent and variety of ways the teacher shared criteria for success with students, indicated by 6 choose-all-that-apply statements and a space for notes.
- The extent and variety of ways the teacher used feedback to move students’ learning forward, indicated by 8 choose-all-that-apply statements and a space for notes.

Utilizing a clear and consistent formative assessment rubric such as the one recommended will bring consistency to the process, and allow for open dialogue about
the process and procedure across a district, and will serve multiple purposes during an overall change process in two important ways. First, it will allow principals to engage in collegial conversation about what they see across grade levels and buildings. These similarities can help derive district wide professional development focuses, necessitate curriculum development changes and provide principals with a foundation to continue. Second, it will allow administrators to access future belief structures that may be impeding the work in which the district is engaged. Through the data collection process, principals will determine and observe additional teacher beliefs that will need to be challenged in order to allow for a high performance culture. Through the data analysis process, principals must focus on identifying practices that are in alignment with the formative assessment approach and those that are not.

As a professional learning community, conversations must focus on how to foster courageous conversations with teachers who are not exhibiting lessons that require a high level of student learning. Principals will need to consider how to motivate staff to think differently about the learning process and engage students in higher order thinking activities. One way to assist in the professional development of teachers will be to integrate an instructional rounds model.

**Integration of Instructional Rounds as Tool for Improvement.** A focused professional learning community and a formative walk-through process are first steps in an overall design that focuses on systems improvement. They both encourage open dialogue between teachers and principals to focus on the aspect of student learning and, therefore, share many of the goals of Instructional Rounds (City, Elmore, Fiorman, & Teitel, 2009). Central to instructional rounds are three common approaches to school-wide improvements focused on increasing teacher quality and raising student
achievement: walk-throughs, networks, and district improvement strategies” (Teitel, 2009; City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009).

Figure 3.1 - Comprehensive Solution Grounded in Instructional Rounds

Comprehensive Solution Grounded in Instructional Rounds


One of the main impacts of instructional rounds is the ability to increase collaboration among teachers and between teachers and principals. Teaching can be a lonely, isolated profession. Teachers rarely have the opportunity to visit each other’s classrooms or learn from each other. They spend most of their time focusing only on individual teaching methods and rarely witness first-hand how their colleagues are integrating new approaches into the classroom. What’s more, any form of collaboration among teachers usually takes place in program or lesson design rather than during actual classroom practice. Teachers are rarely given time to observe another teacher’s classroom and collaborate through professional dialogue analyzing data collected while visiting
each other’s classrooms. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, forty-nine percent of teachers entering public education leave after five years and the isolation of teaching contributes to this alarming statistic (as cited in Darling-Hammond, 2010). Instructional rounds offer schools and districts a way to combat the isolation of teaching. Individuals involved in rounds participate in regular meetings and professional development opportunities. These collaborative discussions increase feelings of collegiality among groups and help to reduce feelings of isolation.

The Harvard Graduate School of Education has developed a practice of instructional rounds currently being used by educational administrators to review classroom instruction throughout the country (Teitel, 2009; City, et al., 2009). Instructional rounds have been utilized in the medical field for decades. They provide doctors opportunities to study cases together and work collaboratively to develop recommendations and plans of actions based on the data collected while on the rounds. Rounds practiced in the medical field engage learners in purposeful conversations designed to teach aspects of professional reasoning and thinking contextually (Bryant & Milstein, 2007; Dolcourt, Zuckerman, & Warner, 2006; Tariq, Ali, Riaz, Awan, Akhter, 2010).

“The idea behind instructional rounds is that everyone involved is working on their practice, everyone is obliged to be knowledgeable about the common task of instructional improvement, and everyone’s practice should be subject to scrutiny, critique, and improvement” (Teitel, 2009; City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009). Schools benefit when they create specific opportunities for teachers to participate in instructional rounds just as professionals in the medical fields have done successfully for generations (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009). Moreover, participating in
instructional rounds creates a structured format through which teachers enter into professional dialogue with their colleagues to reflect on the individual and collective work they observed together and the data they collectively gathered within the school (City, et al., 2009). By participating in instructional rounds, professionals “look at classroom instruction in a focused, systematic, purposeful and collective way” (Teitel, 2009).

Instructional rounds are a significant professional learning process that a school or district can use to enhance teachers' pedagogical skills and develop a culture of collaboration. That’s because the goal of instructional rounds isn't merely to provide feedback to the teacher being observed, although this is an option if the observed teacher so desires (Marzano, 2011). Rather, the primary purpose is for observing teachers to compare their own instructional practices with those of the teachers they observe. The kind of observing we are talking about focuses not on teachers themselves but on the teaching, learning and content of the instructional core.

The chief benefit of instructional rounds resides in the discussion that takes place among observing teachers at the end of the observation as well as in subsequent self-reflection (Marzano, 2010). The feedback can be based on teacher self-perception data (teachers rate themselves on rubrics); teacher self-observation data (teachers watch videotapes of themselves teaching); and observation data from peers, coaches, and supervisors. Outside observations can be done in several ways, including three-to five minute classroom walk-throughs, comprehensive observations, and student surveys. Rounds promote problem identification as well as problem-solving and promote professional conversations that focus on student learning. (Reinhorn, 2014).
Instructional rounds, by design, are intended to challenge beliefs as well as professional practice. The process is grounded in the belief that significant improvements arise from deeper, shared understanding of the work of teaching and the beliefs teachers hold about what is important to effective teaching (City, et al., 2009). Instructional rounds help educational leaders promote continued examination of the profession of teaching. And this culture of continuous inquiry into practice creates structures to support novice teachers in the same way that the medical profession uses skilled doctors to supervise and teach medical interns (Darling-Hammond, 2010).

Instructional rounds have particular impacts for school improvement. First, they help educators develop a shared vision for high quality instruction, what it looks like and how they will recognize it. Second, rounds help educators develop the skills to assess and calibrate their understandings of high-quality instruction so that they can constantly set goals for improvement. Third, rounds help educators weigh the merits of classroom practices to understand what makes some practices more effective than others. Fourth, rounds provide principals and other educational leaders with a structure for assessing the classrooms in their schools and districts. Fifth, the focus on sharing and critiquing helps a school and district develop a culture of public practice. And finally, rounds offer a consistent process for gathering the kinds of data necessary to identify relevant problems of practice (Neuhaus Education Center, 2013).

Yet, institutionalizing the instructional rounds process is not without challenge. Issues of trust and equity must be addressed when and if they surface. Medical rounds are part of being a medical professional, and doctors do not miss rounds, but that is not how most educators initially see rounds (City, et al., 2009). Opening one’s classroom to other teachers for the purpose of learning can be very threatening regardless of its noble
intent. Principals must allocate the necessary resources of time, substitutes and facilitated discussions in order to promote a culture of collaborative sharing rather than pointed criticism (City, et al., 2009).
Chapter 4: Generative Impacts
Creating a Culture for Sustained Student Learning

_We now accept the fact that learning is a lifelong process of keeping abreast of change. And the most pressing task is to teach people how to learn._

_Peter Drucker_

For the purpose of this call for action, generative impacts are defined as changes in the systematic approaches and belief structures that teachers and principals use to examine, challenge, and improve their practices to increase student learning. What makes an impact generative is its ability to foster continuous improvement processes. As educators increase their understanding of what defines effective practice, they compare their present practices to new understandings and call their beliefs into question. As they change their practices and witness student achievement rise, they increase knowledge and the process begins anew. They continuously and constantly cycle through processes of self-assessment, improvement, new understanding that requires additional self-assessment and improvement.

This chapter examines three traditional approaches to school improvement and cultural change—Professional Learning Communities, Walk-Throughs, and Instructional Rounds. Then it compares each approach to a re-imagined version of the approach designed to specifically focus educators on examining the beliefs they hold about how to improve their practice in order to increase student achievement. Finally, this chapter argues that when any of these improved processes are used in isolation, the solitary process cannot bring about meaningful cultural change. It is only when the processes are used together in an evidenced-based learning cycle (Figure 4.1) that meaningful change occurs.
As the figure shows, the four learning processes: (a) cultural change, (b) evidence-based professional learning communities (PLCs), (c) instructional rounds, and (d) formative walk-throughs are operationalized, embedded, and continuously active throughout the implementation process. The processes are functionally bonded, each informing the other and each being informed by the other three. Working together in this way, the four learning processes continuously reduce the knowledge gap between what educators currently believe along with their current practices based on those beliefs; and, educators’ improved practices that grow from belief change. As individual beliefs and practices change and improve, the way the systems within the school operate change as well.

What follows is a description of a focused, research-based plan that includes all stakeholders and brings the evidence-based learning cycle to life. Each process in the cycle is described in turn.
Figure: 4.1 - Evidence-Based Learning Cycle That Combines Formative Walk-Throughs, Instructional Rounds, Evidence Based Professional Learning Communities and Cultural Change to Improve Student Learning

**Evidence-Based Learning Cycle**

![Diagram of Evidence-Based Learning Cycle]

**Generative Outcome #1: Cultural Change**

Cultural change is achieved when educators share a common vision and core beliefs (Moss & Schreiber, 2006) about what counts as evidence of student learning and achievement. There are recognized areas of excellence identified within school systems. Students who are lucky enough to be exposed to these types of systems are able to make a successful life for themselves and make contributions to their community. The students whose learning environments lie outside of these limited areas are not so fortunate. These students tend to be of color, low socio-economic status or both. This is a sad,
unacceptable description of our past and present, but should not predict our future (City et al., 2009). In order to continually improve the educational system at a local level, educators alike must strive to make consistent the educational process to ensure that students do not just simply have access to education but rather access to high quality teaching and learning.

An evidenced-based cycle “…calls for instruction to shift from a predominantly lecture format to one that focuses more on discovery learning” (Richardson, 2012 p.24). Students need to ask questions; identify issues or problems, hypothesize, gather, organize, explore, interpret, analyze, evaluate, draw conclusions or generalizations, make decisions, perform tasks, resolve conflicts, collaborate, evaluate and communicate. The instructional strategies that educational leaders need to focus on must be re-defined to enable children to attain academic standards as well as engage in more complex learning processes. This shift must focus on expanding educational goals by reorganizing standards and curriculum that stress learning processes that will enable students to acquire the ability to be creative, flexible, collaborative and innovative (Carroll, 2007). All of which are skills necessary to be successful in work and life. This shift in focus and culture will require a very different set of teaching skills—skills that are progressive in their orientation. Teachers set the stage for learning; challenge; re-direct; facilitate; probe; question; create doubt or disequilibrium; model; provide resources; evaluate explanations; and assess understandings and processes.

The evidence-based learning culture, suggested in this study, goes beyond traditional approaches that have not yielded significant change in practice. Beliefs are tenacious and highly resistant to change. Within an evidence-based culture, however, practitioners can be led into “genuine doubt” that causes them to question their beliefs,
and enter into a state of disequilibrium that causes them to change the way in which they practice (Jensen 1998; Nuthall & Alton-Lee 1993; Schreiber & Moss, 2006).

Initially, educational leaders may be inclined to make drastic change in the overall culture of the school. Reeves (2007) cautions against that notion at the onset of change. He suggests to leaders, “Find what you will not change. Identify specific values, traditions, and relationships that you will preserve. Rather than make every change a battle that exhausts political capital and diminishes trust. Effective leaders place change in the context of stability” (p. 94). “When change is reframed from a personal attack to new, meaningful, and exciting opportunities, then the odds in favor of successful change are altered drastically. Although reframing does not eliminate cynicism and bout by skeptics, it does provide the leader with space and time to gain trust” (Reeves, 2009, p. 11).

Trust is critical to cultural change that is generative for several reasons. First, leaders must create opportunities for teachers and administrators to challenge their current practices, develop theories of action, and make significant improvement in the overall learning of all stakeholders: the students and the educators. Second, educators must commit to functioning as a team throughout the evidence-based learning process and defy a traditional top-down approach. This may be difficult for teachers to share and for principals to relinquish perceived power that may have traditionally existed in the system. To be successful, all educators in a school must commit to a disciplined process for tackling the various processes and phases that define continuous improvement.

Whatever process a school employs to address the need for continuous improvement, it is important that the whole school is engaged in the discussion and is accountable for the results. School improvement is not the sole responsibility of the
principal, nor that of a single teacher. Rather, it is an intentional process owned by everyone involved in the life of the school. In collaboration, educators must determine what they believe about effective teaching, how it supports meaningful learning and what they must design as a professional learning agenda for themselves to reach their self-improvement goals. These critical conversations are essential and determine the type of cultural shift that is required in our school environment to increase the quality of instruction and raise achievement for all students. Educators must pursue continuous improvement as a matter of social justice. All students deserve to have effective teachers who can help them grow and achieve.

This study has suggested that the focus generative change must center on creating learning opportunities at the lesson level that help all students aim for mastery of rigorous and important content, learn to assess and regulate their own learning, and produce evidence of learning progress that everyone can use (principals, teachers and students) to make decisions about how to improve student learning (Moss & Brookhart, 2012; in press).

As a part of an embedded and continual improvement process, educators must commit to collecting and analyzing evidence that supports any claim that a change in culture is actually occurring. As described in Figure 4.2 (pg. 69), administrators and teachers should see evidence of the following in varying degrees to recognize the shift in culture:

- Classroom expectations are tied to national and district standards and curriculum, well-developed, and understood by students, parents, and educators.
• Every one's most important work is to look for their next level of professional learning and work to improve their understanding and performance.

• Students understand what mastery of important content and skills will look like during a lesson and are able to use public success criteria to get them to those lesson-level learning targets.

• Students aim for mastery, are able to assess and regulate their own learning, and produce evidence of their learning progress that everyone can use (principals, teachers and students) to make decisions about how to improve student learning.

Especially during the onset of the cultural shift, characteristics like the ones noted above will need to be consistently monitored, assessed, and regulated to ensure continuous progress over time.

**Generative Outcome #2 Evidence Based Professional Learning Communities**

Collaborative, respectful dialogue and reflection are critical to continued relationship building as a school begins to enact a cultural change process to collect and discuss lesson-level evidence of student mastery. Implementation and support of professional development within an evidenced-based professional learning community is an essential to disrupting educator beliefs and changing the quality of learning opportunities for students.

All sides of the education reform and improvement debate agree that what most teachers receive as professional learning opportunities are thin, sporadic, and of little use when it comes to improving teaching. The traditional professional development system is beyond being fixed and requires a new vision (Hill, 2007). Yet the education industry—
including federal, state, and local education policymakers, plus all those who work to
deliver teaching and learning to students—still places significant trust in the power of
professional support to change teaching and boost student learning. From federally
supported and locally enacted educator-evaluation systems to the rollout of the Common
Core State Standards, the nascent changes to education all require educators to learn new
and better ways to do their jobs. This study suggests that institutions must replace
traditional professional development models that are time driven, best-practice oriented
lack a consistent focus and direction.

How critical is the relationship of professional learning for teachers to school
improvement? In many ways professional development is the link between the design
and implementation of education reforms and therefore determines the ultimate success
of reform efforts in schools (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 1998). The evaluation of
educator effectiveness based on evidence from what students actually produce during
classroom lessons, for example, has the potential to drive instructional improvement and
reveal important aspects of optimal learning environments.

But in order to have an impact on student learning, classroom walk-throughs
should be formative and accompanied by feed forward information that helps educators
and administrators set professional learning targets for themselves as individuals and as a
collaborative learning community (Moss & Brookhart, in press). If these professional
learning structures are not at the forefront of an improvement design and focused at the
student lesson level, the intended change will fall short, remain at the surface level, and
will be of little benefit to all learners. Moreover, professional discussions must be crafted
to encourage open and honest dialogue about what daily evidence of student learning
reveals and what the next level of professional work will be that will lead to improved student learning outcomes (City et al, 2009; Moss & Brookhart, in press).

True professional development will need to be job embedded and foster teachers’ self-assessment of their professional practice as a design for improvement (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Principals and teachers should focus the discussions that occur in the professional learning communities on observable and tangible evidence. During professional learning community discussions focus questions could include:

- Does the lesson increase student achievement based on observable evidence?
- Are teachers looking for and collecting evidence of student learning from daily classroom performance?
- Do principals engage in conversations with the classroom teacher and students to identify lesson goals and to better understand the instructional intentions?
- Are students given opportunities to demonstrate understanding, skill, and reasoning processes?

This critical assessment will not come easy and requires commitment. Based on the discussions engendered by these questions, job embedded professional development should be tailored to meet the various needs of individual educators. But quality discussions that can affect change at the belief altering level require that all educators create a shared vocabulary regarding desired student learning outcomes. This vocabulary must focus around the use of student success criteria, expectations of student learning, and open dialogue about areas of needed improvement. Consistent use of on-going, embedded formative assessment is crucial in order to gather information about student progress “with the express goal of raising student achievement” at the lesson level (Moss & Brookhart, 2009, p. 6). As indicated in Figure 2.1, these goals must be focused on
specific areas of identified student learning needs and teachers must be held accountable for how their planning and instruction impacts student learning. The use of evidence-based professional learning communities will help educators create a culture of accountability were professional effectiveness is evaluated based on student work and demonstrated learning.

Traditionally, a professional learning community (PLC) is described as a team of educators within a school (or school district) who work collaboratively to share instructional strategies, analyze performance data, and improve learning outcomes for their students. They are invested in the growth and development of all learners in their school building/district, sharing a collective responsibility for the success of all students. Contrary to what many may believe, evidence-based professional learning communities do not limit teachers to work and learn within a specific building, district, state or even country. Teachers across geographical boundaries create lessons that are innovative, creative, far reaching at the heart of the student learning process. A number of studies note the opportunities today’s technologies provide to facilitate the connection of expertise among members and to provide for interaction (Dalgarino & Colgan, 2007; Lieberman, 2000; MacIsaac, 2000). Lieberman (2000) sees the online venue as ideal for connecting and collaborating in the quest for an improved practice. MacIsaac (2000) notes the potential of these venues for unleashing the boundaries of space and time.

The model suggested in this study recognizes the potential for technology to facilitate an evidence-based professional learning community. Technology would enable educators to easily share data and insights, communicate, and collaborate with people in different classrooms and in different schools. It would tap into expertise at district offices or with consultants from across the globe. This study suggests that the first step
in fostering this type of collaboration is to determine the collaborative purpose and set goals for reaching it. Once goals are set, the next step is to determine a format for how the professional learning community should be structured. For example, if the purpose is to broaden the group’s knowledge base of fifth-grade science curriculum and instructional strategies, educators might want to join an online community to gather ideas, resources, and strategies from the many other community members. A wiki might be a more appropriate format if the goal of the online professional learning community is to create a space where grade-level teams might collaborate. The learning purpose should be used to guide the selection of most appropriate and beneficial online tools to build and maintain online professional learning community.

There are three things to consider that help make the most of an online evidenced-based professional learning community: content, structure, and tools. The industrial design principle that ‘form follows function’ should also apply to the design of an effective professional learning community: The structure and tools that shape a professional learning community should follow from its content. What do the community members hope to learn or gain from participating in the professional learning community? What curricular or instructional issues or topics will they address? Using inquiry points like these, use the following steps:

- Determine content goals and expectations for participating in an online professional learning community.
- Choose a structure that will support members as they work toward their goals.
- Select tools that will help create the structure the community members need.
There are three recommended open-source technologies that are available for teachers to help move from the traditional face-to-face professional learning community to an online collaborative environment: Wikispaces, Google Drive, and Twitter. Each will be discussed in turn along with possible strategies for implementation.

**Wikispaces** provides a free online workspace for collaborative editing. Teachers can create a free account. The editing tools and account management features are easy to use and can be used to control the privacy level of the wiki, ensuring that only people who have been invited are able to view and edit the contents of the wiki.

Teachers are able to upload files, add and edit content, and share resources with other members within the wiki. Also available is a built-in discussion board to host an ongoing conversation about the content of the wiki. All members of a wiki have editing rights, so everyone can contribute to the professional learning community equally.

Professional learning community members can use a wiki to upload lesson planning templates, resources and other documents, post links to instructional websites for teachers and interactive sites for students, and share updates and reminders about issues like field trips and special events.

For example, a third-grade team uses their wiki to post links to teacher and student sites for upcoming topics. Members of the professional learning community could explore the links on their own time, and each teacher could choose sites to use in the coming days and weeks. Instead of making copies, teachers could upload files to share with each other, including graphic organizers, teacher-created interactive whiteboard lessons, homework assignments, and permission form templates for upcoming field trips. The teachers could receive email notifications each time someone updates the wiki, to alert them about when they need to visit the wiki for the latest resource.
Google Drive (formerly Google Docs) allows teachers to create, organize, and store documents online. The key benefit of Google Drive is easy collaboration among several individuals. A professional learning community could collaboratively create documents, spreadsheets, and presentations involving all interested parties in the conversations, reflections and discussion. To share a document with professional learning community members, teachers utilize the simple sharing feature which allows an individual to select whether a member has viewing or editing rights. The chat feature would allow members to discuss editing changes with others with whom they share documents. Google Drive also allows users to import existing documents that were created in other programs, as well as export Google Drive files into other formats such as Microsoft Word. Since all documents are stored online, professional learning community teams could access them from any computer with Internet access.

To illustrate how this might work, consider a hypothetical PLC focused on deepening their understanding of second-grade developmental, emotional, learning issues. The teachers in this professional learning community could use Google Drive to create and revise pacing guides for each content area. Whenever a team member adds a resource to a pacing guide, all professional learning community members would see the most current version of the document simply by opening the pacing guide from their Google Drive list. This saves team members from having to email the pacing guides back and forth after making changes — a process that otherwise might become confusing with multiple versions being shared among colleagues.

In addition, this hypothetical PLC could also create a weekly parent newsletter. They could send multiple emails to each other about what they prefer to include in the newsletter. One team member would type the information into a newsletter template.
Then the team could create and edit their weekly newsletters in Google Drive. Each team member could take responsibility for a section of the newsletter. Google Drive would allow them all to work on the newsletter simultaneously or individually asynchronously. The chat feature would also afford team members the opportunity to ask each other questions about the newsletter and make revising or editing suggestions.

**Twitter** is a microblogging platform that allows users to post short tweets, or updates, sharing comments, strategies, and resources with their followers. Individuals can find other educators or educational experts with similar interests. Each tweet could potentially provide educators with a unique professional learning opportunity. Using Twitter as a professional learning community platform would permit team members to explore the links and resources posted by those they follow, and share their own resources and ideas with their followers.

For example, consider a hypothetical teacher who started building his online professional learning community by talking with a few performing arts teachers he knew from nearby districts. They all created Twitter accounts and started following each other’s tweets. The teachers then started to follow a few regional and national performing arts experts whose names they knew well. Through this process the online professional learning community grew exponentially as they explored the lists of people who those experts were following on Twitter. Before long, they were checking the Twitter feed a few times a day, each time finding a new resource or idea to try.

In summary, professional learning communities offer a strategy for educational reform that involves all participants—parents, learners, teachers, community members, intellectuals, and political leaders in a continual process of evolving education. Enhanced through the use of technology, schools can begin to establish connections both
inside and outside of the classrooms. Through this engagement, experts of all ages can be resources for learning. And through PLCs educators can help all students establish life-long patterns for learning, support teachers in a process of continuing growth, and encourage all learners to take an active role in the construction of knowledge.

Figure 4.2 - Comparison of Traditional Professional Learning Communities vs. Evidence-Based Professional Learning Communities and the Social Justice Implications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Approach</th>
<th>Evidence-based approach focused on student learning</th>
<th>Social Justice Implications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Based on currently accepted best.</td>
<td>- Supports the school improvement framework and utilizes technology to support the process.</td>
<td>- All students should receive a high quality education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Does use classroom, lesson level evidence of student learning to guide agenda for professional learning.</td>
<td>- Encourages open and honest dialogue about what daily evidence from lesson level student work reveals about what is working.</td>
<td>- Conversations must more beyond intentions to impacts in that evidence from improved student learning and achievement is used to weigh the effectiveness of the learning the professionals claim has resulted from the PLC.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Sporadic and not part of the school culture.</td>
<td>- Discussion and action centered around and the next level of professional work that will lead to improved student learning outcomes.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Lacks consistent focus, direction and support.</td>
<td>- Evidence is obtained from daily student work.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Focus is approaches that ‘might’ work if implemented without clear criteria for what will count as improvement.</td>
<td>- All participants make working assumptions explicit.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Participants do not make their working assumptions explicit.</td>
<td>- Data is used to determine the instructional and curricular needs of</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
students.

- Analyzes student evidence to support claims about instructional effectiveness, student learning, and achievement and decisions to improve them.

- Discussions are consistent, far reaching and supported by all stakeholders.

- Focus is neither teacher-centered nor student-centered but rather learning-centered.

Generative Outcome #3: Formative Walk-through Process (Moss & Brookhart, 2013) and Instructional Rounds (Teitel, 2009; City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009).

A strong evidence-based professional learning community is paramount to a strong change in culture and the support of open dialogue regarding student learning and evidence of student achievement. The utilization of the Formative Walk-through Process (Moss & Brookhart, 2013) and instructional rounds (Teitel, 2009; City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009) compliments this process. Figures 4.3 and 4.4 illustrate a comparison between the traditional walk-throughs and instructional rounds and those that take an evidence-based approach that is squarely focused on student learning.
There are many social justice implications of classroom walk-throughs and instructional rounds. First and foremost, all students deserve equal access to high quality education at the lesson level each year and every day. In order to evaluate and gather evidence, principals must engage in classroom walk-throughs to help gather data and evidence to shift practice. The walk-through process is formative and focused on what the students are actually doing to learn rather than what the teacher is doing to instruct. Throughout this process teachers and educational leaders focus on developing a consistent language that will be used to analyze the impacts of their instructional and leadership practices on student learning. This language focused on specific student learning is critical to assuring that common goals and objectives are communicated among the PLC during to maximize professional learning and student achievement.

The formative walk-through process coupled with instructional rounds will be a guiding force in the cultural change throughout a school system. Moss and Brookhart (2009; 2012; 2015) caution principals against using an isolated list of best practices that are inconsistently used and not fully understood by teachers or principals and lack significant research to support them. As referenced earlier in the literature review, formative walk-throughs are designed to help principals look for and understand the qualities that deepen student learning and raise student achievement. These processes are based on research that underscores the role of the student and student self-assessment as the number one factor that raises student achievement (Hattie, 2009; Moss & Brookhart, 2012). In conjunction with instructional rounds, principals, teachers and others engaged in coaching effective practice must use the evidence that they gather at the lesson level to design professional learning targets for themselves in order to constantly improve their leadership and instructional practices (Moss & Brookhart, 2012). Teitel, (2009); City,
Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, (2009) support this notion in their model of instructional rounds. “The rounds process provides valuable feedback on district strategies by reflecting on whether and how the hoped-for results show up in classrooms. Just as individuals participating on rounds get better at rounds as they do it, networks grow over time, deepening and adapting to their practice and learning together” (pp. 180-181).

Principals must use instructional rounds that include teachers and that lead collaborative discussions about patterns of strength and need at the building level that are researched-based and focused on improving student learning. These walk-throughs and observations cannot singularly focus on one skill, task or lesson. Rather, they must look at all aspects of the lesson design to ensure that student learning is of high quality, thoroughly planned and students are demonstrating achievement. The principal must be skilled at and able to recognize a quality lesson and significant student learning focused at the core of learning.

City, E. A., Elmore, R. F., Fiarman, S., & Teitel, L. (2009) support this notion by stating:

In its simplest terms, the instructional core is composed of the teacher and the student in the presence of content. It is the relationship between the teacher, the student, and the content – not the qualities of any one of them by themselves – that determines the nature of instructional practice, and each corner of the instructional core has its own particular role and resources to bring to the instructional process. Simply stated, the instructional task is the actual work that students are asked to do in the process of instruction – not what teachers think they are asking students to do, or what the official curriculum says that the students are asked to do, but what they are actually asked to do. (pp. 22-23)

Through the process of formative walk-throughs and instructional rounds, detailed targets of needed improvement become explicit, public, and shared. These areas of
improvement should come from the observations that both teachers and principals are witnessing via formative-walkthroughs and instructional rounds.

Principals will need to develop leadership skills to work collectively with one another and break away from traditional approaches that skim the surface of student learning and get to the point where students can identify lesson objectives, discuss what is explicitly being taught and demonstrate that learning has occurred (Moss & Brookhart, in press). In fact, Teitel, (2009); City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, (2009) suggest the following questions to help structure the instructional rounds and gather useful information,

- What do you really want the participants to understand at the end of this session?
- What is most essential for participants’ learning?
- How are all the activities connected? Are they tightly linked? Is there an opportunity for depth over breath? (p. 139-141).

While questions like the ones listed above may be difficult to tackle, it is imperative that teachers and principals engage in open and honest dialogue. Teachers must be self-reflective, critical and have a lens of improvement.
Figure 4.3- Comparison of Traditional Classroom Walkthroughs vs. Evidence-Based Formative Walk-Throughs (Moss & Brookhart, 2015) and the Social Justice Implications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Approach</th>
<th>Evidence-based approach focused on student learning</th>
<th>Social Justice Implication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Does not have a unified theory of action that provides a causal explanation for decisions of practice.</td>
<td>• Employs a learning target theory of action to bring cohesion to the process and help educators reveal the beliefs and assumptions that drive their educational practices.</td>
<td>• When principals or other educators make an observation they have an obligation to use that information to improve student learning and professional practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Evaluative in nature. Used to audit compliance and suggest improvements from a designated list of instructional walk-through look-fors.</td>
<td>• Formative in nature. Used to deepen learning for all stakeholders: the teacher, the students and the principal.</td>
<td>• All students benefit from teachers who articulate learning expectations, differentiate instructional practices and provide a high quality standards-based curriculum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Focused a checklist of “best practice” look-fors that are arbitrary.</td>
<td>• Focused by Collaborative Inquiry Guides that describe the characteristics of seven high-leverage learning processes.</td>
<td>• Principals must hold themselves accountable for the practices that occur in the classrooms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Many times walk-throughs occur without follow-up conversations.</td>
<td>• Conversations are collegial and forward-looking and focus on the professional learning that the principal and teacher must do to improve student learning and achievement in future lessons.</td>
<td>• All teachers benefit from formative feedback, high-expectations and embedded professional learning opportunities that enable them to meet the expectations used to evaluate them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Conversations that might occur are top-down and backward looking; focused on improving the teacher by analyzing what the teacher should have done in the lesson.</td>
<td>• Uses evidence from what the students did, said, made or wrote during the lesson to assess the effectiveness of the instruction and claims</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
that the instruction deepened student learning and raised student achievement.

- The express goal is to develop students who are assessment capable and who can self-regulate.

Figure 4.4- Comparison of Traditional Instructional Rounds vs. Evidence Based Instructional Rounds and the Social Justice Implications.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Approach</th>
<th>Evidence-based approach focused on student learning</th>
<th>Social Justice Implication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Although centered on the content, the teacher, and the student, the rounds do not provide guiding criteria.</td>
<td>• Teachers have a common set of criteria that is shared and understood by all.</td>
<td>• Students have the right to be instructed by well-prepared teachers who understand and exhibit innovative teaching and learning approaches.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lack of understanding as to what quality instructional delivery looks like.</td>
<td>• Teachers are focused on identifying observable evidence at the student and lesson level.</td>
<td>• Teachers must be self-reflective, critical and have a lens of improvement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• No available time to debrief.</td>
<td>• Teachers are able to transfer observable evidence and reflect on individual teaching practices to self-identify areas of improvement.</td>
<td>• Teachers need to witness model teaching and learning practices to enhance individual styles and improve lesson delivery to meet all learners’ needs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| • Does not make working assumptions explicit. | • Time is provided for thoughtful reflection and debriefing. | }

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### Figure 4.5 - Generative Impacts: Model for Continuous Improvement Implementation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generative Outcomes</th>
<th>Big Idea What will teachers and principals come to know and be able to do?</th>
<th>Generative Impacts What will it look like at the building and classroom levels?</th>
<th>Supporting Theory and Research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Cultural Change** | • Educators share a common vision and core beliefs about what counts as evidence of student learning and achievement.  
• Clear expectations for excellence are publicly stated and guide decisions of practice at all levels.  
• All decisions about what is working and what is not are based on timely, lesson-level evidence of student mastery. | • Classroom expectations are tied to national and district standards and curriculum, well-developed, and understood by students, parents, and educators.  
• Everyone’s most important work is to look for their next level of professional learning and work to improve their understanding and performance.  
• Students understand what mastery of important content and skills will look like during a lesson and are able to use public success criteria to get them to those lesson-level learning targets.  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generative Outcomes</th>
<th>Big Idea</th>
<th>Generative Impacts</th>
<th>Supporting Theory and Research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Evidence-Based Professional Learning Community (PLC) | **What will teachers and principals come to know and be able to do?**<br>• Educators operate with a shared vision for student learning and achievement and develop a shared, evidence-based vocabulary to explain and discuss issues of student learning, achievement and expectations. | **What will it look like at the building and classroom levels?**<br>• Consistent use of on-going, embedded formative assessment to constantly gather information about student progress with the express goal of raising student achievement at the lesson level.<br>• Educators describe effective teaching in terms of its impact on student achievement of clearly identified, lesson-level learning targets and success criteria and use that evidence to create professional learning agendas to that define their next level of professional work.<br>• Open dialogue among principals and teachers focused on areas of improvement at the lesson level that are action oriented and create cycles of learning by doing. | DuFour, R. (2004). What is a professional learning community? *Educational Leadership* 61(8) 6-11.  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generative Outcomes</th>
<th>Big Idea</th>
<th>Generative Impacts</th>
<th>Supporting Theory and Research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Principals, teachers and others engaged in coaching effective practice use formative walk-throughs to focus observations on evidence of student learning as defined by lesson level learning targets as an indicator of student achievement and effective instruction.</td>
<td>- Principals, teachers and others engaged in coaching effective practice use the evidence that they gather at the lesson level to design professional learning targets for themselves in order to constantly improve their leadership and instructional practices.</td>
<td>- Principals, teachers and others engaged in coaching effective practice focus attention on gathering evidence of student learning and achievement for all students at the lesson level.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Principals, teachers and others engaged in coaching effective practice use the evidence that they gather at the lesson level to design professional learning targets for themselves in order to constantly improve their leadership and instructional practices.</td>
<td>- Principals, teachers and others engaged in coaching effective practice have a common set of criteria to “look for” in the lesson to gain a better sense of needed improvement and professional development.</td>
<td>- Principals, teachers and others engaged in coaching effective practice have redirected the focus of walk-throughs validating instructional practices to gathering evidence about the impact of those practices on student learning and achievement for all students during an individual lesson.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generative Outcomes</td>
<td>Big Idea</td>
<td>Generative Impacts</td>
<td>Supporting Theory and Research</td>
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- Principals, teachers and others engaged in coaching effective practice engage in the instructional rounds process as a way to observe high quality teaching and learning within a school and adjust professional practice at the leadership and instructional levels to meet student learning needs for all students.

- Principals, teachers and others engaged in coaching effective practice look for evidence at the core of each lesson: the curriculum, the effectiveness of the instruction, and the degree of student progress in order to make decisions about effective practice.

- Open and honest dialogue among teachers throughout the instructional rounds process focuses on describing what is happening to impact the degree of student learning for all students.

- Teachers focus on increased ability to monitor and regulate their instructional practice to move to the next level of their professional work as identified through instructional rounds process.

- Principals use instructional rounds to lead collaborative discussions about patterns of strength and need at the building level that are researched-based and focused on improving student learning.
Conclusion

Greatness and nearsightedness are incompatible. Meaningful achievement depends on lifting one's sights and pushing toward the horizon.

Daniel Pink

The professional development of teachers is a vast and complex field of study. While much work has been done to challenge educators’ beliefs as a matter of social justice, there is still a great deal of work that lies ahead. This action plan for change must be persistently pursued. Too often we are aware of a problem but take little or no action to resolve it. There is an immediate need to focus on the “how” vs. the “what.”

What follows is a plan that summarizes suggested next steps for school leaders wishing to address this problem of practice within the context of their own institutions. This plan is designed as an improvement road map that spans a 3 year time period and includes the critical aspects of the evidence-based learning cycle described within this dissertation. Realizing that school cultures are unique and ever-changing, key stakeholders should initially assess the needs of the particular learning community. A unique and customized approach will be required in order to drive change as a matter of social justice. The recommendations are as follows:

**Year 1: Principal Professional Development Series Focused on Belief Change**

Transforming a school into a PLC is one strategy for continuously improving student achievement by increasing the learning capacity of teachers (Hord, 2003). While professional learning communities are traditionally focused at the teacher level, this timeline proposes that institutions begin with the principal in mind. Given the nature of the tasks ahead, principals will need targeted and supported professional development on how to engage in the process of changing beliefs. Done in collaboration with other administrators, these teams will engage in a process of collective inquiry regarding effective leadership practices guided by data from
multiple assessments of student learning. It is expected that reflective dialogue about instruction that impacts student learning during team meetings will lead to action and experimentation within the classroom. All efforts should be judged on the basis of the impact that activities have on learning. The intended outcome is continuous improvement and, ultimately, the creation of conditions for ongoing learning in the school (DuFour, 2000).

During these professional learning communities, principals need to share a common understanding of the responsibility they play in shifting the culture. This responsibility includes the need to help faculty and staff understand that the work of a PLC is guided by the core belief that learning for all students is the purpose of schooling. To do this, the principal must consistently communicate a personal belief that reflective discussions around student data by faculty and staff and will result in increased achievement. Both formal and informal channels speak to how a PLC will improve learning and build leadership capacity in a school can accomplish this.

The principal is also responsible for pointing out instances where practices and behaviors do not align with the ideas and beliefs that guide PLC activity. Meeting the responsibility of ideas and beliefs effectively will help with the development of a shared vision. Following the book study on professional learning communities’, principals will engage in a reflective reading, utilizing Visible Learning - Information About What Works Best For Learning (Hattie, 2009). During this development opportunity principals will identify, challenge, reflect and agitate current beliefs that detail student learning within the context of their respective institutions. They will have the opportunity to “learn by doing” as they learn about what important beliefs are while comparing their own beliefs to the research. Following the open dialogue that this text will
influence, principals will incorporate the beliefs and strategies that require agitation in their identified plan to be implemented within their organization.

**Year 2: Development of Professional Learning Community: Primary Focus on Belief Change at the Teacher Level**

Following the professional learning communities focused on cultivating leadership at the principal level, it is recommended that leaders engage teachers in a professional learning community focused on a shift in beliefs with the expressed goal of improving practice and student learning. To help facilitate this professional learning community, it is recommended that teachers begin to discuss belief change by engaging in a book study utilizing the text, *Visible Learning - Information About What Works Best For Learning* (Hattie, 2009). Additionally, based on experiences that teachers have had or have not had working in a professional learning community it may be useful to utilize, *Whatever It Takes: How Professional Learning Communities Respond When Kids Won’t Learn* (DuFour, Eaker & Karhanek, 2004). It is envisioned that teachers within the building will participate in a book study during the first semester of the school year. These specific texts are recommended due to the author’s ability to help teachers compare what they consider strong classroom practices, that of learning styles, homework and technology, all of which have little impact to what actually works and promotes the use of student self-assessment, formative feedback and formative evaluation of teachers. Upon completing the book, this professional learning community of teachers will identify a building specific problem of practice that details how the professional learning community’s practices inform student outcomes.

During the second semester, teachers and principals will work collaboratively to develop a solutions-oriented plan of action. This plan should include how the professional learning
communities can own student-learning issues and how these issues may be addressed. Teachers and principals will work to design evaluative tools that can be utilized in subsequent schools years. The purpose of these evaluative tools is to allow teachers and principals to modify practices to address student learning.

As the school year continues and this design unfolds, teachers should be introduced to the formative walk-through process and instructional rounds process. A professional learning community focus should surround the book entitled, *Learning Targets: Helping Students Aim for Understanding in Today's Lesson* (Moss & Brookhart, 2012). While teachers and principals are engaged in this book study, evidence from teachers’ lessons and classroom should be reviewed, critiqued and discussed. The purpose of this discussion is to help identify patterns across classrooms and will draw to the forefront school wide issues that require attention.

**Year 3: Integration of Formative Walk-Throughs and Instructional Rounds**

Coupled with the focus on teacher belief change, schools wishing to pursue this problem of practice should focus on implementation of formative walk-throughs and instructional rounds. This call for action recommends that the professional learning communities utilize the following texts: *Formative Walk-throughs* (Moss & Brookhart, in press) and *Instructional Rounds in Education: A Network Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning* (City, E. A., Elmore, R. F., Fiarman, S., & Teitel, L. 2009).

At the onset of this cultural shift teachers must buy into the process of formative walk-throughs and instructional rounds and have the desire to share a conceptual understanding of how they will impact student learning as a matter of social justice. Teachers should be involved in the planning and implementation during the design phase. It is encouraged that teachers volunteer to be in the planning process vs. being told that they must participate. This modeling of teacher
volunteers helps to ensure you have the necessary buy in that will be required. Unlike the traditional model of walk-throughs, teachers should gather evidence-based data that is focused on student learning as identified in Figure 4.3. Teachers will need to be prepared to provide and explain lessons plans, what the necessary “look-fors” are and how to reflect on the evidence that was observed through this process. Quality evidence-based instructional rounds will include not only reflection on the observed lesson but rather a connection to the observers’ pedagogical practices. Once this data is collected through evidence-based walk-throughs, instructional rounds and analysis of formative assessments, the information should be reviewed in the professional learning community and conclusions regarding school wide issues should be made.

While this suggested timeline is aggressive and requires significant commitments from all key stakeholders, the work of an educator is never complete. It is a far-reaching, lifelong commitment. To impact the minds of young children is a challenging but rewarding task that has an impact beyond the walls of one classroom or school. The key areas of focus for teachers and administrators involved in this change include:

- *Striving to challenge beliefs* that prevent all students from having a successful learning experience.

- *Creating a culture of learning* that is focused and supported on professional development for teachers and educational leaders through the integration of a professional learning community model;
Utilizing data from formative walk-throughs, instructional rounds and an evidence-based professional learning community to measure the impact of change over time and redirect attention to the lesson level.

By focusing on these areas of concentration, institutions will be able to initiate change in addressing the identified problem of practice. Each component is critical and cannot be isolated, overlooked or excluded. Leadership will be a foundational force behind the cultural movement described within this action plan. It is imperative to have leaders in our schools with a keen sense of research-based practices and the ability to challenge their own beliefs and move beyond the years of poorly execute change (Fullan, M. & Hargreaves, A. 1992; City, E. A., Elmore, R. F., Fiarman, S., & Teitel, L. 2009; Moss & Brookhart, 2012). A critical aspect of this timeline rests in professional development of educational leaders in order to equip them with the knowledge, skills and foundation to engage a change process within an institution. As discussed earlier, leaders themselves have a developed set of beliefs that will need to be challenged to initiate this action plan.

Despite years of reform efforts, schools remain unable to close the achievement gap due to efforts focused more on standardized test results than student learning. Leaders have played a part in these failed efforts and we must move beyond them. Our schools crave leaders who are able to refocus efforts to student learning and value true achievement vs. those who drive reforms based on the scores of a state assessment. Leaders need to focus and guide their staff to develop the core belief that student learning at the lesson level is first and foremost the guiding force in student achievement. Despite ones best efforts, political pressures to focus on state standardized tests will surface, but the ability to redirect and shift attention to the change in
culture will be imperative. We must place our time and energy in the areas that will make the most difference in our students’ lives. Darling-Hammond and Weingarten (2014) state,

An end-of-year sit-down test cannot capture the broader aspirations embedded in the new standards for problem solving, inquiry, team building, communication, collaboration, persistence, and other challenging skills. High stakes tests, which focus only on English language arts and mathematics scores on primarily multiple-choice tests -- has been shown to narrow curriculum to what is tested and to reduce opportunities for higher-order thinking. It is imperative to refocus teachers back to creating high quality lessons that engage, invigorate and challenge our students to think that they never have. No longer can we be complacent about instructional practices that are occurring in our schools that are not addressing the needs of learners. (p. 45)

This call for action is learning-centered, intentional and designed to be used to drive systematic and intentional change in schools. Educators must continue to reflect upon the notion that change can and will occur only when systems are designed, implemented and changed to reflect the ever changing needs of the population.

My professional agenda leading forward focuses on two main areas. First, I will leverage the information suggested in this call for action to influence my professional network (schools and state wide organizations) to help facilitate conversation and agitate beliefs that exist among educational leaders in my region. Second, I will continue to discuss this problem of practice with key stakeholders in the schools, colleges and universities and communities to help shed light on the issue and begin efforts to address this important and necessary work. Additionally, a significant next step in this call for action will be to engage institutions of higher education and professional educational organizations in discussions surrounding teacher preparation program
and professional development opportunities and the beliefs that they transfer onto pre-service and current educators. The main purpose of this plan is to focus our attention on true student learning as a means of cultivating successful students to be productive and contributing members of our society.
References


Freeman, L. (2003). Where did dispositions come from and what can we do with them? Paper presented at the Annual Symposium on Educator Dispositions. Eastern Kentucky University, Richmond, KY.


OECD (2009), Creating Effective Teaching and Learning Environments, First Results from TALIS: http://www.oecd.org/document/54/0,3746,en_2649_39263231_42980662_1_1_1_1,00.html


Suggested Readings

The following sources are recommended for reading and review during the implementation of the designs for action described throughout this dissertation in practice.


