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Teachers' Perceptions of Becoming a Professional Learning Community

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Walden University
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Abstract

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by

Kathleen T. Kohl

MA, Augusta State University, 2000

BS, California State University, Northridge, 1987

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

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Abstract

Professional learning communities (PLCs) have become popular in schools to help improve student achievement. One local middle school implemented a PLC community, yet experienced problems with sustaining the concept and moving forward. The purpose of this quantitative study was to examine the current state of the PLC at the middle school under study, how it functioned, and possible areas for improvement. The theoretical framework revolved around constructivist learning and the dimensions of a quality PLC: collaboration, shared mission, values, vision, and goals. Research questions addressed teachers' perceptions of PLC progress and differences in levels of development scores among the 5 dimensions of the PLC implementation. The School Professional Staff as a Learning Community survey was given to the 54 members of the faculty at the school. The survey measured the dimensions of shared power/decision making, shared vision, collective learning, supportive and shared practice in teaching, and support of teachers and school. Data were analyzed using repeated measures ANOVA. According to study results, there were significant differences among the dimensions, with shared vision scoring in the consistent range ($M = 4.05$) and supportive and shared practices in the never range ($M = 2.32$). Recommendations include strengthening the dimension of shared practice at the local site by supporting frequent observations of other teachers' classrooms with structured opportunities to provide feedback. Improving the functioning of the PLC will assist in sustaining the school learning community and ultimately improve student achievement.

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Dedication

This paper is dedicated to my parents, Randy and Marylan Kohl. Their support and encouragement has been with me all of my life and helped me continue to reach for my goals. My father passed away before I was able to finish this stage of my life, but I know that he is looking down on me with pride. This one's for you Dad, I did it.

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I want to thank Drs. Susan Cottingham and Penny Barclay. Their support and help during this process was phenomenal. Thank you, Sue, for putting up with all of my questions and frustrations.

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Section 1: Introduction to the Study

When teachers work in isolation, students do not receive the educational benefits they need to succeed. Through collaboration with others in their field, teachers can share frustrations which are similar in nature (Bezzina, 2006). This collaboration is beneficial to the students as well as the teachers themselves. With this philosophy of collaboration in mind, the study school began its professional learning community (PLC). Reaching the goal of collaboration has been difficult, and the groups within the school have not made the progress necessary to function effectively.

The study school started its professional learning communities in 2007. Teachers at the school used collaboration to update the school's mission and goals and set up protocols for the meetings. The teams then developed common assessments for each subject area, which was used to assess student understanding. This procedure was successful to a certain point, but informal observations and dialogues showed that the PLC meetings were not as beneficial as they should be. Steps needed to be taken to find out where communication and training problems were occurring so PLC meetings would become beneficial to both teachers and students (T. Smallwood, personal communication, August 2, 2010).

It is common practice in schools involved in the PLC process to use self-evaluation in order to identify what aspects of the PLC process they are proficient in and what parts they need to focus on to become a successful PLC (Buffman & Hinman, 2006; Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2006; Guskey, 2000; Hord, 2004; Olivier, Hipp, & Huffman, 2003). Without this process, PLCs fail, stall out, or are not used to the benefit of the

school (Kiefer-Hipp, Bumper-Huffman, Pankake, & Olivier, 2008). Frequently, this stalling process happens, and schools do not know where to turn for help. While there are many books and articles about how to begin a PLC, but there is a gap in information on how to help maintain a PLC or where to go when things begin to stall. This gap leads to schools not maintaining their PLC or thinking they are working as a PLC when in fact they are not. The purpose of this study was to identify teachers' perceptions of the current stage of implementation of the PLC and to make suggestions on ways to help the school move beyond its current level. I helped determine how to restart stalled PLCs in middle schools by surveying the staff and then using the data to create change regarding how the PLC runs and reinvents itself.

Background of the Study

Many schools are using PLCs in order to enhance student learning (Bolam et al., 2005). PLCs develop from a variety of different sources. The main focus of a PLC is a collaborative culture which emphasizes inquiry, self-evaluation, and reflection (Bolam et al., 2005). Teachers work together to develop common assessments that can be valid measurements of student understanding (Wiggins, 1998). This concept of a professional community was started in the 1980s and was mainly concerned with schools as mediating contexts for teaching (Talbert, McLaughlin, & Rowan, 1993). Seashore, Anderson, and Riedel (2003) elaborated on this concept:

By using the term professional learning community we signify our interest

not only in discrete acts of teacher sharing, but in the establishment of a

school-wide culture that makes collaboration expected, inclusive, genuine,

ongoing, and focused on critically examining practice to improve student

outcomes. (p. 3)

PLCs help focus teachers on the establishment of this type of culture by giving

teachers the framework to increase collaboration across the different grade levels and

disciplines. This communication provides feedback not only to the teachers, but also to

the students, which enhances understanding and learning.

In 2011, the study school was in its fourth year of implementation of a PLC.

Although the school started out applying the concepts, it had since slowed down its

implementation. The School Professional Staff as Learning Community (SPSaLC) survey

developed by Hord (1996) was used to survey teachers in the school to determine their

views on the PLC process and indicate whether they felt the study school was functioning

as a PLC. From this information, the school then examined their status regarding the

concepts to keep the PLC active and successful so all students could benefit. As of 2012,

there had not been any information gathered from the faculty as to how they perceived

the PLC in the school and how it was functioning. The survey allowed a glimpse into

how the teachers saw the PLC at the school.

The SPSaLC survey (Hord, 1996) is a 17- item Likert scale survey which focuses

on five themes of PLCs. Hord, along with the Southwest Educational Development

Laboratory (SEDL), developed the survey after a 4 year study of a school that was

making progress in student achievement. From this study, Hord and SEDL studied other

schools in five states that had these same PLC-interrelated themes which are supportive

and shared leadership, shared values and vision (collaboration), collective learning along

with application (professional development), supportive and shared practice (trust),

physical conditions, and human capacities (Hord,2004).

Problem Statement

The study school had not been able to identify its strengths and weaknesses in the

following five areas: supportive and shared leadership, collaboration, collective learning

with application, supportive and shared practice, and support of teachers and school. No

one at the school had produced a viable way in which to examine the current PLC

configuration to determine where it lies on the continuum of Hord's scale of effective

PLCs. It was also unclear if the problem lie in the team leadership area where PLC

leaders were not adequately trained or if the leadership team was ineffective.

Collaboration or trust between PLC members or between the leadership and the

administration could have inhibited a discussion for the sake of student achievement.

Staff development was necessary for data, improvement of student learning, or learning

to collaborate effectively. All of these factors contribute to the success or stagnation of

any PLC (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Teachers were not satisfied with the PLC concept and

used the meetings as complaint sessions where student learning was not addressed.

Without some form of evaluation, groups which had worked efficiently lost their focus on

the intended goals. This led to discouraged teachers who wanted the process to be

successful so students received the full benefit of their education.

The school where the study took place is located in a rural area in the state of Georgia. The PLC affected approximately 900 students and 51 teachers plus support staff. As experienced by the campus principal, the negative attitude of teachers towards the PLC was spreading, and as a result, student work was not being examined in a way which supported student learning (T. Smallwood, personal communication, August 2, 2010). Most of the school personnel were using the meetings for passing out information or as sessions where opinions were shared in a negative way (T. Smallwood, personal communication, August 2, 2010).

Teachers had been asked by administration to examine common assessments to see if all students are learning the required information. Many groups were looking at the assessments, but were not applying this information to their teaching. In addition, most of the faculty had not been trained on assessing student work as a group; teachers were not comfortable with addressing other teachers concerning their lessons and teaching styles, some were afraid of hurting other's feelings or getting others angry. Teachers with years of experience were having difficulty relinquishing control and had a tendency to dominate the meetings with their views and ideas (T. Smallwood, personal communication, August 2, 2010). Many teachers also felt the PLC meetings were a waste of time because they believed it was not going to help, it was just another fad, and the administration was going to do what they wanted to anyway, regardless of the teachers input. Groups that were once working efficiently had lost their focus on the intended goals and many teachers were starting to become discouraged with the PLC concept and

complained they did not see benefits (T. Smallwood, personal communication, August 2, 2010). Besides teacher's views, there were other problems which affected the efficiency of the PLC process. Information from the leadership team was inconsistent. The leadership team consisted of the PLC facilitators of the different teams. Some of the facilitator teachers did not have experience in being teacher leaders and had a difficult time with their position.

Many of these teacher facilitators had not been able to grasp the concept of the principal giving suggestions, not directives. Teachers participated in the meetings, but when a concept was presented by the principal, they saw it as a directive, "this is what you will do." This misunderstanding caused problems when information was brought back to the different groups. One PLC leader could have presented the information to his or her team as suggestions from the principal that might be considered, while other PLC leaders might bring back the information as specific instructions. In addition, the school had several teachers who had degrees in teacher leadership and who understood the concepts of the PLC. These teachers had good leadership skills and they were not used in leadership positions (T. Smallwood, personal communication, August 2, 2010).

The question of where PLCs currently function had not been answered, and without further examination, no answer was in sight. This quantitative study may contribute to the body of knowledge needed to address this question by analyzing the present level of the PLC process. The results of this study can be used to look for ways to enhance professional development in leadership, developing trust between teachers and

administration, establishing collaboration with an emphasis on data analysis and

developing common assessments, as well as establishing a school environment that

supports teachers and their efforts in the PLC process.

Nature of the Study

This quantitative study was designed to examine the perceptions the staff held on

the strengths and weakness of the PLC within the study school. Descriptive data were

collected and used to analyze where the current groups stood in the five areas of Hord's

survey. The five dimensions, as defined by Hord (1996), were examined to determine

current functioning levels of the PLCs within the school as well as options which might

move the PLCs along within the school. Frequency distributions and a repeated measures

ANOVA was used with the questions to determine how the study school functions as a

PLC and the teachers' perceptions of PLC within the school. The population consisted of

51 teachers and administrators, of which I was one. The sample consisted of all

respondents from the target population at the site. All of the teachers and administrators

were asked to participate in the survey instrument with the exclusion of me. The

instrument used was the SPSaLC created by Hord and the Southwestern Educational

Development Laboratory (SEDL).

Research Questions

The research questions for this study were the following: How do teachers at the

study school identify where they stand with the primary principles and practices of a

professional learning community? What are the differences in level of development

scores among the five dimensions of the PLC implementation? This last question was analyzed using a repeated measures ANOVA test to compare mean scores of the five dimensions.

H_0: There are no statistically significant differences in level of development scores among the five dimensions of PLC implementation.

H_1 There are statistically significant differences in level of development scores among the five dimensions of PLC implementation.

Independent variables are the topic being studied by the researcher. The independent variable is defined as a variable "that probably caused, influenced, or affected the outcome" (Creswell, 2003, p. 94). Weiss (1972) stated, "These are the relevant aspects of the program – the inputs – which are the independent variables of the study" (p. 34). The independent variable of this study was the dimension with all five levels from Hord's (1996) survey: supportive and shared leadership, collaboration, collective learning with application, supportive and shared practice, and support of teachers and school.

The dependent variable is what is altered based on the independent variable. The dependent variable is defined as a variable that "depends on the independent variable; they are the outcomes or results of the influence of the independent variable" (Creswell, 2003, p. 94). According to Weiss (1972) dependent variables are the indicators of program outcomes. The dependent variable for this study was the mean score obtained for each of the five dimensions.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this quantitative study was to explore and identify teachers'

perceptions of their school and the level of success as a PLC. I analyzed teacher's

perceptions at the school using a Likert scale survey. Data from the survey were aligned

with Hord's (1996) five dimensions: supportive and shared leadership between the

administration and teacher leaders' collaboration and the extent of shared values and

visions between the school, staff, and community; collective learning with application;

supportive and shared practice; and support of teachers and school. The data were

analyzed to determine current functioning levels of the PLC, as well as identifying areas

that needed to be changed or studied further.

Theoretical Base

Sharing of leadership is an important concept within the PLC dynamic. Hord

(2004) stated that, when establishing a PLC, schools need to support and share leadership

between teachers and administration, share values and vision within the school and

community, use data to drive decisions, recruit outside agents to keep the focus by

providing training and direction, have the support of the administration and central office

in that time and resources are provided, and recognize that day-to-day progress is the

responsibility of the staff. Teachers need to be willing to take over the control that is

relinquished by the principal. This sharing of control also leads to a positive work

environment where teachers feel they are working with someone rather than for someone.

By working with others, teachers develop an attitude of trust. They learn to engage in

dialogue to generate ideas, create understandings, and develop a common description or meaning of a concept (Hord, 2004).

PLCs can enhance teachers' sense of self-efficacy by providing them with an opportunity to share experiences, increase understanding of students' thinking processes, and help provide the support for each other and the students in the school (Bandura, 1977). PLCs provide teachers with leadership opportunities and time to collaborate with their peers. A PLC's focus of learning is supported by the constructive learning theory. Constructivists links learned knowledge with new concepts, which allows the students and teachers to make connections with their everyday lives (Lambert et al., 2002). Learning and knowledge are not separate from each other, nor are they finite (Senge et al., 2000). In order for students to understand a concept, they need to be able to apply this knowledge to things that they already know. The same is true of teachers; a teacher could have a vast knowledge of the content that they teach, but each year this knowledge can change and grow and a teacher must change and grow with it. Not only does the content taught change, but the students receiving this information change. Each student enters the classroom with different experiences, family backgrounds, learning styles, levels of self-awareness, and expectations (Senge et al., 2000). Each year, the teacher must approach teaching in a different way than in years before. PLCs allow teachers to share the different solutions to the problems that might arise year to year, as well as different teaching techniques on how to cover the concepts that are to be taught. Learning communities focus on learner-centered learning rather than teacher-centered learning.

Variety is encouraged, as well as an understanding of the interdependency between the students, teachers, and community (Senge et al., 2000). This attitude can allow a school to build on the prior knowledge of everyone in the community so that the school as a whole can increase learning and knowledge.

Although all schools are different, they all have teachers, students, and administrators. They all have groups of people trying to work together to benefit student learning. Some problems are universal, and some advice should be available so that collaboration and teacher leadership can be used to the best advantage of teachers and their students. Dufour and Eaker (1998) stated that starting a PLC is much easier to do than sustaining one. "Until changes become so entrenched that they represent part of how things are done, they are extremely fragile and subject to regression" (p.105). Dufour and Eaker claimed that in order to sustain this change, effort the challenge is to develop a critical force of teachers who are prepared to continue to learn, teach, and act as change agents. The study school had reached this point in its development of a PLC. The task, then, was to develop a plan to continue the forward movement so that all students can achieve.

In order for PLCs to be beneficial, certain aspects need to be addressed. Teachers who run into instructional barriers including a lack of training, a lack of time, a lack of collaboration, and a lack of leadership support tend to lose their drive and sense of self-efficacy (Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2006; Martin, 2007) . Not addressing these barriers can cause a PLC to fall apart or cause it to cease being effective in the school setting.

Teachers may need more professional development in analyzing data. Many teachers have not had any practice in this, and although they have access to data, they do not understand how to apply it to their teaching. Teachers may need more of an opportunity to visit each other's classrooms to help each other with problem areas or to learn how to give and take constructive criticism (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003). Teachers should recognize they have the power and capacity to make decisions, which will affect their role and students' production. The problem arises when teachers who do not have the skills and experience needed to lead effectively are put into positions of leadership. Many teachers naturally think in terms of hierarchy. They expect to carry out the decision made above them rather than take what the principal says as suggestions (Hord, 2004). When teachers are leaders of the school environment, they are able to make decisions regarding their teaching practices and how the school will reach it goals.

Definition of Terms

Collaboration: Storytelling and scanning for ideas; sharing; or making agreements, aid and assistance, or joint work (Van Wassum, 1999). These forms of collaboration allow teachers to value each other's contributions and gather different points of view. It allows teachers to discuss areas where they might be having difficulty, or where they have had great successes. Students receive the benefits of instruction that have been planned by two or more teachers in several ways. They get to see teachers modeling collaborative work. Teachers are able to discuss student's learning and

intervene where problems are occurring. Teachers gain a better understanding of which students need specialized assistance.

Collective learning: Teachers and administration use collective dialogue to analyze teaching strategies and student learning. Learning at an individual level is transferred and shared among team members (Garavan & McCarthy, 2008; Lipshitz, Popper, & Oz, 1996).

Human capacities: Characteristics that show a willingness to accept feedback, work toward improving teaching, and showing respect and trust among colleagues. Human capacities also include possession of a skill base that allows for effective teaching and learning (Boyd, 1992; Luis & Kruse, 1995).

Physical conditions: Refers to logistics on how, when, and where the teachers meet to solve problems, make decisions, develop curriculum, and participate in professional development (Hord, 1997; Luis & Kruse, 1995).

Professional development: Ongoing, intentional, systemic educational and training opportunities available to educators in their schools and districts (Guskey, 2000). Teacher leaders have expertise and credibility, relate to others, and lead by example. They may have formal leadership roles in the school or are teachers who informally lead those of their grade level or team. These are teachers who show specialized skills or strengths in guiding others through processes such as staff development, data interpretation, technology issues, and instructional strategies (Martin, 2007).

Professional learning community (PLCs): Professional staff learning together to direct their efforts toward improved student learning through supportive and shared leadership, collective creativity, shared values and vision, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice (Hord, 2004). PLCs are composed of teams that allow teachers to reflect with each other. Teachers work interdependently to achieve common goals linked to the purpose of learning and impacting their classroom practice so it will lead to better results for their students, team, and school (DuFour et al., 2006).

Shared values and visions: A particular mental image which provides a focus for the school as it makes decisions about teaching and learning (Huffman, 2003)

Supportive and shared leadership: Leadership and decisions that affect the school are shared between the administration and the teachers of the school. The administration supports the teachers by providing time, resources, and professional development so the teachers can improve learning in the classroom (Hord, 1997; Pearce, Manz, & Sims, 2009).

Assumptions

Assumptions about this study were all teachers would participate in the survey and these surveys would be returned. It was also assumed the teachers would answer the survey questions truthfully. The study was supported by the administration and data gained was taken seriously for change to occur.

Limitations

A limitation of the study was that the study school was, at that time, the only school in the system which was using the PLC concept. This did not allow for any comparison data from schools in the area with the same demographics. Another limitation was the possibility that teachers gave answers they thought either the principal or I might want to hear just in case there were repercussions. Other limitations included participant pool size, years of teaching experience, and level of education of the participants.

Delimitations

Possible delimitations would be only examining the PLC through Hord's five dimensions, even though there may be many other ways to look at a PLC. Results of the survey may be linked to teacher bias in that they want themselves and the school to be viewed as successful. Another delimitation was that the data could not be generalized to other schools because the study was only being conducted at one school.

Significance of the Study

Through PLCs, teachers become exposed to more ideas to help improve student understanding. They are able to use each other as peer advisors, as well as experts in different fields or concepts. This ability enhances a teacher's instruction so the students are the real benefactors. Students are able to get the help they need to understand information because the teachers are able to use data and each other's expertise to cover information more thoroughly. Some of teachers' deepest insights and understandings

come from action, followed by reflection and the search for improvement (Dufour, 2006).

In this study, I gathered data to help faculty at the study school to formatively assess the

PLC's development and gain an understanding of where the PLC currently stood. From

there, the faculty could begin to make a plan of what might still need to be done so

teachers could actually improve their techniques in collaboration, shared leadership, and

decision making. These improvements may allow teachers to better serve their students

by encouraging a focus on student learning so they are able to instruct all students,

understand when and where the students are failing, and develop a plan to help those

students succeed. When students are successful the whole community is affected.

Success increases a student's self-efficacy and gives the student the support to continue

with the learning process. As the students succeed, the teacher's self-efficacy also

improves as they feel that their efforts in the classroom were beneficial. The community

feels pride in their students, teachers, and schools.

  The goal of this study was to determine the areas of the PLC where the study

school was struggling. Then the study data could be used to provide added information to

other schools which were in the process of investigating the value of a PLC in their

district. It is hoped that determining the areas of the PLC where the study school was

struggling would provide added information to other schools that were in the process of

investigating the value of a PLC in their district.

Summary and Transition

Teachers of the school being used in the study started the PLC process with the intention of increasing student achievement. The beginning of the process went smoothly, and teachers were excited about a way to help students learn through teacher collaboration. As time passed, the communication and knowledge of what to do next and how to proceed had dwindled and meetings became little more than sessions used to complain about student behavior and their low motivation. Through the use of the survey created by Hord and SEDL, the study school had an opportunity to take a closer look at how it was functioning as a PLC by evaluating teacher's progress in collaboration and feedback, collective learning, and shared visions, as well as administrations ability to share authority and decision making.

In Section 2, I provide a literature review to discuss the concept of PLCS. In Section 3, I examine the type of study and the process used to survey the staff at the study school. From there a discussion of the findings is presented.in Section 4. Interpretation of findings, implications for social change, and recommendations for action and future study will be covered in Section 5.

Section 2: Literature Review

A review of PLCS, collaboration, teacher leadership, and professional

development was conducted using peer reviewed journal research and Internet searches,

as well as books and journals from a neighboring university. Internet searches where

conducted using data bases containing education journals, articles, and dissertations. Key

words that were used involved *professional learning communities*, *collaboration*, s*elf-

efficacy*, *collective or group efficacy*, and *learning communities*, Information was then

sorted by looking for full text articles. After an initial review of the articles, a search was

conducted that focused on articles that were peer-reviewed. Searches in the university

library involved first looking through the journals that were available and searching

through the table of contents for PLCs, learning communities, professional development,

team learning, collaboration, teacher self-efficacy, group efficacy, and collaborative

teaching. Abstracts were reviewed for relevancy to the topic. An emphasis was placed on

using the most current data and research available. This information was then used to

support the importance of PLC' in a school setting and its effects on teaching and student

learning.

Professional Learning Communities

PLCs were first applied to education by Eaker and Dufour (Dufour & Eaker,

1998). PLCs arose from the five disciplines developed by Senge. The five disciplines of a

learning organization are systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared

vision, and team learning (Senge et al., 2000). Systems thinking includes knowledge and

tools to identify problems or patterns and then develop ways to change them. By understanding the patterns, schools will be able to predict how those patterns will affect all parts of the school and community. Personal mastery is when people are dedicated to lifelong learning and trying new ideas which might be beneficial to students. Mental models focuses on the constructivist theory and states that mental models are ingrained; these models influence how people see the world around them. Shared vision occurs when all people in a school are working towards the same goal. Thompson, Gregg, and Niska (2004) stated, "A leader cannot dictate a vision, no matter how lofty or appropriate that vision may be. The vision must be truly shared." (p. 3). The last discipline is team learning. Although learning is important, it can be more advantageous when grouped with dialogue. By engaging in dialogue, teams are better able to identify problems and develop solutions that will be beneficial to all involved.

In PLCs, everyone is an important part of the community. Teachers, administrators, parents, and the students all need to be involved in the process of learning in order for the students to succeed. There are main themes which help drive learning communities in a school: a solid foundation that consists of collaboration and shared mission, values, vision, and goals. PLCs consist of collaborative teams that work together to achieve common goals that have a focus on results evidenced by data and research (Andrews & Lewis, 2004; Dufour et al., 2002; Hord, 2004; King & Newmann, 2001; Stinson, Pearson, & Lucas, 2006). According to Hord (2004), the dimensions of a PLC are not autonomous: "These dimensions are not isolated, but are intertwined. Each

dimension affects the others in a variety of ways" (p. 7). Each theme or dimension relies on the success of the other in order for a PLC to succeed. Schools that have supportive administration are more likely to feel comfortable with sharing ideas and engaging in collaboration with their peers.

PLCS use the concept of a collaborative culture to answer the three main questions that drive the process. These questions are the following: What do we expect students to learn? How will we know what students have learned? How will we respond to students who are not learning? (Dufour et al., 2002). Through these collaborative teams, teachers decide how to assess whether the children have learned what teachers wanted them to know and understand. They then are able to develop a process to address misunderstandings and weaknesses so the students succeed. Bolam et al. (2005) focused on the effectiveness of PLCs and found that successful PLCs shared eight key characteristics: shared values and visions, collective responses from teachers for pupil's learning, collaboration, professional learning, reflective professional inquiry, openness, networks and partnerships, trust, respect, and support. These eight characteristics provide a structure for a school to build a base for learning. If the teachers are communicating with each other not only with problems that they might be facing with student learning, but also with successful lessons they open up opportunities for inquiry, suggestions, and networking that will benefit the school as a whole.

The foremost concern of people involved in PLCs is student learning. The more developed a PLC is, the more positive the pupil achievements. PLCs change over time;

some of these changes are planned, many are not. Three stages of development can be

observed in PLCs – started, developer, and mature (Bolam et al., 2005). Kiefer-Hipp et

al. (2008) also observed three stages of development: initiation, implementation, and

institutionalization. The first stage represents a school where faculty and staff have made

a decision to change instruction and the way the school functions in regards to student

learning. The second stage focuses on the faculty and staff beginning to put the

innovations into operation and practice. By the time a school reaches the last stage, they

have recognized that the process is an ongoing and ever changing process and are able to

work as collaborative teams to keep up with the changes. These stages can provide

insight into how these changes can affect the PLC process. Schools must indicate ways of

responding to these changes and modified to be of help for teachers. Even though PLCs

have common characteristics, the implications of these and their impact on schools can

only be worked out in specific conditions that are unique to each individual school. In

order to make sure PLCs are effective, schools need to monitor and evaluate the

development of characteristics and the implementation of their processes and take

appropriate action to insure sustainability. The idea of a PLC is worth adopting in order

to promote student improvement, but it requires effort and commitment from

administrators, teachers, students, and the community.

Collective Learning and Collaboration

One of the main areas where collaboration is used is in developing common

assessments. Dufour (2006) claimed, "Teachers work collaboratively to help a group of

students develop agreed upon knowledge and skills" (p. 55). This collaboration also helps

with creating a uniform understanding across grade levels. These common assessments

provide a method of ensuring all teachers and students understand the essential outcomes

for a subject. Teachers work together to identify the outcomes and develop the strategies

for assessing student achievement. Educators also use this collaboration to decide what

needs to be done if the students do not achieve as expected. Standardized tests can then

be used as a final assessment of student understanding (Dufour et al., 2002). Roberts and

Pruitt (2003) found a steady gain in the percentages of students passing the literacy

component of the state assessment program when teachers collaborated and formed a

common assessment to insure that all students were covering the same standards. In the

past 4 years, scores from students who have reached the proficient level in literacy had

risen from 33.8% to 78%. This increase in test scores indicate that common assessments

can help provide students with the concepts and understandings that are required across

the grade levels. Teachers are working together to make sure that all of the information is

covered by every teacher. This also encourages trust and openness as that the teachers

need to communicate with each other to make sure that students are learning the

concepts.

Collaboration is beneficial in other areas besides assessment. Teachers'

perceptions of their own personal and collective ability has an impact on how effectively

they perform in the classroom (Jerald, 2007). Changes in thoughts about pedagogy and

teaching strategies can be encouraged by teachers mentoring each other and helping with

structure, classroom practices, and assessment (Andrews & Lewis, 2002). When teacher collaborate, they are able to see where they are succeeding. Collaboration gives teachers points to work on and ways to focus instruction. Jerald (2007) stated, "Teachers with a stronger sense of efficacy tend to exhibit greater levels of planning and organization" (p. 3). Teachers' motivation and learning are affected both by their sense of efficacy and the collective efficacy of teachers in the school as well as the efficacy of their students (Shaughnessy, 2004; Strahan, 2003; Woolfolk-Hoy, 2004).

Collective efficacy promotes the concept of teachers, as a whole group, having efficacy that improves the overall school and individual self-efficacy of teachers. Collective efficacy is defined by Goddard, Hoy, and Woolfolk Hoy (2004) as "the perceptions of teachers in a specific school that the faculty as a whole can execute course of action required to positively affect student achievement"(p 4). Collective efficacy is different from teacher's self-efficacy because it applies to the effectiveness of the faculty as a whole rather than to an individual teacher's ability to teach (Ross & Gray, 2006). This collective efficacy can have a positive or negative effect on a school's faculty. If the school's collective efficacy is high, then this can raise the self-efficacy of individual teachers, but a low collective efficacy can lower or not affect an individual teacher (Bandura, 1997; DeRue, Hollenbeck, Ilgen, & Feltz, 2010; Goddard, 2003). This collective efficacy has an impact on the team's effectiveness. Each team member's view affects the group. Depending on each teacher's role in the PLC team, whether implied or assigned, their individual view on how effective the team is being as a whole can affect

the working of that team (Bandura, 2000; Berry et al., 2003; Brown, Anfara, & Roney, 2004; Chong, Klassen, Huan, Wong, & Kates, 2010; Gully, Incalcaterra, Joshi, & Beaubien 2002; Klein, Conn, Smith, & Sorra, 2001; McCoach & Colbert, 2010; Ross & Gray, 2006; Zellars, Hochwarter, Perrewe, Miles, & Kiewitz, 2001). Along with an increase in efficacy, teachers tend to set higher goals for themselves and their students, take greater risks, and have better problem solving skills in regards to classroom pedagogy (Englert & Tarrant, 1995; Ross & Grey, 2006; Strahan, 2003; Takahashi, 2011). Teachers with a high self-efficacy, along with a high collective efficacy, can feel more secure in exposing their teaching weakness to others and are more likely to initiate help seeking, joint problem solving, and developing new teaching strategies (Demir, 2008; Goddard, 2002; Goddard, Logerfo, & Hoy, 2004; Ross & Grey, 2006; Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2000).

Access to peers through collaboration is critical because it requires teachers to express their ideas and share their expertise with others. Without these relationships, teachers can lose confidence in their own professional expertise and sense of efficacy (Hord, 2004; Jones, 2006; Krecic & Grmek, 2008). A three year study by Boyle and Lamprianou (2006) focused on long term professional development activity. Those which involved collaboration between teachers showed an increase in teacher participation over the three years. Math participation went from 16% in 2002 to 32% in 2004. Science participation went from 14% to 28% while English showed an 11% increase over the period. Collaboration provides teachers with the opportunity to make leadership

decisions, develop a sense of ownership, and helps lead the focus of the school. Collaboration makes teachers the center of the school, with an emphasis on developing students so that they are successful (Hickey & Harris, 2005; Little, 2005; Tillema & van der Westhuizen, 2006).

This collaborative process becomes more beneficial to students when trust is incorporated into professional learning communities. "Teachers act as change facilitators for each other, supporting the adoption of new practices through peer coaching and feedback" (Hord, 2004, p. 11). By being open to, and by learning to give constructive criticism teachers can eliminate the feeling of being attacked by their peers. Some teachers feel mistrustful of others and want to protect their "territory" and resist what they feel is interference from others. Teachers can gain trust by putting energy into their relationships with each other. When teachers care about one another they transfer this caring into trust of one another professionally (Hord, 2004). As teachers progress through this process and begin to share new dimensions in thinking and assessing work they grow professionally. Teacher attitudes and beliefs are impacted and they become more aware of their experiences, thoughts, and feelings about teaching and learning (Senge et al., 2000). A teacher taking part in a study of collegial collaboration stated "Other teachers are our best resources. Their ideas get you thinking and reflecting about things. It makes you refreshed" (Delany & Arredondo, 1998, p.9).

By engaging in these collaborations and working towards a common goal teachers are able to enhance their sense of efficacy (Wood, 2007). Bandura (1977) hypothesized

that a person's expectations determines their responses. These responses include the individual's determination to begin a certain behavior, the level of intensity of the behavior, and how much perseverance the teacher has when confronted by obstacles. By increasing a teacher's sense of efficacy it is possible for those teachers to also feel more comfortable with providing leadership in the school setting. In a study in February 2003, conducted by the Virginia Commonwealth University School of Education, Dozier (2007) cites areas where teachers who thought of themselves as leaders were more involved in school dynamics. Ninety-seven percent of respondents considered themselves leaders, while 96% felt that others saw them as leaders also. Ninety- three percent have conducted professional development for other teachers. By cultivating these teachers and providing them with training to continue learning they become agents of change and are able to meet the challenges facing today's educators (Thompson et al., 2004). These teachers commit to a quality of relationships, the schools purposes and goals, and examine and improve instruction. Through their work they inspire others to contribute their special assets; they earn the trust and respect of other teachers as they work on the same issues (Donaldson, 2007).

Professional Development

These teacher leaders, while providing inspiration, can also help with leading professional development. Using the skills and expertise of teachers in the school makes more sense in that they have a vested interest in the school and its' students (Yost & Vogel, 2007). This leads to a feeling of collective responsibility for student learning.

Teachers become invested in the success of the students. Professional development along with collaboration leads to reflective inquiry and dialogue about educational issues and problems which arise with applying new knowledge and concepts (Hord 2004).

By providing professional development that is focused on the school and if possible led by teachers from that school, instruction becomes very beneficial to the teachers (Goodnough, 2005; Nir & Bogler, 2008). This process allows teachers to discuss problems that come up during instruction. It allows teachers to share situations from their classroom with teachers who might teach the same children, or who have taught them in the past. It provides a base so the instruction provided during the professional development session is owned by the teachers. These teachers can see where it will benefit their students because it is focused on their situations (Angelle, 2008; Nir & Bogler, 2008). School based professional development which is initiated by the teachers allows the instruction to benefit not only the school but also focuses on issues that affect the community as well. Another advantage is related to the school's organizational learning. Teachers learning to learn from each other and interacting around issues allow these teachers to gain insights not only on their school but on learning and teaching strategies in general. This might provide a shift not only in the school, but in the district and the teaching profession itself (Nir & Bogler, 2008). Teachers are like their students in that they should always be learning, and their school environment can support this. It is not easy to progress intellectually in a static environment. Teacher education and professional development is ongoing, it is continual so all involved can grow both

individually and as a group (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). Professional learning

communities help with this continual process. Through these communities teachers are

able to discuss outcomes, concerns, and successes. Successful learning communities are

focused on student learning and what happens when students are not showing

achievement or success. The PLC process in a school can become stalled if teachers do

not understand or use these concepts. Teachers need to know it is worth the risk and it

will benefit them to struggle through the hard times (Abrami, Poulsen, & Chambers,

2004).

     With the impact of No Child Left Behind and high stakes state testing teachers are

starting to realize they need help in order to reach the goals set by the state and the

country. Professional learning communities can help schools with meeting these goals,

but saying a school is a professional learning community does not necessarily make it

one. Schools must focus on the goal of professional learning communities by using data

to drive decisions and practices which will help every child learn. A school cannot just

form groups and call them learning communities; there needs to be collaboration where

teachers set goals to improve instruction and work towards those goals (Dufour, 2007).

These collaborative teams focus on ten questions: Is the team clear on the knowledge and

skills each child it to acquire? Is there an agreed upon criteria that will be used to assess

student work? Have common assessments been developed to monitor learning? Are

formative assessments used to identify difficulties so that support can be provided? Is

data used to assess teacher effectiveness? Does each team work interdependently? Are

continuous improvement plans built into the school's everyday practice? Are decisions

made by using shared knowledge and best practices? Are the teachers determined to help

all students learn? Do collaborative teams focus on issues that are critical to the school?

(Dufour, 2007). Schools that use these ten questions to guide their instruction are well on

the way of becoming a true learning community, but getting to this stage can take a great

deal of commitment and work. Dufour (2007) mentions that schools who are beginning to

implement a new concept usually experience a dip in confidence when first applying this

concept. Teachers need to be willing to work through that dip. Schools can help with this

by providing added support, time, and professional development for all those involved

(Dufour & Eaker, 1998, Phillips, 2003).

In order to share ideas and concerns teachers need to collaborate, but this can

cause problems. Collaboration is not a natural process; teachers need training in order to

collaborate effectively, and if not properly trained much of what is done in schools in the

name of collaboration can be unproductive and harmful to the learning community

concept (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003; Supovitz & Christman, 2005). Well run professional

communities depend on the capacity of teachers to blend commitment and a shared goal

of improving learning without doubt and only a small amount of conflict (Hargraves,

2002; Jones, 2006). Without professional development, teachers can become

uncomfortable with the collaboration process. They lose the focus on the goals set by the

group and collaboration reaches a stand still. In other studies teachers have described

themselves as feeling attacked, underappreciated, and angry during group work (Dooner,

Mandzuk, & Clifton, 2008). As the group starts to lose focus they look towards the

facilitator or leader of the group to fix things, but this is not always the solution as the

facilitator may be inexperienced themselves and unable to solve the problems of the

group. Collaboration and professional development is also important for those new

teachers that are entering the school, or replacing key personal. These new teachers are

able to ask questions about school policies and the PLC process in a non-threatening way.

It allows them to quickly feel part of a team and shows their input has value. They are

able to see that support is available in regards to student learning and understanding.

(Bolam, 2005). An evaluative case study was conducted by Bezzina (2006). The study

was conducted at St. Cettina School for the purpose of investigating the functioning level

of the school as a professional learning community. Data were collected from documents

and school records, surveys distributed to the school's parents, teachers, and students, and

the school's national academic results and tracer study reports. Analysis of the data and

questionnaires showed that establishing relationships in a group requires time, practice,

and assistance. It also showed that "direction and leadership are essential; especially in

the initial stages of establishing a professional learning community and that individual

and group learning is a slow process" (p.163).

Shared-Leadership

In working in any type of group situation, such as professional learning

communities, leadership skills are an imperative. A good leader helps the group stay

focused, achieve group goals, set norms, enhance productivities, and promotes

relationships of group members (Du, 2007). Leadership is associated with concepts such as transformation, empowerment, and community. The concept of leadership no longer refers to official leaders but can be applied to members of the teaching and support staff (Bezzina, 2006). Group leaders can be obtained in many different ways. They may become group leaders because of their communication abilities; their skills in certain areas which will help complete the group's goals, or their hierarchy in the school's climate (Bezzina, 2006; Du, 2007). Du identified some characteristics of successful group leaders (2007); Group leaders with significant teaching and leadership experiences had stronger task achievement skills than those with limited experiences. Another characteristic is that group leaders have varying perceptions of leadership roles. Some see themselves as cheer leaders to help keep the group motivated, while others see themselves as units for change. All of these teachers had several things in common. The participants stated the leaders were usually "warm, sensitive, extroverted, forthright, and calm" (Du, 2007, p.193). One aspect which helped these leaders be successful was that they were able to read the dynamics of their group. Leaders stated they spent a lot of time towards understanding the personalities of their group members. One leader stated it was critical to determine who to trust and which teachers were on her side, how to talk with veteran teachers so they did not refuse to adopt instructional changes, and how to keep the focus on the goals (Du, 2007).

Although these teachers were successful in their leadership roles, Du's study did find it was important these leaders were given the opportunity to develop their leadership

skills (Du, 2007). The study's findings also state that teacher education programs and in-services should offer additional training in intrapersonal skills, collaboration, leadership, and group dynamics. Respect, trust, and professionalism are not 'freebees' in schools; teachers and their work must be valued and supported. This trust and support for individual teachers will then lead these teachers to show that trust and support to each other (Fitzgerald & Gunter, 2006). These teachers share a vision and maintain relationships while they work toward the goal of student achievement. They lead alongside the principal as they share opportunities to improve the school (Angelle, 2007).

A study done by the Center for Teacher leadership at the Virginia Commonwealth University surveyed 179 teachers to determine if they perceived themselves as leaders, as well as, what they thought their training needs might be to become better leaders. The teachers who participated in the on-line survey were Teachers of the Year, National Board Certified Teachers, Milken Educators and teachers who were recognized through teacher leadership lists and networks. These teachers, who were considered leaders at their schools, stated they felt they needed additional training in understanding education policy and issues, working collaboratively, and interpreting education research (Dozier, 2007). Teachers are expected to have these skills as they enter the profession, but all too frequently they lack this training. In order for teachers to succeed in their positions and have the opportunity to become teacher leaders in their areas of expertise, training needs to be provided (Dozier, 2007; Hargraves & Fink, 2003; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2009).

Supportive Conditions

Supportive conditions address the physical elements of the school. Hord (2004) identified small school size; interdependent teaching roles, communication structures, teacher empowerment, and time to meet and talk are physical and structural factors which can support PLCs. Other essential elements for support include mutual respect and trust when sharing professional information, while collaborating, and peer observations (Sparks, 2004). Protheroe (2004, 2008) stated that supportive conditions exist when teachers are able to share good practices, participate in cross-disciplinary or cross-grade activities and share content expertise. A school that has supportive conditions ensures that teachers have time to communicate, are within close proximity to each other, and have time and space to collaborate. Teachers and administrators trust each other and work together on the visions and goals for the school.

Using Data

Schools need to be aware that they do not follow tradition to the extent that they miss out on new strategies or changing dynamics in the classroom. Using data to improve classroom instruction is important and challenging. Professional learning communities use groups of teachers and administrators that are focused on improving teaching practice through collaboration and reflection using data. In fact, one of the main focuses of a professional learning community is to use assessments and data to develop a plan to make sure all students are learning (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003; Strahan, 2003). These communities allow teachers to become familiar with research and apply what they learn as well as

giving these teachers an opportunity to read research on issues that affect them and their school.

Many teachers state one of the challenges that go along with using data to drive instruction is lack of training (Faulkner & Cook, 2006; Mokhtari, Rosemary, & Edwards, 2007). Members of a group must look at data focused on curriculum and apply that to each individual child. Recommendations on how to help each child should then be presented as it applies to the team, grade level, or individual teacher. As a group, teachers must then continue to meet and review progress that has been made and modify instruction as appropriate. "In other words, the systematic use of data to make instructional decisions requires leadership, training, and development of a culture of data-driven decision making and accountability" (Mokhtari et al., 2007, p. 355). A data analysis framework using the Standards for the Assessment of Reading and Writing was developed by The National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association Joint Task Force on Assessment (1994, as cited in Mokhtari et al., 2007). It provides a general procedure which can guide decision making for a school. This procedure involves organizing the data set so members can partner to analyze different portions. A recorder for the team who takes notes of the team's discussions and recommendations is selected. Partners analyze their data and each writes down observations on their worksheet. After sufficient time for each team to analyze their data the group comes together to share observations, discuss their findings, and develop a plan. The team then decides when and how they will implement their plan and check on

progress (Mokhtari et al., 2007). Another major part of this process is for teachers to also look at what types of professional development they feel is necessary in order to implement their plan successfully.

Methodology and Research

Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods all approach the forms of knowledge claims, research strategies, and procedures differently. All three of these research designs have been used to study teacher's perceptions of the workings of professional learning communities in a school setting. These differences were examined in order to identify the best method for this study.

The majority of PLC studies have used mixed methods and qualitative measures to analyze data. Analysis is done by looking at reflective notes, transcripts, observations, questionnaires and focus groups (Creswell, 2003; DuFour, 2003). Qualitative research has several strategies that apply well to PLC research, the most common being case studies. Mixed methods approaches involve collecting and analyzing both qualitative and quantitative data. Researchers of mixed methods models use one method to develop or inform the other method. These methods can also be combined together in order to look at different levels of analysis.

Ancess (2000) performed a five-year multiple case study of three high schools that served at-risk students. This study found PLCs helped to stimulate teacher learning and improve teacher practice, which impacted student outcomes by improving graduation rates, college-admission rates, and academic course-taking skills. Wood (2007) also

conducted a case study of a mid-Atlantic U.S. city. This case study collected data for two and a half years and compared data with survey responses. The study concluded most participants did not claim a connection between student learning and teacher collaboration. Participants based this on that they spent more time on community-building efforts than on ways to improve practice.

A mixed method study by Bolam, et. al., (2005) discussed a 34-month study to determine if PLCs are worth pursuing for sustainable improvement and pupil learning. The study found more developed PLCs had a stronger relationship between professional learning and pupil achievement. Another conclusion was PLCs change over time. A mixed method study which focused on shared leadership examined 24 nationally restructured schools. It measured the quality of their pedagogy, the assessment tasks and leadership styles. It determined quality leadership was the factor which affected teacher instruction and student performance the most (Marks & Printy, 2003).

Strategies associated with quantitative research are experiments and surveys. Experiments include true experiments, quasi-experiments, and correlation studies. Also included in this research are cross-sectional and longitudinal studies which use questionnaires or structured interviews to collect data. Many surveys have been used to measure some feature of school culture or community (Goddard, Goddard, & Tschannen-Moran, 2007; Gruenert, 2005; Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk, 2001; Supovitz, 2002; Wells & Feun, 2007). Of these surveys only two groups of researchers have tried to measure PLCs using an instrument that had been validated. One of these instruments was

created by Hord (1997) and is the instrument that was used in this study. This 17 question survey was based on her five elements of a PLC and was validated by an outside organization in 1998. Another instrument, which was a modified version of Hord's survey, was created by Olivier, Hipp & Huffman (2003). This 46 question survey, the Professional Learning Community Assessment (PLCA) was also based on Hord's (1997) five elements and was validated and produced an acceptable level of validity and reliability.

Most quantitative studies focused on how different aspects of the PLC process affect student and school improvement. Buffman & Hinman, (2006) conducted a study that included a seven-year plan which was developed to improve student achievement. Variables were changed in that more time was added to allow for collaboration each month, analyzing assessment results, adding mandatory remediation, mentoring for at risk students, and separating incoming ninth graders from upperclassmen when possible. Data showed an increase in students taking AP courses, an increase in pass rate on exit exams form 63% to 93%. The study also showed an increase in SAT scores and a drop in the failure rate. Another study which involved an improvement plan was conducted by Natkin & Jurs, (2005). This study focused on how PLCs affected student reading scores. A quasi-experimental technique was used to collect data for 6th, 7th, and 8th graders. When compared to other students at other schools these students scored higher than predicted in reading and math. Wheelan & Kesselring, (2005) as well as Trimble & Peterson, (2000) and Wheelan & Tilin, (1999) all conducted similar studies that

investigated the relationship between perceived effectiveness of the faculty as a whole and student performance on standardized tests. These studies found collaboration between faculty and support from administration supported improved student performance.

After an extensive review of literature involving different studies of PLC concepts I found that few address teacher perceptions on the primary principles and practices which make up professional learning communities and what is needed to sustain them. Most research has centered on analyzing successful schools to see what has made them successful. The gap in the research occurs in assessing schools where the PLC may not be performing to an acceptable standard and may need to be examined. This study would attempt to fill that gap in the literature.

Summary

Klingner (2004) lists several things which need to occur in order for staff development to be successful. They are: ensure there is feasibility and fit into the teachers' classrooms; demonstrate the value or the practice and how it will improve student learning; help teachers understand how this is different from what they have done in the past; provide coaches and mentors; maintain communication within the school; and provide materials, resources, and additional training. This long term support is very important to the success of any new strategies that are implemented in a school (Clark & Clark, 2006; Fullan, 1995; Nir & Bogler, 2008; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). It allows teachers to see the benefits in their classrooms and develop a sense of ownership while

allowing them to ask questions to clarify concepts. Professional learning communities

can provide support for new concepts if it is implemented correctly. Teachers help each

other and use each other's expertise in implementing new concepts. Help from colleagues

increases collaboration, teamwork, and teacher leadership as it develops a sense of

ownership in the school environment (Hickey & Harris, 2005).

Section 3: Research Method

Introduction

There are benefits for both teachers and students when teachers work in a PLC (Angelle, 2008). Teachers learn how to work together for the common good and how to promote student achievement. The failure of a PLC begins when this concept stalls and the group cannot manage to move forward in their own learning. The inability to move forward requires intervention to help to diagnose the problem and move the PLC forward in its mission. This study was designed to examine where the PLC had stalled at the study school and to determine solutions to move forward. There is abundant literature on how to start a PLC, but little on how to maintain them and what to do if there are problems. This study was used to attempt to assist in filling that void.

In this chapter, I review the research design approach that was used for this study. I then discuss the setting and sample for the study, how data were collected and analyzed, and the instrument used. The steps used for the protection of human participants is then listed, followed by how the findings were disseminated to those individuals that would benefit from the information gathered.

Research Design and Approach

This quantitative study was used to gather data to clarify how the PLC at the study school was functioning and to gain data to try to improve the functioning of the PLC at the school. A quantitative study was chosen because there had been no primary information gathered from the participants. Before any possible solutions can be asserted,

data needed to be gathered. The questions for this study were the following: How do teachers at the study school identify where they stand with the primary principles and practices of a professional learning community? What are the differences in level of development scores among the five dimensions of the PLC implementation? This last question was analyzed using repeated measures ANOVA to compare mean scores among the five dimensions. An ANOVA design requires fewer participants and resources and uses the same subjects for each condition of the research (Seel, 2011). This design can be more sensitive in that it can detect the effect of the independent variable, even when the effect is small. Each subject contributes several scores and participates in multiple experimental treatments (Myers, Well, & Lorch, 2010).

H_0 There are no statistically significant differences in level of development scores among the five dimensions of PLC implementation.

H_a There are statistically significant differences in level of development scores among the five dimensions of PLC implementation.

For this study, the independent variable was the ordinal scores from the five dimensions of Hord's (1996) survey. The dependent variable for this study was the score obtained in each of the five dimensions. A repeated measures ANOVA was used to analyze the mean scores. This was used to provide ratings on the same subject, PLC relationships with different characteristics, and the five dimensions on Hord's survey (Lamb, 2003).

Setting and Sample

The population for this study included all professional faculty at the study school, a rural/suburban school in southwest Georgia. The public school consisted of sixth, seventh, and eighth grade with approximately 890 students within a district of over 2,200 students. The population ranged from beginning first-year teachers in their 20s to veteran teachers with up to 34 years of experience who were well into their 60s with all ages and years of experience in between. There were approximately 10 core/special education teachers at each grade level teaching core subjects, (math, science, social studies, and language arts), approximately seven connection teachers (band, chorus, physical education, business/technology, art and career connections) plus administration which made up the sample population. The staff was approximately 60% female and 40% male.

No sampling method was used. The whole population was used as the sample group because of the school's size. There were only approximately 54 people, which included administration and teachers, so the sample was drawn from the whole faculty whom were invited to participate in the study. Criteria for selection in the sample included participants who were faculty of the study school in teaching, administration, or professional support positions. If any faculty or staff did not choose to participate in the study, only those who volunteered were included. Due to the limited number in the participant pool, no professional staff was excluded from participating except me. Participants who were eligible were those from the professional faculty of the middle school. This included all teachers, administrators, counselors, and the media staff.

Faculty had the opportunity to agree to participate when they were invited to complete the survey. The characteristics of the sample population were the same as the full population because no professional personnel from the population were excluded from the sample except for who opted out on their own and me.

Instrumentation and Materials

The survey SPSaLC, developed by Hord (1996), includes a Likert-type scale to clarify the perceptions of the staff on where they believe the school is in its development of each of the following five dimensions: sharing of authority, shared vision, collective learning, classroom observation, and school conditions (Hord, 1996). The SPSaLC is a paper/pencil questionnaire. Items are coded and unequally distributed according to the dimensions of Hord's framework (some dimensions have two items, while others have three or five). Each item contains three descriptors focused on PLC practices from *never* to *consistent*. Participants accessed the survey online and completed it by indicating where they felt the school was in its development using the Likert scale. Participants chose the number on the scale from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*consistently*) to indicate the level at which they perceived the school to be in its development as a PLC.

Descriptive statistics were used in this survey. Questions had an ordinal data of medians and frequencies. Totals were interval data measured in means, frequencies, and standard deviations. A repeated measures ANOVA was completed to determine if there were statistical differences between the five levels of Hord's survey. SPSS was used as the analysis program to run all statistics.

Internal consistency was tested by Hord (1996) using Cronbach's Alpha. The reliability for the total of the 17 items was + .92 which is above the +.75 that indicates appropriate instrument internal consistency. Reliability of consistency was measured using test-retest. Fifteen participants were matched with individual ID numbers and the reliability was +.94. The total score of this instrument was correlated with a school climate instrument titled School Climate Questionnaire (as cited in Manning, Curtis, and McMillen, 1996) and showed similar characteristics of +.82.

Data Collection and Analysis

A survey was chosen because surveys are quick ways to gain primary information from participants located at a site (Ambrose & Anstey, 2007; Fink, 2006). The survey used, Descriptors of Professional Learning Communities was developed by Hord (1996). Permission to use this survey was received from the SEDL. Hord's survey contains 17 descriptors that are grouped into five dimensions. These dimensions are

1. Participation of the principal who shares decision making and leadership with the faculty (two descriptors);

2. A shared vision developed by the staff, based on commitment to learning, and referenced to the teachers work (three descriptors);

3. Collective learning that creates solutions that focus on students' needs (five descriptors);

4. Review of teacher's classroom practices by colleagues so that they can provide feedback and assistance that supports students and teachers and helps improve learning and understanding (2 descriptors); and

5. Indication that conditions and human capacities support the PLC concept and operation (five descriptors) (Hord, 1996).

These 17 descriptors are organized to focus on the dimensions and are distributed unevenly across the five dimensions above. The descriptors include a statement and three responses that range from most desirable to least desirable. The statements range from high, middle, to low along a five point Likert scale. The responders must read all three indicators for each descriptor and then mark on the response scale. A copy of the survey being used is provided in Appendix B of this paper.

The question-level responses produced ordinal data that was analyzed descriptively. Dimension-level total scores were analyzed as interval data using means and standard deviations. A repeated measures ANOVA was performed. This test compared the differences of related means of the five dimensions of Hord's survey. This test is useful when there are smaller subject groups (Lamb, 2003).

The questions for this study were: How do teachers at the study school identify where they stand with the primary principles and practices of a professional learning community? What are the differences in level of development scores among the five dimensions of the PLC implementation? The use of a repeated measures ANOVA was used to analyze the means of the five dimensions of the survey to determine any

statistical significance. This test used equality of means to help eliminate individual differences in the data (Lamb 2003). The null hypothesis is: There is no statistically significant differences in level of development scores among the five dimensions of PLC implementation. The alternative hypothesis is: There are statistically significant differences in level of development scores among the five dimensions of PLC implementation.

Independent and dependent variables are relevant to this study and are as follows: independent variables are the five levels of Hord's survey supportive and shared leadership, collaboration, collective learning with application, supportive and shared practice, and support of teachers and school. The average scores of the five dimensions was the dependent variable.

Ordinal data with parametric interval data were produced by the survey. This data were used to help determine the perceptions of the PLC at the study school. Descriptive statistics along with the data from the repeated measures ANOVA are presented in tables.

Protection of Human Participants

Participants received a letter which introduced the study and asked for their participation. The letter supplied the information for the website where an online survey was available. The letter also stated that their participation was strictly voluntary and by completing the survey they were implying consent to use the information in the study.

Teachers completed the survey by going to the website and completing the online survey by indicating the number which most accurately described their views on how the

PLC ran at the study school. Only I had access to the results of the completed surveys. Data placed on SPSS did not have names attached and were passworded, kept at my home on a separate thumb drive and erased and destroyed after 5 years.

This study involved a self-administered on-line survey. My role was to interpret the survey data. I was a teacher at the study school and worked with the participants as either a colleague or employee. I did not present any coercion factor for the participants since I was not in an administrative position.

Dissemination of Findings

Data were first discussed with the principal and then distributed to the faculty at a subsequent faculty meeting. Data were given to the faculty using descriptive statistics that was easy to understand along with an explanation of what the data meant for the school. A plan was then made by the faculty on how to proceed to increase the effectiveness of the PLC at the school. Suggestions were provided by the researcher through the background of the research done for this paper.

Conclusion

Professional learning communities were designed to provide teachers with the opportunity to work together to promote student learning. The study school had been working as a PLC but needed help in diagnosing where the school was in the PLC process. Using the survey Descriptors of Professional Learning Communities developed by Hord (Hord, 1997) the study school focused on the question: How do teachers at the

study school identify where they stand with the primary principles and practices of a professional learning community?

  The school's faculty was surveyed in order to obtain the most inclusive data available to the researcher. The survey produced ordinal data which were analyzed to discover to what extent the study school functioned as a PLC.

Section 4: Results

Introduction

A descriptive-inferential statistical study design was chosen for this study. Survey data were gathered to answer the questions: How do teachers at the study school identify where they stand with the primary principles and practices of a professional learning community? What are the differences in level of development scores among the five dimensions of the PLC implementation? This last question was answered using repeated measures ANOVA to compare mean scores among the five dimensions. A repeated measures ANOVA requires fewer participants, resources, and uses the same subjects for each condition of the research (Seel, 2011). This design can be more sensitive in that it can detect the effect of the independent variable, even when the effect is small. Each subject contributes several scores and participates in multiple experimental treatments (Myers et al., 2010). This section contains the results of this study. The setting, sample, materials, and methods, as well as data tables and analysis of the data.

Setting and Sample

All professional faculty and staff of the study school were used as the population. This public middle school in a rural Georgia area contained approximately 980 students in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade classrooms, with a faculty and staff of 54 people. To meet the criteria for selection in the sample, participants needed to be part of the faculty of the study school. No one was excluded from the study population except me and anyone who opted out on their own. The inclusion of all faculty and staff was due to the

small sample number that was available. Out of a possible 54 participants 52 surveys were returned by the faculty and staff.

Instrumentation and Materials

In this study, I used the SPSaLC, developed by Hord (1996). Using a Likert-type scale to clarify the perceptions of the staff on their views of the workings of the PLC process at school, I asked the participants on their views on where the school is in its development of five dimensions: shared vision, collective learning, sharing of authority, school conditions, and support and shared practice, (Hord, 1996). Each item contained three descriptors, which focused on PLC practices leveled from never to consistent. Participants chose the number on the scale from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*consistently*) to indicate the level at which they perceive the school to be in its development as a PLC.

Descriptive statistics were used in this survey. A repeated measures ANOVA was then completed to determine if there was statistical differences between the five levels of Hord's survey.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study was done using a survey because surveys are quick ways to gain primary information (Ambrose & Anstey, 2007; Fink, 2006). Permission was obtained from the SEDL to use the Descriptors of Professional Learning Communities survey developed by Hord (1996).

The research questions for this study were the following: How do teachers at the study school identify where they stand with the primary principles and practices of a

professional learning community? What are the differences in level of development

scores among the five dimensions of the PLC implementation?

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for each of the questions in the survey. The

minimum score, maximum score, mean, standard deviation, and variance are recorded for

each of the questions. These data provide general information as to how the faculty and

staff responded to each question and a basis for understanding the data to follow.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Question1A	52	2	5	3.46	.727	.528
Question1B	52	3	6	3.54	.670	.449
Question2A	52	1	5	3.83	.760	.577
Question2B	52	3	5	4.37	.627	.393
Question2C	52	3	5	3.96	.713	.508
Question3A	52	2	5	3.35	.653	.427
Question3B	52	2	5	3.69	.643	.413
Question3C	52	3	5	4.12	.646	.418
Question3D	52	3	5	4.00	.560	.314
Question3E	52	3	5	3.81	.742	.551
Question4A	52	1	5	2.27	1.031	1.063
Question4B	52	1	5	2.38	1.140	1.300
Question5A	52	2	5	3.77	.921	.848
Question5B	52	2	5	3.67	.834	.695
Question5C	52	2	5	4.04	.816	.665
Question5D	52	3	5	3.35	.623	.688
Question5E	52	2	5	3.54	.670	.449

The statistical program SPSS was used to analyze the data collected in the survey.

Mean, standard deviation, and variance were computed for each question. The first

dimension, *School administrators participate democratically with teachers sharing*

power, authority, and decision making is comprised of two questions. Responses to

Question 1 A (School administrators consistently involve the staff in discussing and making decisions about school issues) displayed a mean of 3.46, a standard deviation of 0.727, and a variance of 0.528. Question One B responses (Administrators involve the entire staff) showed a mean of 3.54, a standard deviation of 0.670, and a variance of 0.449.

The second dimension, *shared vision*, consisted of three questions. Responses to Question 2A (Visions for improvement are discussed by the entire staff such that consensus and a shared vision result) displayed a mean of 3.83, a standard deviation of 0.760, and a variance of 0.577. Responses to Question 2B (Visions for improvement are always focused on students, teaching, and learning) had a mean of 4.37, a standard deviation 0.627, and a variance of 0.393. The last question responses for this dimension, Question 2C (Visions for improvement target high-quality learning experiences for all students), had a mean of 3.96, a standard deviation of 0.713, and a variance of 0.508.

Dimension 3 focused on *collective learning* and consisted of four questions. Responses to Question 3A (The entire staff meet to discuss issues, share information, and learn with and from one another) had a mean of 3.35, a standard deviation of 0.653, and a variance of 0.427. Responses to Question 3B (The staff meets regularly and frequently on substantive student-centered educational issues) had of a mean of 3.69, a standard deviation 0.643, and a variance of 0.413. Question 3C responses (The staff discusses the quality of their teaching and students' learning) had a mean of 4.12, a standard deviation of 0.646, and a variance of 0.418. Responses to Question 3D (The staff, based on their learnings, make and implement plans that address students' needs, more effective

teaching, and more successful student learning) indicated a mean of 4.00, a standard deviation of 0.560, and a variance of 0.314.

Dimension 4 focused on *supportive and shared practice* and consisted of two questions. Question 4A responses (Staff members regularly and frequently visit and observe one another's classroom teaching.) displayed of a mean of 2.27, a standard deviation 1.031, and a variance of 1.063. Responses to Question 4B (Staff members provide feedback to one another about teaching and learning based on their classroom observations) had a mean of 2.38, a standard deviation of 1.140, and a variance of 1.300.

The last dimension surveyed *support of teachers and school* consisted of five questions. Responses to Question 5A (Caring, collaborative, and productive relationships exist among all staff members) had a mean of 3.77, standard deviation of 0.921, and a variance of 0.848. Question 5B responses (The size, structure, and arrangements of the school facilitate staff proximity and interaction) had a mean of 3.67, a standard deviation of 0.834, and a variance of 0.695. Question 5C responses (A variety of processes and procedures are used to encourage staff communication) displayed of a mean of 4.04, a standard deviation 0.816, and a variance of 0.665. Responses to Question 5D (Trust and openness characterize all of the staff members) had a mean of 3.35, a standard deviation of 0.623, and a variance of 0.388. Responses to the last question, Question 5E (Caring, collaborative, and productive relationships exist among all staff members) had a mean of 3.54, a standard deviation of 0.670, and a variance of 0.449.

Each of the dimensions were then averaged to find the means and standard deviations, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics- Five Dimensions

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Dimension 1	52	3.50	.64169
Dimension 2	52	4.05	.58154
Dimension 3	52	3.79	.44802
Dimension 4	52	2.33	.97460
Dimension 5	52	3.67	.53874

Dimension 2 displayed the highest mean of 4.05, which indicated that most of the participants scored in the consistent range. Dimension 4 showed the lowest mean of 2.32, which falls in the never range.

Each of the dimensions consisted of different numbers of questions, which could have an influence on the outcome of the analysis (Wuensch, K., 2014). Since the study is comparing dimensions and not individual survey items the responses were weighted and new descriptive statistics were collected. These data were shown in the following table.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics- weighted means

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Dimension 1	52	17.65	3.277
Dimension 2	52	21.41	6.462
Dimension 3	52	18.96	2.240
Dimension 4	52	11.79	4.916
Dimension 5	52	18.37	2.694

A repeated measures ANOVA, with Greenhouse – Geisser corrections was conducted to assess whether there were significant differences between the five

dimensions. Results are shown in Table 4 and indicated there were significant differences between the five dimensions, $F(1.008, 51.47) = 48.732$, $p < .001$. The null hypothesis was rejected and the alternative hypothesis was accepted.

Table 4

Tests of With-in Subjects Effects

Source		Type III SS	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
DIMENSION	Sphericity Assumed	2637.685	4	659.421	48.732	.000
	Greenhouse-Geisser	2637.685	2.331	1131.561	48.732	.000
	Huynh-Feldt	2637.685	2.449	1076.843	48.732	.000
	Lower-bound	2637.685	1.000	2637.685	48.732	.000
Error	Sphericity Assumed	2760.449	204	13.532		
	Greenhouse-Geisser	2760.449	118.882	23.220		
	Huynh-Feldt	2760.449	124.922	22.097		
	Lower-bound	2760.449	51.000	54.126		

Examination of the means suggested participants indicated there were different opinions on the schools' participation in certain dimensions. Dimension 2 had a higher mean, 21.41, than the other four dimensions, indicating participants had more responses in the consistent range of the survey. Dimension 4 had the lowest mean of 11.79, demonstrating most of the responses were consistently in the never range.

Table 5 showed polynomial contrasts which indicated a significant linear trend, $F(1, 51) = 40.712$, $p < .001$. However this finding was qualified by the significant cubic trend, $F(1, 51) = 87.76$, $p < .001$. This trend reflected the lower ratings participants scored for Dimension 4 compared to the other four dimensions.

Table 5

Tests of With-in Subjects Contrasts

Source	Dimension	Type III SS	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
DIMENSION	Linear	349.500	1	349.500	40.712	.000
	Quadratic	3.124	1	3.124	.386	.537
	Cubic	2070.491	1	2070.491	87.760	.000
	Order 4	214.569	1	214.569	15.493	.000
Error	Linear	437.822	51	8.585		
	Quadratic	413.066	51	8.099		
	Cubic	1203.220	51	23.593		
	Order 4	706.340	51	13.850		

Statistical data showed there were significant differences in the participants' perceptions of the survey dimensions. The null hypothesis was rejected and the alternate hypothesis was accepted. Data showed Dimensions 2 and 4, shared vision and collective learning, had highly different means when compared to the other three dimensions.

Dimension 2 focused on *Shared Vision.* The questions for this dimension assessed the participant's perception on whether the entire school was in consensus on what improvements needed to be made. The high mean indicated the participants agreed the school had a shared vision all members of the staff and faculty worked towards. Dimension 4 surveyed participants' views on *Collected and Shared Learning*. Questions for this dimension consisted of time spent in peer review and visiting classrooms to help improve instruction. Teachers were to dialogue and discuss strengths and weaknesses of instruction and offer constructive criticism on ways to improve. The low mean indicated participants scored this dimension in the never range indicating most faculty and staff believed the school did not address this concept.

Data from the survey showed there were some differences in how the faculty felt about

certain aspects of the PLC within the school. These differences influence what

recommendations might be made to help the school move forward. Section 5 includes

interpretation of scores, implications of the effect in regards to the faculty's success, and

what recommendations are needed to benefit the school staff's application of the

professional learning community

Section 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Overview

In 2007, the middle school under study began the process of becoming a school that used PLCs to enhance student education and teacher learning. The school's faculty were committed to the process, but as the school ran into difficulties, the process started to slow down. It was uncertain where the problems were occurring. The SPSaLC survey was used to help identify what part of the process was stalling and to help develop a plan to make the PLC process more beneficial to students and teachers. Teachers were asked to complete the survey, which consisted of five dimensions on current functioning levels of collaboration, supportive and shared leadership, collective learning with application, supportive and shared practice, and support of teachers and school. The data were collected and studied to see where the teachers of the study school believed the school stood in regards to the primary principles and practices of a PLC. The survey information was also used to identify any significant differences in the five dimensions which could be areas for concern in the implementation of the PLC process. There were significance in some of the findings that led to the rejection of the null hypothesis. These areas of significance were in sharing of authority and shared practice.

Interpretation of findings

I found that there were significant differences among the five dimensions. This significance led to the rejection of the null hypothesis. The first dimension concerning sharing of authority indicated most of the teachers were in agreement. The teachers claimed that the staff believed administration does not share information with the entire

staff or involve them in the decision-making process. The school needs to work more with administration and school communication. Both sides need to be willing to share control to lead to a work environment which is more focused on common goals. This focus and communication will also help alleviate misunderstandings, which allow teachers to feel like they are working with the administration rather than for them (Hord, 2004).

Dimensions 2 and 4 contained the highest and lowest means respectively. According to Dimension 2's high mean, the majority of the teachers believed that visions for improvement were focused on students, teaching, learning, and to provide a quality learning experience in terms of students' abilities. The school needs to continue working together to keep this shared vision and insure that all staff are working towards the same goals.

In the questions focused on collective learning, Dimension 3, participants believed the school was addressing this concept, but the mean of 18.96 indicated there would be room for improvement. Participants specified that there was a lack of agreement on the school-wide level concerning collective learning. The majority of the staff believed they met regularly and frequently to discuss the quality of their teaching and to make plans to address students' needs. Although the staff meets, it is not as an entire staff but as subgroups, grade levels, and subject areas (i.e., connection teachers – physical education, band and chorus, fine arts). These groups met to discuss issues, share information, and learn with and from one another. The school needs to set aside time to meet as a whole faculty to discuss the issues presented in the smaller groups. Meeting as

a faculty would keep the lines of communication open between all grade levels, connections, and the administration so the faculty would be more cohesive in their collective learning.

Dimension 4, which had the lowest mean score, involved the questions regarding shared practice, specifically peer review of lessons. The low mean signifies the majority of the participants scored this part of the survey in the never range. With one of the main focuses of a PLC being collaboration which stresses inquiry, evaluation, and reflection to improve instruction, this dimension is one that needs to be addressed (Bolam et al., 2005). Teachers need to continue learning and increasing their knowledge base (Senge, Camron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton, & Kleiner, 2000). One way of achieving this continuous learning is by watching other teachers teach and providing constructive feedback (Shaughnessy, 2004; Strahan, 2003; Woolfolk-Hoy, 2004). Peer review can provide both teachers with information, either by collecting ideas which could be beneficial in future lessons, or by providing suggestions to make instruction more beneficial. In the survey, the study school indicated this part of the PLC process was not being addressed. Professional development in providing constructive feedback and peer review might need to be considered.

Dimension 5 regarded school conditions. In this dimension, the majority of the staff members agreed structures were not in place to encourage entire staff communication, and there was not a primary communication method which existed for the school. However, the majority of the participants agreed that most of the staff showed trust and openness. The entire staff communication was the problem with this question

set. The staff worked well together in their small group PLCs, but when it came to faculty-wide communication or decisions, there seemed to be a lack of solidity.

Implications for Social Change

According to the responses from the faculty and staff on the survey, the study school had made some good progress towards the PLC process. In Dimensions 1, 3, and 5, the participants were in agreement with means of 17.65, 18.96, and 18.37 respectively. The majority of the participants did not feel the school consistently addressed these dimensions. I found that the school was functioning well in subgroups where teachers could focus on student learning, teachers were meeting to discuss lessons to help improve instruction, and communication was taking place on a subgroup level. This communication within subgroups allowed teachers to address student learning, identify areas of concern, and improve student understanding. This dialogue benefited the students in that the students had more self-efficacy, which can lead to higher learning. As the study school continues to work on application of the PLC process the students, school, and community benefits in that the students are able to be successful. This feeling of self-efficacy can lead to students in school, continuing towards higher learning, and becoming contributing members of the community.

The school needs to work on whole school communication where all faculty meet consistently to discuss student learning, school visions, areas of concern, and goals for further action. This study can assist other schools who are struggling with the PLC process. The school could survey their faculty to find gaps that need to be filled in to ensure the success of the process within their school. It would not matter if the school had

similar demographics or population of teachers as the survey school. The survey used at this study school was designed to help find strengths and weaknesses in the PLC processes and would provide an avenue for discussion to create change at any school which used it.

Recommendations for action

The study school needs to continue to work on communication. The administration and teachers need to be more willing to work together and stay focused on the vision of the school. Teachers need to be willing to accept responsibility in making decisions that affect the school and students, while the administration needs to make more of an effort to include teachers in the decision-making process. A greater emphasis needs to be placed on the entire staff working together to have a common view on school improvement with a focus on student learning. Emphasis needs to also be applied to the school's collective learning. The study school has a good start in those subject areas, but they do not meet as an entire school to discuss issues, share information and lesson ideas, and learn from and with each other. Time allocated for subject areas to participate in vertical planning might be useful. Vertical planning is when all grade levels of the same subject meet to discuss student learnings. When these discussions occur, corequisite skills and issues which might prevent specific students from being successful can be assessed and hopefully overcome, According to the study results, supportive and shared practice is another area the study school needs to address. In this area, teachers use peer-review skills to increase individual and school-wide instruction. Teachers stated in the dimension concerning school conditions that they have a high level of trust and openness with each

other. Not wanting to jeopardize trust could stop teachers from critiquing each other's work in a professional manner. Creating professional development focusing on observations with constructive feedback might be beneficial to the teachers and help them understand that constructive feedback can maintain the trust they have within the school. Another aspect which could affect peer observations is that teachers are not provided time out of their classrooms to attend other teacher's classes. The administration for the study school would need to provide this time, as well as time for the teachers to meet and discuss what was observed. This time would improve communication and trust between and among the teachers and ultimately strengthen bonds of PLCs.

The school has started using school time to meet with a leadership team. This team consists of one or two teachers per grade level, a connection teacher, a special education teacher, and the administration. Their task is to meet one time per month from 7:30 to 11:00 to work as a PLC for the school. This collaboration enables some shared leadership and vision to work through the administration and with the faculty. This leadership team has some say in school activities but they are limited in what they can do. It is a start and hopefully it will expand in the future to include more of the faculty and functioning as a PLC will improve.

Recommendations for Future Study

This study showed there were areas where the school's faculty had different views. These areas are where the survey participants believed the faculty was in agreement as to how the school was working, whether consistently or not. These dimensions would be areas of future in-depth study. Whole school communication

seemed to be a need at the study school. Researching ways to improve shared communication between the administration and faculty would be a first step for any school wishing to implement the PLC process. Whole school communication is an area which should be developed over time. Finding other successful schools which have positive school-wide communication and having them visit your school for observation and suggestions would possibly increase success in this area.

Collective learning would need to be studied on how to best meet the needs of the faculty as they met as content level groups and cross-curricular areas to help support student learning across the school to implement more consistent instructional methods. Finally, under the topic of school conditions, one of the main tenants of PLCs is the observation of other teachers as a way to share vision, promote collaboration, share instructional practices, and increase teacher effectiveness. Creating a committee to study how these teacher to teacher observations are done in other schools or even contacting other PLC schools to see how this is handled effectively would be a place to start to increase the effectiveness of this area.

Conclusion

Professional learning communities, when used in a school setting can be very beneficial to students and teachers. Collaboration, shared leadership, shared vision, and a strong school environment can allow a school to enhance learning. Everyone is important to the success of a PLC, so everyone's views need to be considered. PLCs provide the avenue for successful application to take place.

This study school has a good beginning in that the faculty has started the PLC process. They have established trust and are collaborating on a subgroup level. In order to progress the school needs to make some changes in sharing leadership, collaborating on a school wide scale, and providing peer feedback by watching each other teach and discussing strengths and weaknesses. Continuing with PLCs can provide the school, students, and community with a strong foundation which enhances learning, focuses on common goals, and promotes trust and openness.

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Appendix A: SEDL License Agreement

ADVANCING RESEARCH

SEDL

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SEDL License Agreement

To: Kathleen T. Kohl (Licensee)
          212 Harvestwood Dr.
          Grovetown, GA 30813

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          Information Associate
          SEDL
          Information Resource Center—Copyright Permissions
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          Austin, TX 78723

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Date: August 11, 2009; revised August 4, 2011

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SEDL is pleased to grant permission for use of the material cited above by the Licensee who will identify if teachers at Groveton Middle School feel they are truly a professional learning community and if not, what areas they need to address to promote productive meetings, to bring about student understanding, and to address students who are floundering. The Licensee also will use the work and research on PLCs in her dissertation at Walden University. The following are the terms, conditions, and limitations governing this limited permission to reproduce the work:

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I'm e-mailing you a PDF of this agreement. Please review, print, and sign one copy below, indicating that you understand and agree to comply with the above terms, conditions and limitations, and send the original back to me. If you wish to keep a copy with original signatures, please print a second copy, and also sign and return it to me and, after I receive and sign it, I'll return it with both of our signatures to you.

Thank you, again, for your interest in SEDL's *School Professional Staff as Learning Community Questionnaire*. If you have questions about this License Agreement, please contact Nancy Reynolds at (800) 476-6861, ext. 6548 or 512-391-6548, or by e-mail at nancy.reynolds@sedl.org.

Sincerely,

Nancy Reynolds   *October 7, 2011*

Nancy Reynolds for SEDL   Date signed

Agreed and accepted:

Signature *Kathleen Kohl*   *10 | 1 | 2011*

Printed Name *Kathleen Kohl*   Date signed

Appendix B: Hord's SPSaLC Survey

School Professional Staff as Learning Community

Directions: This questionnaire concerns your perceptions about your school staff as a learning organization. There is no right or wrong response. Please consider where you believe your school is in its development of each of the five numbered descriptors shown below. Each sub-item has a five-point scale. On each scale, circle the number that best represents the degree to which you feel your school has developed.

Descriptor #1: School administrators participate democratically with teachers sharing power, authority, and decision making.

1a.					
	5	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**
	Although there are some legal and fiscal decisions required of the principal, school administrators consistently involve the staff in discussing and making decisions about most school issues.		Administrators invite advice and counsel from the staff and then make decisions themselves.		Administrators never share information with the staff nor provide opportunities to be involved in decision-making.

1b.					
	5	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**
	Administrators involve the entire staff.		**Administrators involve a small committee, council, and/or team of staff.**		**Administrators do not involve any staff.**

Descriptor #2: Staff members share visions for school improvement that have an undeviating focus on student learning and are consistently referenced for the staff's work.

2a.	5 4	3 2	1
	Visions for improvement are discussed by the entire staff such that consensus and a shared vision results.	**Visions for improvement are not thoroughly explored; some staff agree and others do not.**	**Visions for improvement held by the staff are widely divergent.**
2b.	5 4	3 2	1
	Visions for improvement are always focused on students and learning and teaching.	**Visions for improvement are sometimes focused on students and learning and teaching.**	**Visions for improvement do not target students and learning and teaching.**
2c.	5 4	3 2	1
	Visions for improvement target high quality learning experiences for all students.	**Visions for improvement address quality learning experiences in terms of students' abilities.**	**Visions for improvement do not include concerns about the quality of learning experiences.**

Descriptor #3: Staff's collective learning and application of the learnings (taking action) create high intellectual learning tasks and solutions to address student needs.

3a.	5	4	3	2	1
	The entire staff meets to discuss issues, share information, and learn with and from one another.		Subgroups of the staff meet to discuss issues, share information, and learn with and from one another.		Individuals randomly discuss issues, share information, and learn with and from one another.
3b.	5	4	3	2	1
	Staff members meet regularly and frequently on substantive, student-centered educational issues.		Staff members meet occasionally on substantive, student-centered educational issues.		Staff members rarely or never meet to consider substantive educational issues.
3c.	5	4	3	2	1
	Staff members regularly discuss the quality of their teaching and students' learning.		Staff members do not often discuss their instructional practices nor its influence on student learning.		Staff members basically discuss non-teaching and non-learning issues.
3d.	5	4	3	2	1
	Staff members, based on their learnings, make and implement plans that address students' needs, more effective teaching, and more successful student learning.		Staff members occasionally act on their learnings and make and implement plans to improve teaching and learning.		Staff members do not act on their learnings
3e.	5	4	3	2	1
	Staff members regularly debrief and assess the impact of		Staff members infrequently assess their actions and seldom make revisions based on the results.		Staff members do not assess their work

	their actions and makes **revisions.**	

Descriptor #4: Peers review and give feedback based on observing each other's classroom behaviors in order to increase individual and organizational capacity.

4a.	**5** **4**	**3** **2**	**1**
	Staff members regularly and frequently visit and observe each other's classroom teaching.	**Staff members occasionally visit and observe each other's classroom teaching.**	**Staff members never visit their peers' classrooms.**
4b.	**5** **4**	**3** **2**	**1**
	Staff members provide feedback to each other about teaching and learning based on their classroom observations.	**Staff members discuss non-teaching issues after classroom observations.**	**Staff members do not interact after, or about, classroom observations**

Descriptor #5: School conditions and capacities support the staff's arrangement as a professional learning organization.

5a.	5 4	3 2	1
	Time is arranged and committed for whole staff interactions.	**Time is arranged, but frequently staff members fail to meet.**	**Staff members cannot arrange time for interacting.**
5b.	**5** **4**	**3** **2**	**1**
	The size, structure, and arrangements of the school facilitate staff proximity and interaction.	**Considering the size, structure, and arrangements of the school, staff members are working to maximize interaction.**	**Staff members take no action to manage the facility and personnel for interaction.**
5c.	**5** **4**	**3** **2**	**1**
	A variety of processes and procedures are used to encourage staff communication.	**A single communication method exists and is sometimes used to share information.**	**Communication devices are not given attention.**
5d.	**5** **4**	**3** **2**	**1**
	Trust and openness characterize all the staff.	**Some of the staff members are trusting and open.**	**Trust and openness do not exist among the staff.**

Appendix C: Informed Consent

Teachers,

I am asking for your permission to participate in a survey regarding your perceptions on how our school is functioning as a professional learning community. You are invited to participate in this survey group because you are a member of the survey school and functioning in the PLC. This research is designed to determine the current level that the school's PLC are functioning. The survey has questions regarding your perceptions of administration support of the school, shared leadership, the schools values and visions, shared practice in teaching, supportive conditions for staff, and how the school works with collective learning and application of data. At the bottom of this email, there is a link to the survey. Clicking on the survey implies your consent to participate in this research study. I am a teacher here at the school but this study is in no way connected with my work at the school. This study is connected with my doctoral work at Walden University. I would like to thank you for your time in completing this survey. If you have any questions, please feel free to email me at kathleen.kohl@waldenu.edu.

Procedures: You will be asked to complete the survey linked at the bottom of the page. It should take about 10-15 minutes.

Potential Risks or Discomfort: There should be no risks involved for participants beyond the risks associated with daily life. This survey should not cause any discomfort.

Potential Benefits: While you might not have any personal benefits from completion of this survey, your participation will allow the school to continue with the PLC process. You participation is completely voluntary.

Confidentiality: Participation in this study is completely anonymous and responses will be confidential. The website does not allow for entering of personal data.

Storage and future use of data : The raw data you provide will be stored in a password protected program that is only accessible by the researcher. The researcher will retain the data for a period of five (5) years or until all analyses are complete.

Freedom to Withdraw: Your participation is strictly voluntary and you may withdraw your consent at any time without penalty. In addition, you have the right not to participate. To refuse participation, simply do not click on the link to start the survey. Declining to participate will not impede any relationship with the researcher.

Financial Compensation: No compensation is available to participants. Please feel free to print a copy of this consent form as you deem necessary.
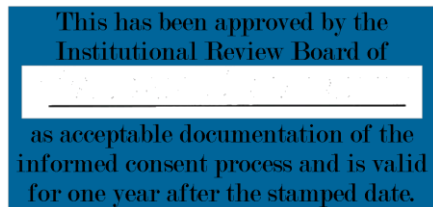
Contact information

If you have questions about this research, you may contact: Kathleen Kohl
at kathleen.kohl@waldeu.edu

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a participant in this study you may contact the WaldenUniversity Representative at 612-312-1210. Walden University's approval number for this study is 11-12-13-0050440 and it expires on November 11, 2014.

By taking the survey, you are agreeing to be in the study. Be sure that questions you have about the study have been answered and that you understand what you are being asked to do. You may contact the researcher if you think of a question later.

By clicking on this survey link, I agree to participate in the study.

This has been approved by the
Institutional Review Board of

_____

as acceptable documentation of the
informed consent process and is valid
for one year after the stamped date.

Curriculum Vitae
Education Degrees, Special Awards

1987 California State University – B.S. Psychology

1987 California State University – Teaching Certificate

2000 Augusta State University – Masters in Education – Middle Grade Science

2004 – present – Georgia Master Teacher

Employment

1988 – 1989 Teacher, Third Grade – Highlands Elementary, Saugus, CA

1989 – 2002 Teacher, Fourth and Fifth Grade – Lamar Elementary, Augusta, GA

2002 – present Teacher, Eighth Grade Physical Science – Grovetown Middle School