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Collaborating for Improvement? Goal Specificity and Commitment in Targeted Teacher Partnerships

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Abstract

Background: Collaboration among teachers is now considered a marker of effective schools and key to creating successful professional learning opportunities. However, the nature and efficacy of collaboration vary widely, and research suggests that collaborative efforts often fail to promote teacher development.

Purpose: This study draws on goal-setting theory from the organizational and management literatures, as well as prior research on improvement-focused teacher collaboration, to explore specific features of teacher collaborative partnerships developed through the Instructional Partnership Initiative (IPI) in Tennessee. This analysis categorizes the goal specificity and goal commitment of teachers' IPI collaboration and explores individual, relational, and organizational factors associated with high specificity and high commitment.

Setting: The IPI is a voluntary statewide teacher development program in Tennessee. Principals pair teachers based on complementary areas of strength and weakness in specific domains of teaching practice based on indicator scores from their teacher observations.

Participants/Sample: This study focuses on 48 Tennessee teachers who participated in IPI during the 2016–2017 year and who were interviewed as part of a broader implementation study of IPI. This implementation study purposively sampled schools and teachers who had more robust implementation of IPI.

Research Design and Analysis: This qualitative study uses teacher interview data to categorize the goal specificity, goal commitment, and perceived benefits of IPI for 48 participating teachers. After categorizing teacher partnerships using theoretically

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driven codes, this analysis compared high-specificity/high-commitment and low-specificity/low-commitment partnerships using four illustrative case studies.
Findings: Teachers' reported experiences with IPI varied based on the level of goal specificity and goal commitment in their partnership. Teachers in high-specificity/high-commitment partnerships tended to describe more in-depth participation and perceived greater benefits of participation. Teachers' mindsets about improvement, perceptions about teaching expertise, and their principals' approach to implementing IPI all appeared to be associated with the reported level of goal specificity and commitment.
Conclusion: As posited by goal-setting theorists, teachers seemed to benefit the most from participating in IPI when they had a specific goal and when they expressed commitment to that goal as a mechanism for their own improvement. The findings reinforce how peer observations can be particularly fruitful sites for collaborative learning among teachers, highlight the challenges of using teacher evaluation data to support collaborative learning, and discuss the important role played by school leaders in implementing teacher collaborative efforts in schools.

Keywords
Collaboration, Partnerships, Improvement

Teachers have spent more time working together in recent decades than earlier in the 20th century (Hargreaves, 2010; Johnson et al., 2017). Collaboration among teachers is now considered a marker of effective schools (Bryk et al., 2010) and key to creating successful professional learning opportunities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Hawley & Valli, 1999). Substantial resources, effort, and time have been invested in professional learning communities (Vescio et al., 2008), peer coaching and observation programs (Goldstein, 2007), and other approaches encouraging collaboration around instruction (e.g., Vangrieken et al., 2015).

However, not all teacher collaboration is equally productive (Ronfeldt et al., 2015), and programs intended to foster collaboration may not always have the intended effects (Hargreaves, 2000; Talbert, 2010). Recent research on workgroup conversations among middle school math teachers found that collaboration often focuses on logistical matters and rarely creates opportunities for meaningful learning (Horn et al., 2017). Similarly, in assessing the implementation of data-driven professional learning communities, Hargreaves (2010) argued that teachers today spend much more time working together, but these collaborative efforts "are pleasurable, but also hurried, technical, uncritical, and narrow" (p. 150).

What, then, characterizes collaboration that creates opportunities for teacher learning and instructional improvement? I address this question within the context of an initiative intended to create instructionally focused teacher partnerships. This program, the Instructional Partnership Initiative (IPI), is a voluntary statewide teacher

development program in Tennessee. Principals pair teachers based on complementary areas of strength and weakness in specific domains of teaching practice based on indicator scores from their teacher evaluation. Results from a pilot study indicated that IPI participation led to significant improvement in teaching practice and student performance (Papay et al., 2020). While many collaborative efforts are intended to generally improve teaching and learning, teachers in IPI are paired for a specific goal—improvement in certain instructional domains—and this goal is linked to a measurable outcome embedded in the broader accountability structure. To better understand if and how this type of collaboration offers unique opportunities for instructional improvement, this study describes the nature of these partnerships using interview data with participating teachers.

In this study, I draw on goal-setting theory from the organizational and management literatures (Klein et al., 1999; Locke & Latham, 2002), as well as prior research on improvement-focused teacher collaboration, to explore how certain conditions within collaborative programs can support teacher improvement. Using IPI as an instrumental case study, I examine how teachers describe the specificity of their goals for collaborative work and their commitment to these goals to consider whether these features may hinder or facilitate learning. While exploring how collaborative partnerships unfold through this particular program, the theoretical constructs offered here could be applied to a broad range of collaborative activities.

Conceptual Framework

Collaboration is typically considered a means rather than an end (DuFour, 2011), and within schools, collaboration is often framed as a mechanism for teacher learning or school improvement (Johnson et al., 2017; Little, 2002; Talbert, 2010). Specific objectives are often embedded within programs meant to encourage collaboration. To explicitly examine the nature of these objectives, I apply a conceptual framework that connects key concepts of goal-setting theory—goal specificity and commitment—to prior research on how teacher collaboration can support instructional improvement.

Goals and Employee Performance

Specific, difficult goals lead to higher levels of employee and workgroup performance across many organizational settings (Klein et al., 1999; Locke & Latham, 2002). Goals help improve performance by directing employees' attention to important aspects of their work, increasing effort and persistence, and encouraging employees to seek out and activate relevant knowledge for goal-driven tasks (Locke & Latham, 2002). In contrast to generic "do your best" encouragement, specific goals clarify acceptable employee behavior and performance levels (Klein et al., 1999; Locke & Latham, 1990). Greater specificity may be particularly important in encouraging greater workgroup performance because vague goals among group members can create inconsistent expectations or confusion (O'Leary-Kelly et al., 1994).

This theorized relationship between goal-setting and performance depends on goal commitment, typically defined as employees' determination to reach a goal or willingness to expend effort over time toward achieving it (Hollenbeck & Klein, 1987; Locke et al., 1988). Individual employees or workgroups are typically more committed to goals they find important and attainable (Locke & Latham, 2002). Research on goal commitment offers inconclusive evidence about whether self-selected or supervisor-assigned goals are more effective (Locke et al., 1988; Zetik & Stuhlmacher, 2002). Self-selected goals may be more appropriate because employees typically know more about their jobs than their supervisors do, and workers may be more motivated to achieve self-selected goals. When goals are assigned, employees are more likely to commit to those set by supervisors whom they judge to have legitimate authority (Locke et al., 1988) and when supervisors effectively communicate and support their employees' goal attainment (Locke & Latham, 2002).

Applying Goal-Setting Theory to Instructional Improvement

The design of teacher evaluation systems more broadly (Darling-Hammond, 2013) and the type of collaboration studied in this analysis align with key tenets of goal-setting theory. Evaluation systems are intended to establish concrete and measurable standards of acceptable performance for teachers, highlight areas in which teachers excel or struggle, and create a framework on which performance goals, feedback, and incentives can be based (Hallinger et al., 2014). In Tennessee, as in many other states, evaluators and teachers identify a specific area of refinement (i.e., what teachers need to improve). While other collaborative programs often imply that collaboration is meant to improve instruction, IPI's explicit logic encourages strategic partnerships targeting improvement in specific areas of instructional practice. As such, this program offers a particularly fruitful opportunity to explore whether the goal specificity and commitment engendered through collaborative programs are likely to lead to instructional improvement.

Goal-Setting in Prior Research on Teacher Collaboration

Although goal-setting theory is rarely applied in research on teacher improvement (for an exception, see Seijts et al., 1998), concepts similar to goal specificity and commitment emerge throughout research examining supportive conditions for collaboration focused on instructional improvement. Collaboration can take many forms, including storytelling among teachers, planning nonacademic activities, or coordinating scheduling across classes (Horn et al., 2017; Little, 1990). Unlike these other forms of collaboration, *collaborating for improvement* focuses explicitly on developing or refining instructional practices. Many collaborative approaches introduced in recent decades are intended to support instructional improvement among teachers (Goldstein, 2007; Supovitz, 2002; Vescio et al., 2008).

Specificity

Teachers may benefit most when they dedicate collaborative time to close examinations of teaching and learning (Supovitz, 2002). Activities such as peer observations, co-creation of instructional materials and lesson planning, and analysis of student work are particularly useful for promoting teacher learning and developing instructional practices (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Parise & Spillane, 2010). This type of collaborative work allows teachers to deprivatize their teaching and discuss specific problems of practice (Little, 2003). Because teachers rarely teach together, they must make their instructional practice visible to their colleagues through peer observation or through collaborative activities that illustrate their practices. For example, teachers may engage in "replays," in which they describe or reenact a specific classroom event, or "rehearsals," in which they practice what they will do in future classes (Horn, 2010). Along with observations, such activities allow for the level of openness and specificity needed for teachers to develop a common language around instruction and refine their understanding of instructional practice (Horn et al., 2017; Little, 2003).

Commitment

Having a shared purpose often distinguishes collaboration (marked by interdependency) from situations in which teachers continue to work independently but share stories or ideas with each other (Little, 1990). Studies have found that teachers prefer collaboration with clear and meaningful goals and that school leaders play an outsized role in setting these goals (Charner-Laird et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2017; Scribner et al., 2007). However, collaboration that is overly prescribed through administrative mandates—with low levels of teacher commitment—can become oriented toward compliance rather than addressing genuine needs (Hargreaves, 2000; Talbert, 2010). Reflecting on over a decade of work with professional learning communities, Talbert (2010) differentiated bureaucratic approaches to collaboration marked by blanket policies mandating collaboration with top-down goals and performance measures related to accountability system demands. Teachers typically respond to these approaches by either "ritual enactment" of collaboration requirements or resistance that challenges the goals of collaborative initiatives. In contrast, professionalized approaches to building collaboration involve developing shared goals, strategically using school resources and structures to facilitate collaboration, and developing mutual accountability among teachers. Talbert (2010) argued that teachers are more receptive to and enthusiastic about professionalized approaches to collaboration. Thus, Talbert's framework suggests that teacher commitment to collaborative goals engenders more positive collaborative experiences.

Study Context

This study focuses on collaborative partnerships created through Tennessee's IPI, a teacher development program designed to pair teachers with low evaluation scores in

certain domains of instructional practice (i.e., a "target" teacher) with another teacher in their school who has high scores in the same domain(s). A randomized controlled trial from IPI's pilot in one Tennessee district found that students in treatment schools scored 0.06 standard deviations higher on standardized math and reading tests and that these treatment effects were higher among students whose teachers were identified as target teachers (Papay et al., 2020). After the initial pilot, IPI was rolled out as a statewide randomized controlled trial. This analysis uses data from teachers who participated during the second year of IPI's statewide implementation (2016–2017).[1]

Principals in treatment schools were given the option to implement IPI, but participation was not mandatory. The Tennessee Department of Education (TDOE) provided these principals with suggested teacher partnerships based on an algorithm that accounted for teachers' prior-year scores on observation rubrics rating mastery on specific domains of instruction practice (e.g., presenting instructional content, questioning, managing student behavior). This information also highlighted specific domains on which identified target teachers were lower scoring and indicated whether suggested partner teachers scored highly in that area. Importantly, this approach recommended partnerships based on domain-specific scores (i.e., pairing a teacher struggling with lesson structure and pacing with a teacher who demonstrated mastery in that area) rather than partnerships based on teachers' overall performance (i.e., pairing low-scoring teachers with high-scoring teachers).

As designed, the work of these partnerships should focus on certain domains of instructional practice. TDOE provided teacher and principal guidebooks to implementing schools. In their guidebook, principals are encouraged to provide participating teachers with guidance about which specific instructional domains they should focus on, offer clear expectations for how partnered teachers work together, and provide ongoing support throughout the year. The teacher guidebook includes suggested partnership activities, such as holding an introductory meeting to discuss expectations and norms, setting specific partnership goals, observing each other to provide feedback, and working together to create lesson plans.

While IPI collaborative partnerships are designed to focus on improvement in specific instructional domains, what these partnerships looked like in practice varied substantially across participating schools. This variation created an analytic opportunity to explore whether certain factors explained differences observed within and across schools. Grounded in how teachers themselves described their experience and building on the conceptual framework of goal specificity and commitment, this analysis explores this variation to examine how and why some collaborative partnerships appeared to create opportunities for learning, while others did not.

Data and Method

Data

The main data source for this study was interviews with teachers participating in IPI. These data were collected as part of a broader implementation study of IPI, and I was

a member of the research team undertaking that study. The research team purposively sampled schools and teachers who had more robust implementation of IPI (see Appendix A of the online supplemental materials for additional information). Of approximately 90 schools implementing IPI during 2016–2017, principal and teacher interviews were conducted in 13 schools. Given that prior research suggests that collaboration focused on instructional improvement is not a common occurrence in schools, this purposive sampling approach—in which schools and teachers were recruited based on higher levels of engagement—identifies information-rich cases (Patton, 2002) that provide useful insight into the nature of collaborative partnerships set up through IPI.

As part of the broader study, 72 teachers participated in interviews in April/May 2017. The semi-structured interview protocol included detailed questions about teachers' overall experiences with IPI, their relationships with their IPI partner, specific IPI collaborative activities, perceived benefits of IPI, and how IPI differed from other types of ongoing collaboration. Teacher interviews, which typically lasted between 30 and 45 min, were audio-recorded with the permission of participating teachers and then transcribed.

Sample

For this analysis, I limited the sample to partnerships among regular classroom teachers in which both teachers were interviewed. This allowed me to better triangulate information across interviews and explore how partners' perceptions of their collaboration varied. Next, I dropped four teachers (representing two schools) from the analysis because their schools only had one partnership remaining after applying the first inclusion rule. Finally, I eliminated one school from the sample because its implementation of IPI varied substantially from the program as designed (see Appendix A of the online supplemental materials for more details).

Table 1 presents information about the school level, geographic context, teaching assignment, and teaching experience of the 48 teachers included in the analytic sample. These teachers teach across a wide range of subject areas and grades, and they have varying levels of experiences. Importantly, this sample is not meant to be representative of all Tennessee teachers or of all teachers participating in IPI.

Analysis

In the early stages of this project, I engaged in an initial round of open coding grounded in the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) for 20% of the interviews (10 randomly selected teachers). Next, I examined the most significant and recurring codes (Charmaz, 2014). Specificity of partnership goals and teachers' commitment emerged during this initial coding phase as important elements of collaborative partnerships. Next, I created theoretically driven codes and categories based on goal-setting theory. I tested this coding framework on another 10% of the interviews (five randomly selected teachers) and

Table 1. Descriptive Information About Teachers in Analytic Sample.

	N of teachers (% of sample)
School level	
Elementary	32 (67)
High	16 (33)
Geographic context	
Rural/town	30 (63)
Suburban	10 (21)
Urban	8 (17)
Teaching assignments	
Elementary (self-contained)	19 (37)
English language arts (ELA)	5 (10)
Math	9 (18)
Science	8 (15)
Social studies	5 (10)
Special education	2 (4)
Electives (e.g., arts, CTE, PE)	3 (6)
Years of experience	
0–5	10 (21)
6–10	17 (36)
11–20	15 (32)
More than 20	5 (11)
Total	48 teachers (100)

Note. Not all subtotals add up to total because there a few teachers had multiple assignments, and one teacher was missing data on experience. CTE = career and technical education; PE = physical education.

made minor edits to the framework, such as clarifying code definitions. The finalized coding framework is presented in Table A1 in the online supplemental materials, and I detail next how I categorized teachers based on goal specificity and commitment. Once the coding framework was finalized, I worked with two research assistants to code the full analytic sample (48 teacher interviews).

Specificity. In their interviews, teachers were asked to describe the overall objectives for IPI and specific goals or focus areas for their partnership. After coding each interview, I made a holistic determination of low specificity or high specificity for each teacher based on how they described their partnership (see Table A1 for descriptions and example quotes).

Commitment. The teacher interviews included questions asking teachers to evaluate their experience with IPI, including whether they felt their partnership goals and activities were worthwhile. For each teacher, I made a holistic determination of high or low

commitment (see Table A12). Importantly, this coding does not capture teachers' commitment to their own improvement generally, but whether they were committed to the specific goals and improvement processes embedded within their IPI partnership. Three teachers were coded as *Not Applicable* because they framed the partnership work as exclusively supporting their partner's improvement and unrelated to their own professional learning.

Reliability. Approximately 60% of the analytic sample (28 of 48 teacher interviews) were independently coded and categorized by myself and one of the research assistants. I assessed interrater reliability for these double-coded interviews and found that our categorizations agreed in 90% of cases (we reconciled all differences). The remaining teacher interviews were coded and categorized by one coder.

After coding was completed for all teachers, I examined both specificity and commitment at the partnership level. Specificity refers to the nature of the partnership itself (i.e., the focus or goals of partnership work), and commitment refers to each individual teacher's personal orientation toward those goals. A total of 42 teachers (88%) were originally coded as having the same level of specificity as their partner, and 34 teachers (71%) were coded as having the same level of commitment as their partner. For all partnerships with divergent coding, I reread the interviews to see if the difference in coding reflected actual differences in the teachers' descriptions of their partnerships (or their orientation toward it), or if it reflected differences in the information collected during the interview. I then made final determinations about how partnerships should be coded. For six of the partnerships with differing levels of commitment, the difference in coding reflected clear divergence in each teacher's commitment to their partnership and its goals as a mechanism for improvement. These pairs—defined here as "mixed" commitment—are further described in the "Results" section.

Perceived Benefits. To better demonstrate how partnerships differed based on specificity and commitment, I present four illustrative case studies highlighting how partnership activities and perceived benefits of IPI vary between low-specificity/low-commitment and high-specificity/high-commitment partnerships. Before selecting these cases, I first read the coded text for all teacher partnerships in these two categories and wrote brief summaries capturing reported participation and perception of IPI's benefits. I then selected cases aligning with the general patterns in each group. Because teachers' experiences appeared to vary based on whether partners taught similar grades/subjects, I purposefully selected two cases teaching similar grades/subjects and two cases teaching different grade/subjects. To supplement these cases, I also coded all teachers' perceptions of the benefits of IPI participation as low, medium, and high (see Table A12). In their interviews, teachers were asked what they had learned from participating in IPI, benefits of participation, whether they enjoyed participating, and how they would rate their experience with IPI in terms of an effective use of time on a scale of 1 to 10. Thus, I compared these perceived benefits across levels of goal specificity and commitment.

Table 2 presents information about each teacher, including their school type (elementary or high), partnership type (whether paired within or across subject/grade), teaching assignments, and assigned levels of specificity, commitment, and perceived benefits.

Results

First, I describe and catalog the level of goal specificity and commitment among interviewed teachers (Table 2). Then, I use four comparative cases to demonstrate how the collaborative partnerships unfolded differently in low-specificity/low-commitment partnerships and high-specificity/high-commitment partnerships. Finally, I explore factors that appeared to engender high or low levels of goal specificity and commitment among teachers.

Describing and Categorizing Goal Specificity and Commitment

Goal Specificity. All teachers in the analytic sample described the goals and purpose of the IPI as generally relating to teaching or instruction. However, when asked about the specific objectives or focus of their partnership work, teachers' reported level of specificity varied substantially. As shown in Table 2, 9 partnerships were identified as having low goal specificity, whereas 15 partnerships were identified as having high goal specificity. Next, I illustrate the differences between low specificity and high specificity as described by teachers themselves.

Low Specificity. Teachers in partnerships with low goal specificity described the goals of IPI as sharing ideas, swapping instructional strategies, or giving advice as needed by their partner. These teachers framed their partnership as more general collaboration among teachers. Low specificity seemed to manifest in two different ways. In most of these partnerships, teachers reported having no particular goal or focus and often characterized their partnership work as checking in with their partner about what was happening in their classroom (e.g., "just whatever was on our mind that we were struggling with, that we needed advice on"). For those in low-specificity partnerships who engaged in classroom observations, teachers described their observations as "just watching" or "observing their routines, their procedures, their teaching strategies." In a few partnerships, teachers had objectives for every given partnership activity, but there was no overarching goal or sustained focus. In one case (Pair B), both teachers described their IPI work in terms of "activities" and reported they had discussed their evaluation scores, shared their lesson planning templates, brainstormed how to improve their time management, and cotaught a technology-focused lesson. While both teachers described some of these activities as helpful, their partnership was not driven by an overarching improvement goal.

High Specificity. In contrast, teachers in partnerships with high goal specificity often named a specific goal(s) and described how that goal(s) guided their collaboration. In

Table 2. Teacher-Level Partnership Information.

Sch. ID	Sch. level	Pair ID	Same subject?	Tch. ID	Tch. assignment	Level of specificity	Level of commitment	Perceived benefits
1	Elem.	A	Same	A1	Self-contained (K)	Low	High	Medium
1	Elem.	A	Same	A2	Self-contained (K)	Low	High	High
1	Elem.	B	Same	B1	Self-contained (1)	Low	Low	Medium
1	Elem.	B	Same	B2	Self-contained (1)	Low	High	High
2	High	C	Same	C1	ELA	Low	Low	Low
2	High	C	Same	C2	ELA	Low	Low	Low
2	High	D	Same	D1	Social studies	Low	Low	Low
2	High	D	Same	D2	Social studies	Low	Low	Low
3	Elem.	E	Same	E1	Special education	High	High	High
3	Elem.	E	Same	E2	Self-contained (2)	High	High	Medium
3	Elem.	F	Same	F1	Science/social studies	High	High	Medium
3	Elem.	F	Same	F2	Science/social studies	High	High	Medium
3	Elem.	G	Different	G1	Self-contained (3)	High	Low	Low
3	Elem.	G	Different	G2	ELA	High	Low	Medium
4	Elem.	H	Different	H1	Self-contained (2)	High	High	Medium
4	Elem.	H	Different	H2	Self-contained (K)	High	N/A	High
4	Elem.	I	Different	I1	Self-contained (1)	High	Low	Medium
4	Elem.	I	Different	I2	Self-contained (3)	High	N/A	Low
4	Elem.	J	Same	J1	Math	High	High	Medium
4	Elem.	J	Same	J2	Math	High	High	High
5	High	K	Different	K1	Career-technical	High	Low	Medium
5	High	K	Different	K2	Math	High	High	Medium
5	High	L	Different	L1	Science	Low	Low	Low
5	High	L	Different	L2	Performing arts	Low	Low	Medium
6	High	M	Different	M1	Science	High	Low	Medium

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Sch. ID	Sch. level	Pair ID	Same subject?	Tch. ID	Tch. assignment	Level of specificity	Level of commitment	Perceived benefits
6	High	M	Different	M2	Math	High	Low	Medium
6	High	N	Same	N1	Math	Low	Low	Medium
6	High	N	Same	N2	Math	Low	Low	Low
7	Elem.	O	Different	O1	ELA	Low	High	High
7	Elem.	O	Different	O2	Special education	Low	High	High
7	Elem.	P	Different	P1	Self-contained (3)	Low	High	High
7	Elem.	P	Different	P2	Self-contained (K)	Low	High	High
8	Elem.	Q	Different	Q1	Science/social studies	High	High	High
8	Elem.	Q	Different	Q2	Self-contained (K)	High	High	Medium
8	Elem.	R	Different	R1	Science	High	High	High
8	Elem.	R	Different	R2	Self-contained (1)	High	High	Medium
8	Elem.	S	Different	S1	Self-contained (2)	High	High	High
8	Elem.	S	Different	S2	ELA	High	High	High
9	Elem.	T	Different	T1	Self-contained (3)	High	Low	Medium
9	Elem.	T	Different	T2	Self-contained (5)	High	High	Medium
9	Elem.	U	Different	U1	Self-contained (2)	High	Low	Medium
9	Elem.	U	Different	U2	Special education	High	N/A	High
9	Elem.	V	Different	V1	Self-contained (2)	Low	Low	Low
9	Elem.	V	Different	V2	Math	Low	Low	Low
10	High	W	Same	W1	Math	High	High	Medium
10	High	W	Same	W2	Math	Low	High	Medium
10	High	X	Same	X1	Science	High	High	High
10	High	X	Same	X2	CTE/science	High	High	High

Note. ELA = English language arts; CTE = CTE = career and technical education.

most cases, this specific goal was aligned with an area of instructional need—referred to as a teacher's refinement area—identified through their formal observation (e.g., lesson structure and pacing, questioning, grouping students). In a few cases, principals explicitly told teachers to focus on a certain area in their partnership work. For example, one teacher reported that their principal "highlighted some things that [my partner] needed to work on, just a couple of them—problem solving was one of them." In most cases, principals suggested that IPI partnerships focus on teachers' refinement area from their recent evaluation and/or gave teachers autonomy to decide themselves what they wanted to focus on. Teachers in high-specificity partnerships explained how observations, feedback, or conversations with their partner were often framed around their goal or focus area. For example, one teacher described how her observations of her partner focused specifically on questioning, which was her partner's area of refinement. She explained, "My main focus was how many questions [and] were they higher order thinking versus the lower level." This teacher described how she kept tallies of the number and level of the questions used by her partner during the observation, which she later shared and discussed with her partner. Other teachers within high-specificity partnerships similarly reported collecting and sharing feedback focused on certain instructional domains identified as a specific area of focus for their partnership.

Commitment. As with any improvement program implemented in schools, teachers expressed varying degrees of commitment to the goals embedded within their IPI partnership. Overall, 7 partnerships were identified as low commitment, 6 partnerships were identified as mixed commitment, and 11 partnerships were identified as high commitment (see Table 2). The following sections describe how teachers in low-commitment, mixed-commitment, and high-commitment partnerships described their orientation toward their partnership goals.

Low Commitment. Teachers in partnerships identified as low goal commitment often described their partnership work as "another thing to do" or explained that their partnership replicated the types of collaboration that they already do, "just with paperwork." These teachers tended to frame their partnership work as compliance-oriented rather than improvement-oriented. In describing her reaction to the program's introduction, one teacher explained how she "just added it to the list and moved on." Some teachers emphasized the paperwork associated with IPI and suggested that much of their focus was on completing the necessary documentation. Many teachers within this group indicated that their partnership did not offer anything new or different from other forms of collaboration (e.g., "this was just another form that we fill out to go along with things we were already doing"). Most teachers within this group clarified that they believed peer collaboration can be beneficial, but this particular partnership was not structured in a way to support their learning or improvement.

High Commitment. Teachers in partnerships identified as high goal commitment framed IPI as a way for them to learn and improve. Multiple teachers explained how

their partnership's goals and associated work offered them collaborative learning opportunities or supportive professional relationships that may not have been available otherwise. For example, one teacher described the program "as the opportunity that we all want to have, to go see another teacher who may do some things differently than we do." Other teachers highlighted the importance of having a peer to discuss challenges or who could provide helpful feedback. Not all teachers coded as high commitment felt instantly excited about the program. For example, one teacher coded as high commitment described how "at first, I thought, ugh, something else to do" but that her mindset changed once matched "because I knew that I could learn a lot from her."

Mixed Commitment. Finally, six pairs of teachers were identified as having mixed goal commitment. Half of the partnerships in this group reflected the same pattern. In these partnerships (Pairs H, I, and U), one teacher was clearly positioned as a mentor and one teacher was positioned as the mentee. For example, when asked to describe the goals of the program, one of these teachers explained, "As a mentor, your goal is to tell the person that you're working with some things that really help you become a better teacher and in the end, attain better [observation] scores." The mentor teacher in these three pairs viewed the partnership as something to help their partner but did not consider their partnership work as a mechanism to learn or improve themselves (these teachers are listed as N/A, for not applicable, in Table 2). Two additional partnerships in this group (Pairs K and T) also described their relationship in hierarchical terms. The hierarchical nature of these partnerships created tensions that seemed to differentially influence teachers' commitment to their goals and partnership work. For example, one teacher who was considered a mentee explained that the program creates "like a stigma, saying that I need to work on these things . . . I must be doing something really bad." Unlike high-commitment partnerships, teachers in mixed partnerships did not consistently frame the goals of their partnership as something meant to help them both learn and grow professionally.

Comparative Cases

To better illustrate how IPI partnership activities and perceived benefits varied across goal specificity and commitment, I highlight four pairs of teachers from the broader sample. The nature of partnerships unfolded differently based on school context and partnership type (i.e., whether teachers were paired within or across subject/grade). Thus, I have constructed two sets of comparative cases to illustrate differences between low-specificity/low-commitment and high-specificity/high-commitment partnerships. I focus on these partnerships because (1) the majority of pairs in the sample (13 of 24 pairs) fell into these two categories, and (2) they provide the clearest contrast to illustrate how goal specificity and commitment can facilitate greater learning opportunities for teachers during collaborative partnerships. In both cases, I have selected pairs of teachers who look similar "on paper" but whose partnership experiences diverged con-

siderably. Table A2 in the online supplemental materials presents additional information about the two comparative cases.

Comparative Case #1: Elementary Teachers Paired Across Grade Level. In the first case, I compare the partnership of Sandra and Ashley (Pair V) with the partnership of Jasmine and Meg (Pair S). In both pairs, a self-contained second-grade teacher was paired with a fifth- or sixth-grade teacher who was departmentalized (see Panel A of Table A2 for more information). All four teachers discussed this large grade-level difference and questioned, at least initially, what they could learn from the partnership. In Sandra and Ashley's school, the principal gave little guidance about how teachers should engage with their IPI partner and did not assign any goals. Sandra and Ashley felt that they were left on their own to figure out what their partnership should be about. Each teacher described the goals of the program in general terms ("to learn more about teaching") and the focus of their partnership work—which mostly revolved around informal chats—as sharing ideas about teaching in their respective grade level ("more on the general side of handling things in the opposite grade level"). Neither Sandra nor Ashley described the program as supporting their own instructional improvement and clearly expressed their low commitment. Ashley described it as "another thing to do," while Sandra said "I didn't put much thought into it." Neither teacher felt that their partnership was a priority or relevant to their instructional needs. They both reported putting little effort into their partnership work.

Jasmine and Meg described their partnership experience much differently. Their principal explained that they were matched based on their observation scores and, specifically, because of their refinement areas. The principal asked each pair to determine an area of focus and then complete two sets of observations. Both teachers explained that they were a bit skeptical at first, given the large difference in grade levels (Jasmine recalled thinking, "Why in the world am I with fifth? I mean, you know, fifth grade, that's a huge jump"). However, the rationale for their pairing and specific ways that they could help each other quickly became clear. As Meg explained, the principal's specific guidance and focus on refinement areas helped the teachers make sense of what they should be doing together:

> Why am I paired with this person? But when [the principal] said reinforcement and refinement, it was pretty easy to understand. I could go pull out [my evaluation] and [the principal] looked at those and was able to say, well, this person needs [this]. I could see—after being in her class and she being in mine—it totally made sense.

As they began working together, Meg and Jasmine quickly decided to set partnership goals based on specific needs that their partner was particularly well positioned to help them with. For example, Jasmine had recently switched to second grade from teaching kindergarten, and she had struggled with teaching more advanced writing. Meg—a fifth-grade English language arts teacher—could support her in this area. They planned Jasmine's observations so she could observe Meg doing lessons on writing ("So when

I went down there, she would always show me different types of writings"). Similarly, Meg—who was focused on grouping and centers—described how she concentrated her observations on how Jasmine managed her group work and centers. Jasmine and Meg both explained how their partnership created a supportive, collaborative relationship that they would never have sought out themselves but that really helped them improve in a specific area of instructional need.

Comparative Case #2: High School Teachers in Similar Subjects. The second case compares the partnership between Calvin and Graham (Pair N) with the partnership of Victoria and Zion (Pair X). Both pairs worked in small rural high schools in which they were the only teachers who taught their particular classes, and both partnerships were between teachers who taught in similar subjects (see Panel B of Table A2 for more information). In Calvin and Graham's school, the principal encouraged them to observe each other, but otherwise provided no rationale for why the teachers were paired together or specific expectations for IPI. Both teachers associated IPI with encouraging collaboration within their subject area. For example, when asked to describe the goals of the program, Calvin explained,

> It would be [getting] any teacher in a certain discipline to work together . . . I know a lot of places, you would get like all the algebra teachers doing common assessments, but our school is so small, most of us teach things independently of the others.

Although both Calvin and Graham appreciated being partnered with another math teacher, they questioned what their partnership work added to what they already did together. Calvin described IPI as replicating and documenting work that he had always done with Graham ("it's nothing different than what we've previously done"). Neither teacher identified any particular goal or focus for their partnership work, and neither associated their partnership with improving instruction. In fact, both teachers expressed some reluctance to provide feedback to their partner after their observation. Calvin said he did not feel like his role should include providing critical feedback to Graham ("as a professional, you don't want to get too [negative]"), and Graham similarly expressed hesitation about discussing any instructional weaknesses with Calvin.

In contrast, Victoria and Zion both enthusiastically described their partnership experience and hoped they could continue it during the next school year. Although they worked in different departments (Victoria taught health and medical science electives while Zion taught biology), both teachers described their subject matter as overlapping. In setting up the expectations of the program, their principal explained that they should identify a focus area based on their strengths and weaknesses, observe each other at least twice, and provide feedback through an observation template provided by the principal. Before each observation, they would meet and discuss the goals for that observation. Victoria and Zion differentiated their partnership work from other types of collaboration, and both teachers explained how their partner gave them some of the best feedback that they had ever received on their teaching. Victoria said, "[we]

openly talked about things that we needed to improve on" and explained how their partnership "built a platform for constructive criticism" that she really valued. Zion similarly explained they had built a trusting relationship encouraging constructive feedback.

For Jasmine and Meg, and Victoria and Zion, their partnership was focused on specific areas of instructional need (high specificity) and, in their words, offered them a way to improve their practice that they would not otherwise have had (high commitment). Their cases illustrate how these partnerships can create opportunities for professional learning and growth.

Perceived Benefits Across All Cases. To supplement the mentioned cases, I also assessed the level of perceived benefits of IPI for all teachers in the sample (see Table 2). Of the 10 teachers in low-specificity/low-commitment pairs, 80% described IPI as having no or few benefits (see the "low" code defined in Table A1), and 20% described IPI as having some benefits but that these benefits were moderate or that barriers had impeded the program from being very useful (coded as "medium"). In qualitatively assessing how teachers in these pairs described the benefits (or lack thereof) in IPI participation, I found that teachers often described the potential of the program, but they felt like they did not learn much or anything because it lacked structure, dedicated time, or direction. Of the 16 teachers in high-specificity/high-commitment pairs, half described IPI as having moderate benefits, and half described IPI as having tangible and meaningful benefits to their instruction or professional growth (coded as "high"). In their responses, these teachers often could identify specific instructional strategies that they had learned from their partner and/or explained how it created an important avenue for reflection and feedback.

Exploring Factors Accompanying High Specificity and High Commitment

Goal specificity and commitment seemed to mutually reinforce one another, and certain patterns emerged in the analysis in terms of individual, relational, and school factors that appeared associated with high specificity and high commitment. I discuss these factors together and note if certain factors seem more strongly associated with specificity or commitment.

Individual Factors. Teaching experience and teachers' mindset about improvement seemed to shape their commitment to their partnership goals and associated collaborative work as a means for learning. Almost all teachers expressed support for the idea that teachers learn throughout their careers, and collaboration can encourage learning. This mindset was especially prevalent among more novice teachers. For example, a second-year teacher explained, "I think I'm receptive to [IPI] because I know I'm new, and I always need to grow, you know?" In a few cases, more experienced teachers rejected their partnership as a way to improve (demonstrating low commitment) because they did not feel it was appropriate for them, as veteran teachers, to be included

in this program. In these cases, teachers described the program as a mentorship in which a mentor teacher was helping them (the mentee) improve their evaluation scores. For example, one teacher who had 7 years of experience explained her frustration about being selected to participate: "I'm not a new teacher. I mean, I'm still not perfect but I'm not a new teacher. And so I guess in some ways I'm kind of like why [is my partner] still having to work with me." Other teachers suggested that partnerships may work better if newer teachers are paired with veteran teachers:

> Did I learn anything? Honestly, I don't think I did. I mean, I know that's bad. I wasn't fully in it. . . . But I can see the benefit in this program, I really can, if it was partner[ing] a one- to three-year teacher and veteran teacher that were similar in grade.

However, numerous veterans expressed their enthusiasm for IPI as a way to continue to learn throughout their careers. While reflecting on what she learned from her partnership, Meg explained, "You know, you think, I've done this 20 years, there's nothing that I could learn from somebody," but her collaboration with Jasmine confirmed that she could still learn a lot. She explained, "To me, that solidified in my mind that the program was really a good thing." Other veteran teachers expressed high commitment when they identified their partnership as one means to continue to learn and grow.

Relational Factors. As with any collaborative effort, interpersonal dynamics influenced how teachers worked together. While a few teachers explained that personality incompatibilities or personal conflicts strained their partnerships, the most important relational factor that seemed to encourage both goal specificity and commitment was teachers' perceptions of their own expertise and their partner's expertise. There seemed to be a reciprocal relationship between specificity, partnership type (i.e., similar subject vs. different subject), and expertise. For partnerships matched within similar grades/subjects, teachers easily recognized how their partner had relevant instructional expertise to share. For example, one teacher explained why he appreciated being matched with a fellow math teacher:

> We kind of know what we're doing with each other—we can relate to each other as kind of the same background. Because it really wouldn't do much if I sit in on biology or English, because it'd be hard for me to give them any feedback.

However, for same-grade/subject partnerships without a specific focus, teachers had a hard time determining what they should have been doing in their partnership beyond collaboration already occurring within subject-area or grade-level teams. For example, Calvin and Graham both questioned the goals of the partnership and what it was supposed to add to their ongoing collaboration within their math department. Joking that he and Graham were "pleasantly ambivalent" about the program, Calvin explained, "So that's something we would've done anyway, you know, whether or not we were supposed to meet [for IPI] or not. It's just it helped us fulfill our requirements for this."

In contrast, all same-grade/same-subject partnerships coded as high levels of specificity also expressed high commitment to their partnership as a way to improve. This increased specificity may have helped teachers differentiate IPI from their other grade-level or subject–area collaboration.

Expertise operated slightly differently for teachers matched across grades and subjects. Many of these teachers expressed initial reluctance or surprise about being partnered with a teacher in a different subject area or grade level (e.g., remember that Meg and Jasmine were both hesitant about their pairing). However, specific partnership goals helped them understand how they could capitalize on the expertise of their partner. In contrast, for teachers like Sandra and Ashley, cross-grade teachers in low-specificity partnerships felt they had little to offer each other in terms of useful expertise. In three of the elementary schools in the sample (Schools 7, 8, and 9), all teachers were intentionally paired across grade level. Teachers in these schools could easily differentiate the goals of IPI from those of grade-level collaboration and explained how the program had encouraged peer observations or vertical planning. When asked to compare her IPI partnership with other types of professional learning, a teacher in School 8 explained how there were tradeoffs in terms of what the cross-grade partnership could offer:

> [IPI is] definitely more useful in helping the culture, the environment of our building, relationships, and more useful in me self-reflecting on my teaching. . . . And a lot of us wouldn't do that without something like this, and it gives us a safe environment to do that. . . [It is] less useful in specific stuff for my subject area because, you know, we've gotten ideas, but if I want specific stuff on the science standards, that's not where I'm going to get it.

For some teachers, the differences across content area or grade level created too much distance for the partnerships to be an effective vehicle for instructional improvement, even with a specific focus.

Organizational Factors. As illustrated in the four cases, principals implemented IPI quite differently across schools. How the principal introduced and supported the program seemed to shape the goal specificity and commitment reported by teachers. In some schools, principals did not provide much detail about the goals of the program overall nor set any expectations about how teachers should structure or focus their partnership work. For Sandra and Ashley, their principal provided them with the program guidebook, but otherwise, as Ashley explained, "It was mostly just kind of up to the partners in the partnership." Neither teacher knew why they were paired up, although Ashley mentioned that her principal had told her they were "randomly" selected to participate. Without any further guidance, they did not have any particular reason for working together (i.e., low specificity) and did not feel like it was meant to help them improve (i.e., low commitment). In contrast, most teachers in partnerships coded as high levels of specificity were explicitly told by their principals that their

partnership was meant to focus on their areas of refinement from their evaluation or that they should identify an instructional area of focus for their partnership. For many teachers, this specific focus differentiated IPI from other types of collaboration and oriented their partnership work around their own improvement. For example, one teacher reflected on how her partnership was much more individualized than other professional development opportunities:

> I mean, I think that it's probably better than most [PD] because it's more specified and more individualized . . . it's nice to have that one person that you can build a relationship with, like a bond that, you know, they've seen me teach. They know my weaknesses, they know my strengths, and it's nice that you can have this conversation and I can get positive feedback and constructive criticism.

Especially when principals encouraged and supported peer observations as part of IPI, teachers often embraced the opportunity to observe as a crucial learning opportunity they would not normally get. For many teachers, this seemed to increase their commitment to the partnership.

Finally, whether and how principals talked about the use of evaluation data in creating the partnerships varied across schools. In some schools, principals did not explain how teachers were matched and did not emphasize the use of evaluation data in selecting and placing teachers in partnerships.[2] Teachers in these schools often lacked clarity about exactly why they were matched with their partner. Although some teachers speculated that they were intentionally matched within grade/subject or partnered based on their personalities, these teachers were not sure how to focus their partnership work. For example, one teacher who was paired with someone in her grade level explained that she did not know why she was matched and reflected that "clearer instructions would be good and maybe like why we're doing it . . . when you're paired with somebody across the hall and you talk all the time, it's just kind of strange." In other schools, principals told teachers explicitly that evaluation scores were used in matching teachers. In some cases, principals asked teachers to discuss their strengths and weaknesses and decide a goal for their observation ("she asked us to compare our evaluation scores and pick out a strength and a weakness"), provided information illustrating how they were matched ("we had a piece of paper that showed where we were weak in areas and where our strengths were in areas"), or directly told teachers what they should focus on ("After our evaluations, she kind of focused us on areas that we needed to strengthen"). In these cases, teachers had a specific goal for their partnership work and explained how their partnership activities concentrated on these areas.

However, this explicit focus on evaluation caused a small number of teachers to reject the partnership as a mechanism for improvement (i.e., low commitment). Some teachers felt that matching lower and higher scoring teachers created tension that made it difficult to work together effectively. For example, Graham did not feel comfortable talking with Calvin about evaluation and explained, "Sometimes evaluations really don'*t* have a good connotation behind it." Especially in schools in which the

partnership was framed as mentoring, some teachers indicated that participating in IPI created "stigma" or an uncomfortable situation in which one teacher was positioned as the authority.

Discussion

Through an analytic process grounded in how teachers describe their collaboration, I explore how goal specificity and commitment can shape how targeted collaborative partnerships promote learning opportunities for teachers. This analysis builds on prior work classifying collaboration (Hargreaves, 2000; Little, 1990) by using theory from organizational and management studies on employee performance to examine the interplay among different dimensions of collaboration (i.e., specificity and commitment). As posited by goal-setting theorists (Klein et al., 1999; Locke & Latham, 1990, 2002), teachers seemed to benefit the most from participating in the IPI when they had a specific goal and when they expressed commitment to that goal as a mechanism for their own improvement.

For participating teachers, having a specific goal gave them a reason to participate in IPI, made it easier to differentiate IPI from other collaborations, and helped teachers plan targeted collaboration focusing on specific instructional practices. While teachers without a specific focus sometimes described their partnership work as helpful to or supportive of their professional development, the learning that happened in these partnerships often seemed to occur by chance. For example, teachers in low-specificity matches explained how they happened to observe a particular instructional strategy that they thought would work in their own classroom, or they saw how their partner teacher managed a student whom they struggled to work with. Teachers in a high-specificity partnership also described these accidental or peripheral learnings but more often explained how their partnership work helped them reflect on and develop a specific instructional skill. They typically organized their observations and other partnership work around these areas, and these teachers were more likely to describe getting and giving specific instructional feedback within their partnership. This is likely because more targeted observations, conversations, and feedback encouraged teachers to move beyond simply swapping stories (Little, 1990) or offering up "tips and tricks" (Horn et al., 2017), and instead encouraged teachers to talk about their instructional practice in concrete, specific terms rooted in what they actually do in their classroom (Levine & Marcus, 2010; Little, 2002).

Goal specificity alone, however, was not sufficient to create learning opportunities for teachers. Teachers' commitment to the specific goals embedded in their partnership work also seemed an important condition to support learning. Teachers in low- or mixed-commitment partnerships often expressed resistance to IPI as implemented in their schools, and they described their partnership work as a means to a bureaucratic end. These teachers were focused on getting in their hours, filling out the associated paperwork, and fulfilling the requirements of the program. Their language aligned with "contrived collegiality," a term coined by Hargreaves (2000) to describe

collaborative work that is administratively mandated and heavily controlled by school leaders. In contrast, teachers in high-commitment partnerships framed their collaboration as a means to learn or grow professionally, and they articulated ways in which their collaboration provided an opportunity to reflect, to get targeted feedback, and to refine their instructional skills. Victoria, one of the teachers from the high-specificity/high-commitment pair profiled in the high school comparative case, explicitly differentiated between collaborative opportunities oriented toward compliance versus learning. She described her experience in IPI as "professional development at its best" and explained, "I mean, not professional development to have it written on paper, but you actually get to learn from one another."

Limitations

Before discussing the implications of these findings, I must acknowledge certain limitations. This study draws exclusively on interviews in which teachers describe their collaborative partnerships. I relied on what teachers reported doing rather than direct observations of IPI partnership work. What teachers reported doing may have been different from what they actually did for a multitude of reasons, including pressure to report certain activities, desire to please the interviewer, or hazy memories of collaborative activities completed early in the year. To mitigate against this limitation, I specifically examined the degree to which teachers in the same partnership described engaging in similar activities. In almost all cases, I found that teachers reported qualitatively similar partnership activities. Future analyses observing collaborative partnership work between teachers would be particularly well situated to carefully examine how the specific tasks and nature of collaboration vary when teachers set different types of goals.

Like many other studies of collaboration, this analysis only focuses on describing collaboration engendered by a specific program. IPI differs somewhat from other, well-studied collaborative efforts such as professional learning communities. While most collaboration entails groups of teachers brought together because of a shared subject area or grade level (Vangrieken et al., 2015), IPI is designed to facilitate pairs of teachers—matched based on domain-specific teacher evaluation data—to collaborate around specific instructional practices. Consequently, the findings of this analysis may not be broadly generalizable to all types of teacher collaboration. However, the conceptual framework presented here may be applicable to other forms of collaboration.

Implications

These findings have implications for school leaders implementing programs meant to encourage instructionally focused teacher collaboration and the broader research base on teacher collaboration. First, the findings reinforce how certain collaborative activities may be particularly fruitful sites for collaborative learning among teachers. Teachers in this sample reiterated the value of peer observation to make their teaching

visible to their peers, reflect on instructional choices, and develop a shared language of teaching (Horn, 2010; Little, 2003). Especially in observations in high-specificity partnerships, teachers focused their attention on specific instructional moves or choices related to their own or their partner's area of refinement. Some principals further supported these targeted observations by adopting peer observation templates aligned with this specific focus. This higher level of specificity in observation seemed to create more space for dialogue and constructive criticism from peers. As illustrated in the case of Calvin and Graham, teachers who engaged in peer observation in low-specificity partnerships expressed reluctance to provide any critique or negative comments about their partner. The focus built into observations in high-specificity matches facilitated more constructive conversations about *the teaching* rather than *the teacher*.

The analysis also speaks to the possibilities and pitfalls of using teacher evaluation data to structure instructionally focused partnerships among teachers. Like Tennessee, other states and districts across the country have invested heavily in developing new teacher evaluation systems but have struggled to use these new systems to support improvement (Darling-Hammond, 2013). Most of the teachers in this analysis described the broader goals of IPI using the language of instructional improvement but varied in how closely they associated the program with evaluation. Teachers who focused their collaborative work on instructional domains, as defined by the observation rubric, more easily differentiated their IPI partnership from other forms of collaboration focusing on standards, content, or students. However, the explicit use of evaluation data sometimes provoked greater resistance from teachers and engendered lower commitment. Some teachers felt that partnering higher and lower scoring teachers created tensions within the school and impeded partners from creating trusting relationships. In addition, some teachers expressed reluctance to speak frankly with peers about their weaknesses and instead engaged in surface-level conversations or congratulatory praise for what their partners did well. Especially among teachers in low-specificity/low-commitment partnerships, this "persistence of privacy"—identified by Little (1990) as a normative feature of schools that hampers collaborative learning among teachers—meant that teachers did not feel comfortable engaging in improvement-oriented collaboration.

Finally, this analysis reiterates the important role played by school leaders in facilitating collaboration that can support teacher learning (Charner-Laird et al., 2017; Louis et al., 2010; Rigby et al., 2020; Talbert, 2010). Across all 10 schools in this analysis, how principals introduced and supported partnerships seemed to shape goal specificity and commitment. Principals faced numerous dilemmas in how to implement the program in their school. First, principals had to decide how to describe the use of evaluation data in selecting teachers and creating partnerships. Although IPI is designed to target teachers who have lower observation scores in particular instructional domains and match them with teachers in their school who demonstrate mastery in those domains, most principals in this sample did not describe the program in this way. For those who did, some teachers expressed resistance to the idea of creating hierarchical or mentoring relationships based on evaluation data (i.e., low commitment). Another dilemma facing principals is whether to direct teachers to work on

specific areas of refinement from their prior evaluations or allow them greater autonomy in choosing the goals of their partnership. In some schools, principals provided very little guidance, and teachers were unclear about why they were paired together and how they should focus their partnership work (i.e., low specificity). Most principals explained the program as matching teachers based on strengths or weaknesses and encouraged teachers to discuss and select an area to focus on in their partnership work. Although this explanation seemed to prompt greater commitment among teachers to the espoused goals of the program, it meant that teachers had less information on why they were specifically matched. Finally, a few principals gave teachers very explicit directions about how to focus their IPI partnership. While this approach promoted higher goal specificity, it did not always encourage greater commitment among teachers if they did not agree with their principal's chosen area of focus.

Within the goal-setting literature, the debate continues about whether self-selected goals are more effective than supervisor-assigned goals (Locke & Latham, 2015). The potential benefits of self-selected goals are both cognitive (employees know more about their jobs than their supervisors do) and motivational (employees will be more motivated if they select their own goals) (Locke & Latham, 2002). While some teachers appreciated being given autonomy to set their own goals or focus areas for their partnership work, many teachers desired more guidance and support from their principals. In reconciling how their experiments about assigned goals led to different results, goal-setting theorists Gary Latham and Miriam Erez concluded that assigned goals are just as effective as self-selected goals when supervisors take a "tell and sell" approach to assigning goals (Locke et al., 1988). In this approach, supervisors provide additional information for the employees about the importance of goal attainment rather than just telling them the goals. Similarly, within the context of this study, teachers repeatedly expressed frustration when principals required them to participate in partnerships but gave them little insight into how they were matched and whether their partnership work should focus on specific areas of instructional practice.

In conclusion, this analysis illustrates that—even in a program designed to create targeted partnerships focused on specific domains of instructional practice—collaboration among teachers varies widely in the extent to which teachers report that it supports their professional learning. Goal-setting theory provides a valuable framework to explore the goals embedded within collaborative programs and identify conditions under which teachers are more likely to report collaborating around and for instructional improvement. Given the limited time that most teachers have to participate in collaboration with peers (Johnston & Tsai, 2018) and the increased focus on collaboration as a professional expectation of teaching (Hargreaves, 2010; Johnson et al., 2017), it is increasingly important that school leaders and researchers understand these facilitating conditions.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. None of the schools in the sample for this analysis had participated in the earlier pilot program.
2. In one school (School 7), the principal reported that she made matches with little regard to evaluation scores (she called it "peer-to-peer observations" rather than IPI). Teachers made no association between partnerships and evaluation data.

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