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Early Childhood Teachers' Perceptions of Professional Learning Communities

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Walden University

College of Education

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Andress Carter-Sims

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Walden University
2021

Abstract

Early Childhood Teachers' Perceptions of Professional Learning Communities

by

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MA, University of South Carolina, 2005

BS, University of South Carolina, 1992

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

Teachers are struggling to transfer newly acquired knowledge and skills from professional learning experiences into their classrooms. This study aimed to explore teachers' perceptions of how professional learning communities (PLCs) enhance elementary teachers' instructional practices based on interviews with teachers in a rural school district. Olivier and Huffman's theory of utilizing PLC to their fullest potential was used as a conceptual framework for the study. This framework highlighted five dimensions of meaningful collaborative learning to increase teaching and learning in schools. This was a qualitative study with semi-structured interviews of 10 certified elementary teachers who engaged in PLC. Interview transcripts were examined using open-coding techniques with thematic analysis. Participants reported nurturing teacher leadership, support for teaching and learning, collaborative learning, sharing instructional practices, and supportive conditions were significant contributing factors for PLCs' success in enhancing teacher instructional practices. All of the study participants agreed that PLCs impacted teachers learning instructional strategies at the elementary school level, especially for pre-kindergarten through second grade teachers. It is recommended that districts and schools provide training regarding collective learning and application, sharing instructional practices, working collaboratively to plan, solving problems of practice, and learning opportunities in their classroom through collaboration with colleagues. Further recommendations include using a mixed-methods research design to understand PLCs better. This study contributes to positive social change by informing educators, practitioners, and researchers about the need for teacher collaboration to improve instructional strategies, thereby improving students' academic achievement.

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Dedication

The researcher dedicates this dissertation to my mother, Dorothy R. Carter, who transitioned to heaven while working on this research study. She supported me and helped me keep my goals alive and real. I also dedicate this work to my husband, Wayne Sims, daughter, Alicia Sims, and my father Woodrow Carter. Your encouragement, faith, and patience have been an inspiration while I cried and fell into numerous depression stages throughout this process. I love each of you very much and thank God for your understanding and love while I faced this enormous journey.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

According to research from researchers at the National Center for Educational Statistics (2019), professional learning communities (PLC) are an effective evidence-based strategy for enabling teachers to update their knowledge, sharpen their skills, and acquire new teaching techniques intent of changing teacher practices. According to researchers at the Institute of Education Sciences (2016), collaborative PLC teams have exposed teachers to new id-eas and practices. They can improve their pedagogy through a process of critical reflection with their colleagues. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2017) reported that 81% of teachers participated in regularly scheduled collaboration with other teachers, 67% of teachers observed or were observed by their colleagues for at least 10 minutes, and 45% conducted individual or collaborative research on a topic of professional interest to improve teacher effectiveness. As a result of the number of teachers engaged in collaborative professional learning experiences and the time dedicated to PLC, school leaders must ensure PLC was carefully planned and organized in a way that enhances teacher pedagogy and classroom instructional practices.

Teacher collaboration and PLC can enhance professional learning opportunities and correspondingly foster meaningful changes in teaching instructional practices (Bellibas, Bulut, & Gedik, 2017; Oliver & Huffman, 2016; Steyn, 2016). Several researchers have indicated that PLC stimulates teachers' learning and outcomes and supports schools' continuous improvement process (Binkhorst, Poortman, & van Joolingen, 2017; Pang & Wang, 2016; Song & Choi, 2017; Vanblaere & Devos, 2016).

Chapter 1 included background literature on the research topic and the research problem and its purpose and followed by the research question. This conceptual framework grounds the research, explains the research, and offers definitions for critical terms in the research study. Finally, the researcher offered assumptions, scope, delimitations, limitations, the study's significance, and summarize the information included in Chapter 1.

Background

For teachers to improve their instructional practices, collaboration with their colleagues for increased professional learning and enhanced professional practice is critical (Oliver & Huffman, 2016). Researchers have suggested that in order to engage in sustainable school improvement, teachers must be engaged in collaborative PLC, which allow them to play an active part in their knowledge construction (Dehdary, 2017; Van Lare & Brazer, 2013; Wilson, 2016). Therefore, transforming teachers into thinkers and inquirers who play an active part in knowledge construction can guarantee improved teacher practices (Dehdary, 2017). In order to engage in collaborative practices that change teachers' instructional delivery, enhances their professional growth, and improves teacher quality, additional research is required to maintain effective PLC (Louws, Meirink, van Veen, van Driel, 2017; Oliver & Huffman, 2016). While there is a large body of research on the purpose and benefits of PLC, there are not many studies on early childhood teachers' perceptions of PLC. Additional studies on the perceptions classroom teachers have about PLC are needed because teachers are influential in reforming schools because they provide direct instruction to students in their classrooms daily (Dehdary, 2017; Wilson, 2016).

Years of research have asserted that teachers are the most influential determinates for instruction quality in a classroom learning environment (Damjanovic & Blank, 2018). Therefore, teachers must be provided with time to participate in collaborative efforts with their colleagues to construct meaningful knowledge and engage in inquiry to transform their teaching and learning (Popp, & Goldman, 2016). Unfortunately, many teachers receive professional learning that does not promote active engagement or improve their instructional practice (Capraro et al., 2016; Louws, Meirink, van Veen, van Driel, 2017). For this reason, professional learning opportunities for teachers should involve opportunities for collaborative participation of teachers based on their needs for planning and implementing instructional changes in their classroom.

According to Capraro et al. (2016), teachers were often expected to collaborate with other teachers rather than work in isolation because PLC is one of the most effective strategies for increasing teacher learning collaboratively. PLC must ensure positive outcomes for teachers. PLC is not guaranteeing teacher learning and enhanced instructional practices. PLC must be implemented to create and sustain learning and change in practice for teachers.

Problem Statement

South Carolina requires professional learning and growth in order for teachers to maintain a teaching certificate. This requirement is designed to promote high-quality teaching and learning. Through empirical research, collaborative professional learning structures have been suggested to support early childhood professionals' high-quality teaching and learning experiences (Bahous, Busher, & Nabhani, 2016; Song & Choi,

2017). According to Guerra and Figueroa (2018), teachers' professional learning should be an essential component of their professional growth to ensure high-quality early childhood education. Bahous et al. (2016) added that teachers need opportunities to build their capacity to learn various skills and knowledge collaboratively to help them teach and support learning successfully.

Gilbert, Voelkel, and Johnson (2018) suggested that PLC are often not used to their fullest potential in school. Hurley, Seifert, and Sheppard (2018) asserted that PLC is not used to their fullest potential when school leaders do not engage in distributive leadership practices with teachers for individual teacher growth and continuous school improvement. Additionally, research has documented a well-known problem with PLC. The problem with PLC is that teachers often struggle to transfer newly acquired collaborative teacher learning experiences into their classroom learning environment (Sjoer & Meirink, 2016). Song and Choi (2017) suggested that PLC are designed for various forms of collaboration in the current field of education to bring about significant teaching activities and student learning changes.

Similarly, Mu, Liang, Lu, and Huang (2018) indicated that enhanced teaching is likely to occur when teachers have a collaborative PLC that facilitates teaching practices through an engaging professional learning process. Although a substantial body of current research offers insight into PLC (Pop and Goldman, 2016; Voelkel and Chrispeels, 2017; Woodland, 2016), further research is needed to understand better teacher's perceptions of PLC to support teachers' individual and collaborative learning to enhance teacher instructional practices (Bellibas, Bulut, & Gedik, 2017; Burns et al., 2018; Owen, 2016). Due to the lack of research on teachers' perceptions, many schools

may not have implemented PLC that cultivate learning through collaboration or support continuous school improvement (Gilbert et al. 2018; Hurley et al. 2018; Sjoer & Meirink, 2016). Therefore, the problem to be addressed by this research is that it is unknown to what extent PLC conducted with prekindergarten through third-grade teachers improves instructional practices.

According to the teacher surveys collected by the school's department of education, only 52.9% of the teachers were satisfied with their learning environment, and only 58.8% of teachers were satisfied with their social and physical environment during the 2018-2019 school year (South Carolina State Department of Education, 2020). Additionally, only 59.9% percent of students reported they are cognitively engaged in their learning environment per the opinion surveys provided during the same instructional year (South Carolina State Department of Education, 2020). Finally, the South Carolina State Department of Education (2020) reported that the school's achievement score was unsatisfactory, and the report card rating was below average for the same school year. Therefore, this data provides evidence and supports the reason for this study. PLC has become embedded within the identified school; having a better understanding of teachers can effectively collaborate through professional learning communities that may enhance instructional practices.

Purpose of the Study

At the site where this study took place, all teachers K-3rd grade participate in early childhood PLC. The purpose of this qualitative research study was to better understand prekindergarten through third-grade teachers' perceptions of how early Childhood professional learning communities enhance teachers' instructional practices.

The participants in this study were prekindergarten through third-grade teachers who engage in PLC to enhance teaching and learning in a public elementary school in South Carolina. The qualitative data analysis was used to understand teachers' perceptions of PLC and their alignment to the PLC conceptual framework.

Research Question(s) (Qualitative)

1. What are early childhood teachers' perceptions of how early childhood professional learning communities enhance teachers' instructional practices?

Conceptual Framework (Qualitative)

This study's conceptual framework was Olivier and Huffman's (2016) theory for utilizing PLC to their fullest potential. This theory highlights five dimensions of meaningful collaborative learning to increase teaching and learning for teachers and their students (Olivier and Huffman, 2016). According to Olivier and Huffman (2016), the five essential dimensions were shared and supportive leadership, values, vision, collective learning, application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions. These five dimensions that emphasize the need for continuous improvement helped inform the research question's development, interview questions, data analysis themes, and themes that may emerge throughout the research process. These dimensions were also be reflected in the research question. The questions were a part of the data analysis themes expected and new themes that may emerge. These dimensions were essential for interpreting the results and findings and can help to inform recommendations.

Nature of the Study

This qualitative research study employed a semi-structured interview approach (Rubin and Rubin, 2012) to investigate 10-12 prekindergarten through third-grade teachers' perceptions of PLC. Teachers' perceptions of the five dimensions of meaningful collaborative learning were studied through individual in-depth qualitative interviews. Rubin and Rubin (2012) noted that in-depth qualitative interviewing allows a researcher to gather rich and detailed information through open-ended questions that may be adjusted depending upon the interviewee's responses to questions. Data were gathered through face-to-face interviews with teachers prekindergarten through third grade who was purposefully selected and invited to interview. An interview protocol was used, and open-ended questions were developed based on Oliver and Huffman's (2016) theory for utilizing PLC to their fullest potential. Questions were developed based on how PLC nurture leadership, support a shared vision for learning, influence collaboration, support sharing instructional strategies, and characteristics of support conditions that exist for their PLC. The transcribed answers to the open-ended questions were used for analysis. Through thematic analysis, prominent themes were identified based on Oliver and Huffman's (2016) five dimensions of utilizing PLC to their fullest potential for meaningful collaborative learning. The coding was used to identify themes and new themes that may emerge and aligned to the five dimensions and research question. As suggested by expert researchers in the field, qualitative interview techniques were referenced and designed for flexibility, interactive, and continuous learning (Babbie, 2017; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Thomas, 2017) in order to investigate PLC.

Definitions

Professional Learning Communities: Teachers who meet during or after school regularly to develop lesson plans, examine student work, monitor student progress, assess the effectiveness of instruction, and identify their professional development needs for increasing teacher knowledge, improving teaching strategies, and classroom practices.

Collaboration: Provides a forum for a team of teachers to exchange ideas, knowledge, challenges, strengths, experiences, and practices in order to improve their pedagogy through a process of critical reflection and dialogue with other teachers.

Shared and Supportive Leadership: Provides a structure for teachers to have a voice in the decision making that involves teaching and learning at the school level through professional learning communities.

Shared Vision and Values: Provides an alignment between the purpose and intended outcomes of professional learning communities, developed and agreed upon by the teachers related to the instructional culture and climate.

Collective Learning and Application: Provides a structured opportunity through professional learning communities for teachers to learn from each other through job-embedded dialogue, classroom observations, and modeling, which leads to the opportunity to practice what has been learned from other teachers.

Shared Personal Practice: Provides a structured opportunity through professional learning communities for teachers to share evidence-based strategies, assessments, next steps, student work, and best practices.

Supportive Conditions: Provides appropriate structures such as schedules and time for teachers to collaborate effectively with colleagues who are trustworthy, positive, and productive professionals.

Assumptions

There are several assumptions associated with this study. One assumption underlying this study is that the teachers interviewed understand that PLC was implemented to increase teacher knowledge, improve teaching strategies and classroom practices. Another assumption is that the teachers view dialogue and reflection with other teachers as an essential and necessary strategy that fosters and promotes a critical examination of teacher practice. These assumptions are necessary as the answers to the research question regarding PLC was used for the data analysis process to identify themes based on the study's conceptual framework. It was also assumed that the teachers were honest and thorough when answering the interview questions. Also, as it relates to this study on the perceptions of early childhood teachers' PLC, the participants must be honest and thorough to ensure the results of the study accurately answer the research question.

Scope and Delimitations

Studies on the perceptions of early childhood teachers' PLC are limited; however, there are several decades of research by experts that have been conducted on the benefits of PLC. The site for this study was chosen because the superintendent initiated PLC in the school district. The selected elementary school has been conducting PLC to enhance teacher practice. The site was also chosen because it provides an authentic opportunity to investigate PLC through a district collaboration strategy. The scope of this qualitative

study at a public elementary school in South Carolina included participants identified as early childhood teacher's grades prekindergarten through third grade. Excluded from the study were administrators, instructional coaches, and other faculty members who do not serve students daily. Interview questions allowed for investigating early childhood teachers' perceptions of the five dimensions of meaningful collaborative learning based on their PLC at their elementary school. Data gathered from participants was presented using confidentiality labels to protect their privacy, encouraging authentic responses to the interview questions. The interview questions' responses allowed for data to be gathered on the topic and provide thorough answers to the research question. The coding of the interview responses was analyzed the qualitative data to identify themes that emerge from the coding. A thorough account of participant experiences and perceptions afforded teachers, educators, and administrators not employed at this research site the opportunity to assess whether the findings from this study apply to their setting.

Limitations

According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), qualitative interviews allow for examining the real world's complexity by exploring multiple perspectives toward a specific topic. The qualitative study examining the perceptions of early childhood teachers PLC had limitations. One limitation of the study is that it involved one public elementary school in South Carolina. The interviews were conducted with ten early childhood teachers, prekindergarten through third grade in a single school. Due to the small number of participants in the study, results cannot be generalized to all early childhood teachers in public elementary schools.

Additionally, since the research was conducted in one district at one elementary school, this may prevent the generalization of the finding to other similar populations. Another limitation is that the study researcher was the only person to gather the data, analyze the data, and interpret the data. This could lead to the data being influenced through bias with the coding, themes, and interpretation of the data. Although limitations may be potentially possible, the finding may suggest valuable insights into meaningful collaborative learning strategies that may improve teacher instructional practice and enhance teacher knowledge.

Significance

There are numerous reasons to study teacher perceptions of early childhood PLC to improve teacher practice (Gilbert et al., 2018). Oliver and Huffman (2016) suggested addressing the need for improved teacher practices; PLC might be a viable and sustainable option for improving teachers' collaborative practices. According to Hagen and Park (2016), being aware of how adults learn can help education leaders reduce PLC issues while designing adult social learning structures that may be contributed to enhanced student engagement. This qualitative research study examined early childhood teachers' perceptions of effective collaborative practices for early childhood teachers' PLC. In accordance with Voelkel and Chrispeels (2017), the examination of PLC can address the nature and extend the professional learning needed to effectively foster both pedagogical and content knowledge needed by teacher teams to improve teacher practice significantly because there is little empirical research available that evaluates how the complete process of PLC work and how aspects were linked to the intended outcomes

(Binkhorst et al., 2017), the findings of this study can offer insight into how to improve PLC that may result in improved teacher practice through collaboration. Because high-quality early childhood education consistently generates positive child outcomes (van Huizen and Plantenga, 2018), providing adequate and effective educators' training opportunities is crucial (Gilbert et al., 2018; Song & Choi, 2017). Therefore, effective PLC may bring about positive social change by improving the quality of education and how PLC and teachers work together to increase best practices (Pang & Wang, 2016). Correspondingly, this qualitative research may lead to positive social change by developing improved PLC, which could improve teacher self-efficacy, thereby producing more confident and competent educators (Gilbert et al., 2018) and, ultimately, young children.

Summary

Chapter 1 of this dissertation was guided by teachers' problem of inconsistently implementing effective collaborative practices through PLC. As a result of this problem of practice, the purpose of the study, research question, conceptual framework, nature of the study, definitions of the key concepts essential to the study, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study are described in the first chapter. Chapter 1 is sequenced in this manner in order to purposefully and systematically investigate through qualitative research early childhood teachers' perceptions of effective collaborative practices with early childhood teachers' PLC. Chapter 2 provided a comprehensive review of the current literature within the last five years relevant to PLC, improving teacher practice, and knowledge.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

There is currently a wealth of research on PLC, but there was limited research on PLC for early childhood teachers. Consequently, as a result of decades of research and practice on PLC, researchers have found that this collaborative strategy has the potential to assist teachers with expanding their knowledge and improving their instructional practices. For example, according to Postholm and Waage (2016), teachers must have the opportunity to work together, discuss their teaching experiences, observe their colleagues, and provide feedback to better their practice. Additionally, Wagner et al., (2019) found that recent reviews of research on the characteristics of effective professional learning were that it nurtures collaboration and collective participation among teachers, promotes active learning through teaching, observation and reflection, and maintains alignment with teachers' current concerns about standards and curriculum initiatives.

There appears to be consensus in several research studies that teachers' opportunity to collaborate in professional learning communities, which involved teachers meeting consistently for joint learning, enhancing instructional practices, and lesson planning, is crucial for high-quality professional development (Attorps & Kellner, 2017). Because of the positive influence PLC can have on enhancing instructional practices, this study addressed why prekindergarten through third-grade teachers' participation in PLC does not improve instructional practices. During the last few decades, PLC was implemented to enhance teacher instructional practices in many schools. While many teachers are consistently participating in PLC, the purpose of this qualitative research study is to better understand prekindergarten through third-grade teachers' perceptions of

how early childhood professional learning communities enhance teachers' instructional practices in a public elementary school in South Carolina. Peer-reviewed articles and professional text on PLC from 2015 to 2019 were reviewed and used to write the literature review for Chapter 2. Chapter 2 includes studies on PLC and specifically the findings related to shared and supportive leadership, shared vision and values, collective learning and application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions. Specifically, Chapter 2 described what the research has revealed about the five dimensions of meaningful collaborative learning for teachers previously mentioned. Finally, this chapter summarized the culture and practices desired due to the five dimensions, best practices for PLC, and discuss the gap in the literature.

Literature Search Strategy

A thorough review of the literature was conducted to inform this qualitative study, provide a foundation of knowledge, and acknowledge findings from other research studies on PLC. A search of peer-reviewed articles and professional books published within the last five years regarding PLC was conducted using Walden University's online research database. Academic Search Complete, Education Source, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), PsycINFO, SocINDEX, and Teacher Reference Center were the databases used for this literature review. Keywords used for the search were professional learning communities, professional learning teams, supportive leadership, supportive conditions, collegial learning, collegial inquiry communities, intentional communities, teacher collaboration, teacher leadership, professional development, a community of practice, and faculty development. Approximately 150 peer-reviewed

articles were reviewed from Walden University's library on PLC, and over 55 were relevant to this qualitative study.

Conceptual Framework/Theoretical Foundation

This study's conceptual framework was of Olivier and Huffman's (2016) theory for utilizing PLC to their fullest potential. This theory highlights five dimensions of meaningful collaborative learning to increase teaching and learn for teachers and their students (Olivier and Huffman, 2016). According to Olivier and Huffman (2016), the five essential dimensions were shared and supportive leadership, values, vision, collective learning, application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions. These five dimensions that emphasize the need for continuous improvement helped inform the research question's development, interview questions, data analysis themes, and themes that may emerge throughout the research process. These dimensions were reflected in the research question. The five dimensions were also components of the data analysis themes expected and new themes that may emerge. These dimensions were essential for interpreting the results and findings and can inform recommendations that may enhance PLC collaborative practices.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variable

The literature review from peer-reviewed and academic journals and professional books support meaningful collaborative learning through PLC. A review of the literature on shared and supportive leadership, shared vision and values, collective learning and application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions seek to explain the benefits of collaborative practices through the implementation of PLC. The significance of collaborative practices through PLC was explored and reviewed in the literature

review procedure. First, there was a review of PLC literature followed by reviewing the five dimensions' findings.

Professional Learning Communities

The concept of PLC first emerged in the educational arena as early as the 1960s when researchers offered this collaborative concept as an alternative to teachers working in isolation in the United States (Solution Tree, 2020). While there is no universally agreed-upon definition Prenger, Poortman and Handelzalts (2019) described PLC as a group of people sharing and critically questioning their practice in a consistent, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, and growth mindset manner. Likewise, Woodland and Mazur (2015) indicated that PLC allows teachers to collaborate within teacher teams to build a shared culture of high-quality instructional practices and student learning by analyzing assessment data, solving practice problems, and creating evidence-based lessons plans. To engage in best practices related to the initial intent of PLC, specific questions related to teaching and learning should drive collaborative teacher teams' work. According to DuFour and Reeves (2016, p 94), the four questions that should be addressed in effective PLC are: “What do we want students to learn? How will we know if they have learned it? What will we do if they have not learned it? How will we provide extended learning opportunities for students who have mastered the content?”

Educational reform initiatives have stressed the benefits of teachers interacting and exchanging information with each other (Benoliel & Schechter, 2017; Carpenter, 2017). Some researchers claimed that collaborative professional learning was viewed as a high leverage strategy for improving and reforming schools as well as enhancing staff quality (Bailey & Jakicic, 2019; Plows, 2017; Zheng, Yin, & Li, 2019). Also, Keung et

al. (2019) pointed out that current educational reform initiatives are focused on improving collaborative cultures and teachers' instructional practices through building PLC. Hence, Bush (2018) and Horn, Garner, Kane, and Brasel (2017) noted a growing interest in PLC's role in school improvement to create and sustain learning through teacher collaboration.

A PLC of teachers was defined as an organizational strategy for school reform and improvement that has been extremely effective for propelling teachers' professional learning (Park, Lee, & Cooc, 2019). Similarly, PLC has been defined as a group of teachers who share and critically dialogue about their instructional practices to reflect, learn, and growing professionally (Doğan & Adams, 2018). PLC has also been described as a group of teachers within a school environment who share and question their instructional practice through a strategic process (Gilbert, Voelkel, & Johnson, 2018). Additionally, PLC was defined as an ongoing process in which teachers collaborate consistently on a problem within their practice through inquiry and action research to achieve better results for their students through improved instructional practices (Bailey & Jakicic, 2019). These collaborative workgroups allow scheduled and ample time for teachers to routinely engage in job-embedded collegial discussions that create opportunities for learning (Buttram & Farley-Ripple, 2016).

According to Horn and Kane (2016), strong PLC foster trust that supports teachers with trying new instructional strategies to develop new instructional practices. To address the need for school reform in the United States, early research and the current findings regarding PLC allowed PLC to surface as a viable and sustainable option for continuous school improvement (Auslander, Meyers, Schafer, Kavangh, and Haardoerfer,

2018; Kalkan, 2016; Olivier & Huffman, 2016; Wilson, 2016; Woodland, 2016).

According to Gilbert et al. (2018), Voelkel and Chrispeels (2017), Wilson (2016), and Woodland (2016), a powerful opportunity for school reform is highly conceivable when teachers engage in authentic PLC, and increased student learning is then a potential byproduct of such communities. Sjoer and Meirink (2016) asserted that educational reform literature strongly suggests that teachers are considered essential for achieving classroom practices changes. Furthermore, Kalkan (2015) and Woodland (2016) posited PLC facilitate professional learning, develop new skills, strengthen pedagogy, and enhance professional practice for teachers. Therefore, PLC foster and promote building teacher capacity through the collaboration for sustainable improvement (Damjanovic & Blank, 2018; Dufour, 2016; Olivier & Huffman, 2016; Thessin, 2015; Voelkel and Chrispeels, 2017).

A PLC was described as a collective inquiry vehicle through action research (Woodland, 2016). The PLC cooperative mindset allows for creating and distributing collective knowledge by facilitating new skills and strengthening pedagogy (Voelkel and Chrispeels, 2017). Subsequently, the whole staff can become more significant than its educators (Visone, 2016). PLC exemplifies social constructivism, which allows teachers to learn from one another to enhance professional practice. Teachers collaborating through PLC enhance collegial learning and allows teachers to share and learn evidence-based practices.

Additionally, Bannister (2015) noted that teacher communities are a learning resource for teachers in the same content area, school, grade level, or teachers with a common practice problem whose collaboration was intended to provide a robust teacher

setting learning. Gee and Whaley (2016) asserted that the use of collaborative PLC is the best and professionally rewarding way to enhance professional learning. Teacher collaboration is also widely acknowledged as a powerful tool for professional teacher learning and sustainable school improvement (Gee & Whaley, 2016; Sjoer & Meirink, 2016).

Thornton and Cherrington (2019) noted that it is essential that PLC has a clear purpose and focus on achieving goals and enhancing teachers' professional practice for optimal benefits. Gray and Summers (2015) shared that having access to education experts and knowledgeable, experienced, and effective teachers during PLCs enhances teachers' benefits and helps them do their job more effectively. Additionally, Postholm and Waage (2016) posited that PLC, which allows teachers time to reflect on professional text or success stories in the classroom, may also support teachers' learning. However, as many researchers have found, it takes considerable time for a fully functioning collaborative PLC to become established, and once established, they are extremely difficult to implement and maintain (Thornton and Cherrington, 2019). Virtually PLC should be supported by administrators and designed to allow educators who provide instruction to students' time to solve, reflect on their practice, collaborate, discuss interventions, and build their competency (Buttram & Farley-Ripple, 2016). Therefore, Gee and Whaley (2016) emphasized that PLC do not develop spontaneously or by invitation; they must be strategically designed.

This study's conceptual framework is based on Oliver and Huffman's (2016) theory regarding PLCs and school reform. The framework developed by these researchers was appropriate for this research study regarding PLC. The framework presents an

approach to assist school leaders and educational stakeholders in implementing and sustaining highly effective PLC that enhance teachers' instructional practices. The conceptual framework evaluates PLC through five specific dimensions, helping school reform shift from initiation to implementation to enhance teachers' learning. The five key dimensions are shared and supportive leadership, values, vision, collective learning, application, shared persona practice, and supportive conditions. Oliver and Huffman's (2016) research defined five dimensions of effective PLC. Since the purpose of this study is to find out if PLC enhances instructional practices for teachers in an elementary school, this theory was selected to study the culture and practices desired for initiating and sustaining highly effective PLC.

Shared and Supportive Leadership

According to de Jong, Meirink, and Admiraal (2019), the power of sharing instructional ideas is not as pertinent as it should be, particularly for teachers with limited collaborative experience or limited pedagogical knowledge and skills. Research on PLC has emphasized the need for shared and supportive leadership to enhance teachers' professional learning. McBrayer, Chance, Pannell, and Wells (2018) noted that school-level administrators' accountability and responsibility is overwhelming. To counteract their vast workload, distributing responsibility may help administrators accomplish their massive workload (McBrayer et al., 2018). School administrators sharing power, authority, and decision-making while nurturing leadership at all levels within a school, mainly promoting leadership with teachers, is highly recommended (McBrayer et al., 2018; and Olivier & Huffman, 2016). Hairon, Goh, and Chua (2015) revealed that the optimal function of teacher leadership is in the direct establishment of PLC in order to

exercise teacher collegial relations, collective engagement for improvement in teaching practices. Hence, teacher leadership is essential, and without their active engagement, change and development are less likely related to enhanced professional practice (Thornton and Cherrington, 2019). Researchers suggested that teachers who support each other through coaching models feel more empowered and develop collective efficacy and are more eager to learning and improve their instructional practices (Johnson, Finlon, Kobak, & Izard, 2017).

No individual in a formal leadership role can possess all the knowledge needed to lead today's schools. Therefore, leadership must evolve as a distributed and collective process (Visone, 2016). Supportive and shared leadership involves positional leaders promoting leadership in others and including them in decision-making related to teaching and learning (Thornton and Cherrington, 2019; Reed & Swaminathan, 2016). Hence, school leaders need to empower teachers to take an active role as leaders in their schools, classrooms, and PLC (Qiao, Yu, & Zang, 2017).

According to Sjoer and Meirink (2016), educational reform literature has found teachers are the key agents for achieving classroom practices changes. As a result, allowing, encouraging, promoting, brokering, supporting, and ensuring teachers were positioned in leadership roles within the PLC process may enhance teachers' instructional processes. Voogt, Pieters, and Handelzalts (2016) found that promoting curriculum change through teacher leadership is beneficial when teacher leaders can coach and support their peers, develop curriculum, plan instructional lessons together, and determine which strategies should be used during instruction based on the content, learner, and available resources. Teacher leadership as it relates to the PLC means that

teachers are the facilitators of their learning and are provided the autonomy to engage in and lead activities that address their questions and instructional needs (Rönnerman, Edwards-Groves, & Grootenboer, 2015). Therefore, teacher leaders take on leadership roles by influencing school-wide instruction or policy, disseminating best practices, offering support for differentiation, or leading their colleagues through a protocol that focuses on content-specific issues to enhance teacher capacity and instructional practices (McBrayer et al., 2018).

Hallam, Smith, Hite, Hite, and Wilcox (2015) discussed the importance of using shared and supportive leadership to maximize and sustain effective collaborative practices within PLC. The positional leader's role is crucial as they influence the conditions under which the PLC operates. They also need to encourage others to become involved in leadership and engage them in meaningful shared learning (Thornton and Cherrington, 2019). When principals distribute to influence school instructional decisions, they can increase trust among teachers and enhance the PLC collective responsibility for professional learning (Hallam et al., 2015).

McBrayer et al. (2018) conducted a mixed-method case study for one school year specifically focused on PLC to understand these complex social phenomena. The purpose of the study sought to examine how a PLC initiative based on distributed leadership was utilized to implement collaborative, purposeful, and sustainable professional learning (McBrayer et al., 2018). McBrayer et al. (2018) found that distributed leadership among teachers effectively improved professional and classroom practices. The study results emphasized the value-added to the school's continuous improvement process when shared authority is promoted and nurtured by school administrators.

McBrayer et al. (2018) posited that in order for PLC to be a vehicle for improved teacher performance, school leaders must establish shared governance among their teachers. Stein, Macaluso, and Stanulius (2016) recommended that transformational school leaders provide on-going opportunities to ownership of new ideas and shared decision-making. According to Vijayadevar, Thorton, and Cherrington (2019), teacher leadership manifests itself in the form of teachers being leaders of PLC, making decisions about selecting interventions and strategies that were used to enhance student learning, sharing responsibilities as well as teachers' participation in school-wide and instructional decision making. Additionally, teacher leadership allows all teachers to play an influential role in collaborative learning, educational change, and curriculum decisions to improve instructional practices (Colmer, 2017).

Huggins, Lesseig, and Rhodes (2017) shared that teacher leadership has been defined as a process through which teachers influence other teachers and other school community members to improve teaching practices and ultimately increase student achievement. Moreover, research has concluded that teacher leaders can lead the school by increasing teacher collaboration, spreading best practices, boosting professional learning, offering assistance with differentiated instruction, and focusing on content-specific instructional issues (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Therefore, teachers' selection for leadership roles is critical to the continuous school improvement process as they were needed to foster and support shared norms and behaviors.

Shared Vision and Values

According to Turner, Christensen, Kackar-Cam, Fulmer, & Trucano (2018), shared values and norms foster and promote teachers' collective responsibility related to

beliefs about student learning, teaching behaviors, and human relationships between schools and society. Research has indicated that the most commonly cited dimension of successful PLC is the teachers' ability to establish shared values and vision related to teaching and learning (Philpott & Oates, 2017). It has also been noted that to reach a similar goal with more than one person, agreement on how the goal might be reached may facilitate achievement rather than producing barriers. Likewise, values and visions within a professional learning community have been described as the norms, practices, or behaviors that guide teaching and learning decisions within PLC (Olivier & Huffman, 2016). Additionally, shared vision and values have been described as creating a group's shared goals and purpose, aligned with a vision and mission (Olivier & Huffman, 2016). Ning, Lee, and Lee (2015) argued that when team members within a PLC can set aside individual differences, they can collaborate efficiently to determine and implement best teaching practices through reflective dialogue and action research.

Additionally, Ning et al. (2015) noted that PLC's basic principle is when teachers engaged in collective values to achieve shared goals. According to Sompong, Erawan, and Dharm-tad-sa-na-non (2015), PLC that function with congruent goals focused on teaching and learning tend to be much more effective with improving instructional practice than those that do not exhibit this characteristic (Reed & Swaminathan, 2016). Also, Goodnough and Murphy (2017) and Sjoer and Meirink (2016) asserted that differences could hinder a collective task in teachers' ideas or beliefs. Therefore, PLC should have a component that addresses teachers' beliefs and practices because they appear to sustain teacher practice through this collaborative process of established norms (Lynch, 2017).

Thornton and Cherrington (2019) revealed that similar values and vision within a PLC ensure that all teachers agree on behaviors or practices that support continuous school improvement. Also, Chen, Lee, Lin, and Zhang (2016) argued that shared values and vision become critical for teachers to identify with and own in order to be able to follow norms and build a culture of collegial collaboration. Damjanovic and Blank (2018) wrote that the opportunity to analyze student work during a PLC allows teachers to construct a shared understanding of what quality student work is and what instructional strategies are beneficial to enhance student work. Also, Ning et al. (2015) discussed that shared values and vision among teachers support instructional behaviors that guide teaching and learning decisions. Subsequently, when values and norms are aligned within PLC, commitments are strengthened. Members can depend on one another to reinforce objectives and implement effective strategies that support enhanced professional practice (Ning et al., 2015). Therefore, establishing and maintaining a culture focused on collaborative learning is essential to a productive PLC (Ning et al., 2015) even in instances of turnover when new members may bring a different perspective, which could strengthen the norm and elicit new collaborative learning (Thornton & Cherrington, 2019). Lynch (2017) further argues that changes in teaching practice have led to changes in beliefs, and changes in knowledge have produced changes in beliefs, and subsequently, beliefs can impact practice.

Sjoer and Meirink (2016) conducted a study to add to the research related to collaborative teacher learning. A Montessori PLC of six primary school teachers voluntarily participated in the research study for one school year to identify the factors contributing to their norms. The study indicated that an essential factor in the team's

collaboration was their ability to achieve synthesis around a science and technology curriculum due to their shared values and vision around science and technology education for early childhood learners (Sjoer & Meirink, 2016). An exciting aspect of the one-year study with these six elementary teachers was that they all could subscribe to the vision, which seems to be one of the most significant factors for promoting and sustaining collaboration.

As noted above, ensuring a shared vision and values are established and maintained within a PLC was cultivated collaborative practices among teachers. Colmer (2017) adds to the research by noting that critical reflection and professional dialogue focused on pedagogical practice stimulate professional growth by assisting teachers in evaluating their values and ultimately transforming their instructional practices. Additionally, a highly effective PLC's infrastructure helps establish and maintain a school-wide culture and climate focused on building and sustaining continuous improvement efforts (Penner-Williams, Diaz, Gonzales Worthen, 2017).

Thus, shared values among members in a PLC play a critical role and are essential to effective collaborative learning (Oliver & Huffman, 2016). Also, having shared values within a PLC helps support schools' purpose, which is student achievement (Chen et al., 2016). Some examples of shared values within an effective and sustainable PLC are that all students can learn at reasonably high levels, given the teacher's developmentally appropriate support (Owen, 2016). Another shared value essential to effective PLC was designed to focus on student learning through collaboration among teachers (Oliver & Huffman, 2016). Additionally, other shared values that support continuous school improvement through PLC is creating a learning culture for all students to include

outstanding education students, having high expectations for all students as well as having a shared value that PLC is a priority and should not be canceled or interrupted (Chen et al., 2016).

Collective Learning and Application

As noted by many researchers, certain factors develop effective PLC. Since many school systems within the United States are using PLC to increase professional learning and enhance professional practice, implement professional learning that is collective, purposeful, and sustainable (Ho and Lee, 2016; Ho, Lee, and Teng, 2016). The study may be beneficial for schools to cultivate certain factors within their PLC for optimal effectiveness. Damjanovic and Blank (2018) noted that a wealth of peer-reviewed literature acknowledges the benefits of collaboration and the impact collaboration, for professional learning, has on cultivating PLC. Turner et al. (2018) described the collaboration as more than just collegial relationships; it also refers to teachers creating new knowledge alongside other teachers to improve their practice. True collaboration among teachers involves seeking help from colleagues to develop new skills, making practice public by opening classrooms up for observations or peer coaching, and engaging in reflective dialogue, leading to deeper understanding resulting in improved instruction (Turner et al., 2018). Collective learning and application are described as the teachers' opportunity to share information, work collaboratively to plan, solve problems, and improve learning opportunities in their classroom through collaboration with colleagues (Olivier & Huffman, 2016). Capraro et al. (2016) found that teachers who have adequate time for collaboration can improve their instructional practice by obtaining and using knowledge from other teachers rather than working in isolation. According to

Dufour and Reeves (2016), an actual PLC functions as a collaborative team rather than in isolation and take collective responsibility for student learning.

Consequently, Buttram and Farley-Ripple (2016) claimed that PLCs provide one option for fostering teacher collegiality and shared accountability. Hence, numerous researchers' familiar premise is that a collaborative design embedded within PLC positively influences professional learning and practice (Colmer, 2017; Damjanovic and Blank, 2018; Sjoer and Meirink, 2016; Voogt et al., 2016). Those peer interactions provide a forum for exchanging ideas, enhancing pedagogical knowledge, solving instructional problems, and sharing classroom experiences to improve their general practice (Binkhorst, Poortman, McKenney, van Joolingen, 2018). Additionally, there have been numerous benefits to teachers having quality time to collaborate to improve their teaching practices. According to Voogt et al. (2016) and Ho and Lee (2016); collaboration allowed teachers to generate new knowledge about teaching practices, adjusted teaching strategies, generated sustainable and transferable teaching practices, solve curriculum issues, and enhance the content knowledge related to their subject matter.

Recent research surrounding professional learning for teachers has directed educational decision-makers towards collaborative strategies because of their ability to build capacity through social means, address relevant instructional and individual needs, and enable teachers to construct knowledge through a sustainable approach (Bowe & Gore, 2017). Furthermore, collective learning and application for teachers are essential to school reform as it involves staff sharing and planning to solve problems and improve learning opportunities. Consequently, in schools, teachers have the organizational

structure that allows them to develop pedagogical knowledge about teaching within an authentic job-embedded context because of the collaborative framework (Ho & Lee, 2016; Kruse & Johnson, 2017).

Teachers have to plan for instruction and collaborate with their colleagues should be strategically designed, so teachers have time to share pedagogical practices to solve instructional issues. The research revealed that collaboration offers a unique opportunity for job-embedded professional learning that allows teachers to enhance their practice (Penner-Williams et al., 2017). Additionally, it has been argued that collective learning and application results in teachers working collaboratively and engaging in regular dialogue (Thornton and Cherrington, 2019). Peer interactions through a PLC provide a forum for exchanging ideas, knowledge, problems, and experiences (Sjoer & Meirink, 2016). Hence, dialogue as a form of collaboration allows teachers to solve instructional challenges, plan for instruction, and engage in reflective practices through a formal PLC structure (Damjanovic & Blank, 2018). Having the opportunity to transfer learning through collaborative practices means that teachers can apply knowledge gained through PLC into their classroom (Penner-Williams et al., 2017).

Bahous et al. (2016) conducted a study with teachers, principals, and some students in Beirut's four primary schools. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews to investigate how teachers develop their knowledge and skills to construct learning for their students (Bahous et al., 2016). After analyzing the interview data, the transcripts yielded themes such as collaborative practice, support that teachers receive from their professional learning, and commitment to their learning and their students (Bahous et al., 2016). Bahous et al. (2016) found that teachers valued the importance of

collaborative learning because it was linked to their professional learning and the students' engagement and learning.

Shared Personal Practice

A vital foundation element of PLC is teachers' opportunity to share their instructional strategies, techniques, expertise, resources, and practices with their colleagues to improve practice (Capraro et al., 2016; Horn et al., 2017). According to Thornton and Cherrington (2019), shared personal practice involves teachers observing and giving each other feedback, which should result in rigorous debate and discussion for increased professional learning and enhanced professional practice. Similarly, Olivier and Huffman (2016) described shared personal practice as the opportunity for teachers to meet and observe one another to provide feedback on instructional practices to enhance teacher practice and improve student learning. Also, Brown, Horn, and King (2018) found that an essential component of PLC is sharing personal practice, which requires teachers to participate in activities such as peer coaching, classroom observations, and discussion to enhance their professional practice. Therefore, the structure of using peer coaching as a collaborative learning mechanism to share personal practices provides a sustainable, effective strategy for fostering a teaching community that encourages observation and reflection of best classroom practices (Johnson et al., 2017). The collective inquiry that occurs among teachers as they share their practice is critical to improving teacher pedagogy and instructional practice. Chen et al. (2016) noted that PLC improvement and innovation are only possible as teachers collaborate and share their practices through dialogue and rigorous deliberations about teaching and learning strategies.

Risk-taking, deep reflection, and learning from colleagues are all benefits of collegial visits, but teachers collectively must appreciate these potential benefits before anyone visiting another's classroom (Visone, 2016). Collegial visits can help schools deepen their learning and improve their practice (McNeill, Butt, and Armstrong, 2016; Visone, 2016). In particular, McNeill et al. (2016) and Sjoer and Meirink (2016) stated that observing colleagues teaching practices through peer observations is an important learning activity for teachers. Numerous education experts advocate for regular classroom observations or instructional rounds with teachers with foci in mind to improve professional learning and practice through PLC (Visone, 2016). A possible solution is a promising practice facilitated through PLC known as the collegial visit, which can increase collaboration, counteract teacher isolation, and improve educator practice (McNeill et al., Visone, 2016).

Chen et al. (2016) conducted a study to investigate the critical factors of developing effective PLC in Taiwanese schools. The study was conducted in two phases. Chen et al. (2016) conducted a phase I of the study, which consisted of a questionnaire distributed to 181 teachers with a response rate of 81%. Phase II of the study was implemented to determine the questionnaire's reliability and validity with a response rate of 62%. Chen et al. (2016) found that shared values and vision had the highest mean value of 4.55, with collegial trust having a mean value of 4.54. Overall, these results from this study indicated that shared vision, along with supportive and shared leadership through collegial relationships, could help teachers learn collaboratively through shared PLC practices. A critical aspect of sustaining PLC is supportive conditions.

Supportive Conditions

According to Glen, Blackberry, and Kearney (2017), as schools strive to reform their teaching and learning practices, cultivating, supporting, and empowering teachers should be essential. The establishment of effective PLC within a learning organization relies mostly on school leaders' actions and support (Jones & Thessin, (2015). Through dialogue, teachers should be supported to analyze and evaluate their existing knowledge base and instructional practices about the practices they would like to develop or change. Chen et al. (2016) asserted that supportive conditions that include available infrastructures, administrative coordination, access to resources, and intentionally scheduled time to improve instructional practices nurtured professional growth among teachers (Sacks, 2017). In like manner, when such organizational structures exist, empowered teachers, supported by administrators, were willing and able to continue their meaningful work through teachers' collective participation (Mundschenk & Fuchs, 2016).

Conversely, Gilbert et al. (2018) revealed that poorly constructed support systems also contribute to difficulties with implementing PLC for schools as leaders often struggle to cultivate collaborative learning or establish structures that facilitate teacher professional growth and ensure PLC's success. Subsequently, the absence of school leadership support is one of the most significant barriers to PLC (Voogt et al., 2016). Hence, mounting evidence exists that PLC supported by school leadership cultivates new knowledge and skills and changes teacher practice for the better (Voogt et al., 2016). Similarly, Olivier and Huffman (2016) claimed that with the consistency and level at which PLC is being implemented in schools, the amount and type of district support directly impact whether schools can flourish and sustain highly effective collaborative

practices. Likewise, supportive conditions are the backbone for sustaining a high performing PLC (Voogt et al., 2016).

Researchers have acknowledged in numerous studies that supportive conditions related to building strong professional relationships are incredibly challenging (Thornton and Cherrington, 2019). Supported conditions included relational conditions such as respect and trust and structural conditions such as time, PLC size, resources, and supportive systems (Thornton and Cherrington, 2019). Building relationships and establishing trust was a prerequisite to the effective implementation of PLC (Thornton and Cherrington, 2019). Relational trust is necessary for robust conversations and dialogue, fostering, and promoting effective collaborative practices within PLC (Thornton and Cherrington, 2019). According to Horn et al. (2016), strong professional communities foster trust and support teachers' risk-taking in developing new instructional practices. Therefore, support is essential to highly effective PLC (Voogt et al., 2016). Likewise, school leadership teams need to develop adequate support systems for PLC to be effective (Voogt et al., 2016).

Song and Choi (2017) conducted a study by collecting and analyzing 375 questionnaires in Seoul, South Korea, from 40 elementary schools. The study found that collaboration through PLC is stimulated when adequate support from school leadership, and collegial relationships among teachers is evident. According to Song and Choi (2017), these factors positively influence collaborative practices' success and sustainability through PLC. Song and Choi's (2017) study examined the effects of PLC on schools' effectiveness and elements that promote collaborative structure. Song and Choi (2017) concluded that the most critical factors that positively influenced PLC were

supportive relationships among teachers and principals. Song and Choi (2017) posited that teacher and principal support's organizational features could ultimately lead to sustainable school reform.

According to Oliver and Huffman (2016), as school learning, communities begin to learn about initiating and sustaining PLC, school systems in the United States are choosing to organize their continuous improvement efforts around these five dimensions. Oliver and Huffman's (2016) theory provided a construct for collecting data, analysis, and interpretation of the results for this study focused on what extent PLC improves teachers' instructional practices. One of the primary reasons this conceptual framework for this study was selected is that it presents an approach to assist instructional leaders and school systems with organizing highly effective PLC that enhance instructional practices for teachers. The five dimensions are shared and supportive leadership, values, vision, collective learning, application, shared persona practice, and supportive conditions. Since the purpose of this study is to find out if PLC enhances instructional practices for teachers in an elementary school, this theory was selected to study the culture and practices desired for initiating, implementing, and sustaining highly effective PLC.

Summary and Conclusions

There have been numerous studies conducted on PLC in the school sector; however, less research has focused on PLC in early childhood education. Additionally, other researchers argue that little research focused on teachers' specific interactions inside PLC, meaning most studies neglect the local context. Consequently, there is much research on PLC's benefits; however, research on early childhood PLC is limited.

Although there may be gaps in the research on PLC, many empirical studies confirm that it is undeniable that PLC can be a useful organizational strategy for collaborative practices among teachers (Gray, Kruse, & Tarter, 2016; Hallam, 2015). Therefore, key findings from the review of research on PLC indicate the importance of shared and supportive leadership, shared vision and values, collective learning and application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions to positively influence teachers' professional learning and enhance their instructional practices.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to better understand prekindergarten through third-grade teachers' perceptions of how early childhood professional learning communities enhance teachers' instructional practices. The researcher conducted this study to understand the essence of developing and sustaining a high performing PLC to support individual and collaborative professional learning among teachers. Furthermore, the researcher explored teachers' perceptions to make meaning of how their instructional practices were enhanced through professional learning communities.

In Chapter 3, the researcher described the setting where the study was conducted. Next, the researcher described the research design and the rationale for the study. The research design and rationale were followed by a description of the researcher's non-bias role. A detailed discussion of the study methodology included participant selection, instrumentation, recruitment procedures, interview participation procedures, and data collection. This chapter will also include the data analysis process and how the researcher established its trustworthiness and validity. Finally, the chapter will end with a discussion of ethical procedures and safeguards.

Setting (Quantitative and Mixed Methods)

The qualitative research occurred at a rural elementary school in a Southeastern area within the United States of America. The public elementary school where the study occurred enrolls an estimated 300 students in grades prekindergarten through fifth grade was also identified as a Title I School. The teachers have been engaged in PLC under their district's direction and understand its intended purpose is to enhance teacher

practice. Eighteen teachers serve students prekindergarten through fifth grade. The school has been engaged in professional learning communities for three years, with 2019-2020 being the third year of implementation.

Research Design and Rationale

The following research question was used to conduct this study:

RQ1: What are early childhood teachers' perceptions of how early childhood professional learning communities enhance teachers' instructional practices?

The study's goal was to understand the teachers' perceptions of PLC. This qualitative study used interviews to gather data. The research design was used to better understand the perceptions of early childhood teachers in their PLC. This study will seek to understand the characteristics that contribute to PLC, which create and sustain professional learning and changes in instructional practices for teachers. The study's overall concept was that PLC is highly beneficial for improving teachers' instructional practices through collaborative strategies. When implemented appropriately, this phenomenon of PLC was utilized to implement collaborative, purposeful, and sustainable professional learning that improves teachers' instructional practices. As a result of the study's purpose, a qualitative study with interviews was the research design because it connected the purpose, research question, and data collected. The qualitative design is also appropriate for a small research project, with 10-12 participants were interviewed.

Merriam (1998) claimed that the necessary qualitative studies are the most common form of qualitative research. Basic qualitative research allowed the researcher to seek understanding from the participants' experiences. Merriam (2002) noted that necessary qualitative studies were conducted to understand how participants interpret,

construct, or make meaning. According to Creswell (2013), a primarily qualitative study method was warranted when a researcher seeks to understand a situation or phenomenon by talking to those who experienced or influenced it. Similarly, Lichtman (2010) asserted that a primary qualitative research method was used when a researcher seeks to describe a person's perceptions of an issue based on their personal beliefs. Creswell further argued that a qualitative method consisting of interviews is appropriate when a researchers' goal is to learn more about a phenomenon by obtaining data from persons experiencing the situation, actively engaged in the research problem, or are influenced by or from the situation. As a researcher who wants to examine early childhood teachers' perceptions of how early childhood professional learning communities enhance teachers' instructional practices, the qualitative semi-structured interview method is most appropriate.

While there are other qualitative approaches, they are not as appropriate for this study. Babbie (2017) cautioned that ethnographers seek to discover and understand those they are studying while in their natural environment. Correspondingly, Thomas (2017) shared that ethnographers position themselves as investigation instruments because they were participants in their studying and observing situations. Additionally, Creswell (2013) claimed that an ethnographic study would not be beneficial because the population being observed or studied is uniquely distinctive or that comparisons with other participants' populations would not yield reliable data. Thus, an ethnographic study is most appropriate when a researcher wants to understand, describe, and discover norms or behaviors (Leedy & Ormrod, 2014). Since the purpose of this qualitative study is to understand better early childhood teachers' perceptions of how early childhood

professional learning communities enhance teacher's instructional practices, an ethnographic study would not be an appropriate research design.

The grounded theory attempts to derive theories from an analysis of the patterns, themes, and common categories discovered in observational data (Babbie, 2017). While the grounded theory is another qualitative design that could be used for this study, Creswell (2013) noted that this research design attempts to gather information from research participants and use it to develop or modify a theory about a particular phenomenon. Babbie (2017) purported that grounded theory is based on what has already been learned about the phenomena and can create expectations that could constrain what the research would look at and see and how the data would be interpreted. This research aims not to formulate or make modifications based on the findings from this study.

A case study is another qualitative research design that could have been selected for this study. A case study could have been used if a PLC was going to be compared to another PLC. According to Thomas (2017), a case study involves in-depth research into one case or a small set of cases involving many methods and procedures to understand a phenomenon. Likewise, Creswell (2013) shared that a case study would best support a study if the purpose were to compare one case to another. Additionally, an essential component of a case study was that the study was conducted in the study's natural setting (Yin, 2009). Since this study aims to understand better early childhood teachers' perceptions of how PLC enhance instructional practices through interviews only, a case study was not selected as the research design. Also, since this study involved semi-structured interviews, a case study is not appropriate since there was no attempt to compare or contrast PLC.

Another qualitative design that could be considered, but would not be appropriate, is a longitudinal study. According to Thomas (2017), a longitudinal study involves gathering data from many individuals over an extended period. A longitudinal study has a crucial factor in time. The researcher does not plan to understand PLC's development or progression; this method would not work appropriately for this study.

Role of the Researcher (Qualitative)

The researcher's role was to interview participants. The researcher gathered data through semi-structured interviews on teachers' perceptions of effective collaborative practices with early childhood teachers' PLC. It is important to note that the researcher does not work or serve in any supervisory capacity at the school where the data were collected, nor does the researcher have any professional influence over the participants. The researcher does not have any personal or professional relationships with any of the study participants. Participants were informed before each interview that no adverse consequences were imposed due to their participation in the interview sessions. Nor will their names or any identifying information be used against them for retaliation for their participation. The interviewer's goal was to make the participants as comfortable as possible during the interview process and ensure they understand we can dialogue as equals in the conversation.

As a result of the researcher's personal experience with PLC at the state and local levels and also while serving as a school leader, the researcher used PLC to enhance instructional practices and student achievement. While serving in a support role at the district and state level, the researcher used PLC to support schools in their continuous improvement efforts. In every situation, while PLC was implemented, there was an

increase in learning for teachers and students. The data collected provided evidence of improved teaching and learning for teachers and students; however, some were greater than others. The researcher's awareness of the bias brings value to the research as intentionally acknowledge it to ensure it does not inappropriately affect the interpretation of the data in particular ways. Thomas (2017) discussed that a researcher should recognize their position, preferences, knowledge, likes, and dislikes, affecting how they perceive and interpret the world.

To further address any bias, the researcher avoided interview questions, which may cause participants to respond in a particular way. Therefore, interviewers were not asked questions that require them to select one specific answer. The interviewees' questions were open-ended questions that allowed them to respond any way they choose. Hence, this allowed them to elaborate on their answers or raise new issues or thoughts. Babbie (2017) claimed that a researcher could avoid bias by cultivating a conscious awareness of their values and preferences and adhering to established data collection techniques and analysis techniques. The researcher avoided bias by providing the interview transcripts to participants and requested that they notify the researcher of any errors. Rubin and Rubin (2012) shared that it is crucial to transcribe, summarize, and quote your interviewees accurately.

Participant Selection (Qualitative)

The researcher received informal verbal approval from the superintendent to focus on one elementary school in the district engaged in PLC with their early childhood teachers. The interviews were conducted with early childhood teachers only in grades prekindergarten through third grade to understand better teachers' perceptions of effective collaborative practices within their PLC. Formal approval was sought once the proposal was approved by Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). For this research, teachers were defined as a certified member of the school staff who is the teacher on record for teaching and learning daily to students in grades pre-kindergarten through third grade.

District administrators, interventionists, instructional coaches, assistant principals, and principals were not selected as participants because they may not offer the specific details or relevant information classroom teachers are likely to provide regarding collaboration or collaborative practices within PLC. There is only one principal, one assistant principal, and one interventionist in the identified school. Many of their roles and responsibilities are drastically different, meaning their collaboration on similar initiatives may be limited. It would not provide information on collaborative practices within PLC to the extent necessary for this study.

Sampling Strategy

Qualitative research is about the pursuit of viewing, understanding, and engaging with people and making meaning of their experiences (Ravitch & Mittenfelner Carl, 2016). Johnston and George (2018) and Binkhorst et al. (2017) noted that qualitative research design supported gathering, analyzing, and describing teachers' perceptions

engaged in PLC. This study's potential participants were ten early childhood teachers who teach pre-kindergarten through third-grade students in a public school in the southeastern county in the United States of America. Additionally, to be a viable participant for this study, the teacher must have engaged in the PLC process in the identified school the current year the study was conducted and the previous school year. Therefore, the interview data were gathered from purposefully selected participants involved in the implementation of PLC during the same timeframe. The justification for the number of participants was based on professional articles that discuss qualitative studies. According to Francis et al. (2010), ten participants were considered by qualitative researchers adequate for reaching saturation. Additionally, Fusch and Ness (2015) suggested that the research and findings' quality may be flawed by not reaching saturation.

Judgmental or purposive sampling was used to select the 10 participants who have participated in PLC during the current school year for this study. Babbie (2017) defined purposive sampling as a type of nonprobability sampling. The participants being observed were selected based on the researcher's judgment about which participants were most useful or representative based on the phenomena being studied. Purposive sampling allowed the researcher to use various research designs and ensure all participants are selected based on their ability to contribute relevant understanding to the study. The criterion sampling was employed to ensure participants are all early childhood teachers who were engaged in PLC during the current school year. The criteria for interview participants will include (a) willing to participate in a one-on-one interview, (b) engaged in PLC during the current school year, (c) teacher on record for student's pre-

kindergarten through third grade, and (d) certified early childhood educator in the identified school.

Based on the stated criteria, all potential participants were identified using the school's principal's school staff and faculty list. Each potential participant was contacted through e-mail. The initial contact through e-mail detailed the study's purpose and goal, what the study involves, expectations as a participant, estimated time involved as a participant, and the ethical safeguards implemented with fidelity. An Informed Consent form (Appendix B) was attached to the e-mails of participants.

The quality assurance practice was implemented to ensure all participants meet the selection criteria before any participants are confirmed or any interviews. The school website, staff, and faculty school list and confirmation from the school principal were used to ensure all participants meet the stated criteria. Additionally, at the beginning of each interview, participants were asked to verify that they meet the stated criteria.

Instrumentation (Qualitative)

The data collection instrument was used as an interview protocol followed in conducting semi-structured interviews with all participants. According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), semi-structured interviews were used when the researcher has a specific topic to learn about, has prepared a limited number of questions, and has planned to ask the participants' follow-up questions when applicable. The semi-structured interview questions (Appendix A) intentionally focused on the planned questions that speak to the research question. The researcher used the interview questions to understand better early childhood teachers' perceptions of effective collaborative practices with early childhood teachers' PLC. Additionally, the follow-up questions were added to seek further depth,

and detail of the phenomenon studied—appropriate probes used if necessary to keep the dialogue going while clarifying ambiguities shared during the semi-structured interviews. Babbie (2017) described a probe as a technique employed by an interviewer to solicit a complete answer to a question or encourage an interviewee to elaborate.

The researcher's interview questions were designed to explore how PLC nurtured teacher leadership, supported a shared vision for teaching and learning, influenced collaborative learning, and explored teachers' perceptions of sharing their instructional practices with colleagues through the PLC process. Rubin and Rubin (2012) described qualitative interviewing as a way for researchers to see phenomena that are not ordinarily on view and examine phenomena that are often looked at but seldom seen.

Correspondingly, Babbie (2017) discussed that qualitative interviews' strength lies in the depth of understanding it permits with examining social processes. Nine main questions, four follow-up questions, and two probes have been prepared for each semi-structured/ interview. The questions and probes were developed based on the five identified PLC dimensions of effective collaborative practices based on the conceptual framework. The questions and probes are also aligned with the studies of five researcher questions.

The interview's initial phase began with sharing an introduction of the study with the interviewee and asking any questions before the researcher began the interview process. The researcher responded to any questions the interviewee has and communicate again that a recording device recorded the responses. Interviewees were informed that the recording was transcribed and then coded for data analysis. Interviewees were informed that the transcribed data were shared with them for review and feedback before coding.

Once interviewees have provided their approval and confirmation of their interview transcript, a three-column coding process begun.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection (for students collecting their own data)

The recruitment procedures for this study were guided by Walden University's IRB once approved. Since the superintendent initiated PLC for the entire district and felt this study might provide implications for improving PLC, the superintendent selected the school with the principal's approval. The principal provided the faculty and staff list, which were used to identify all early childhood teachers who meet the study's criteria—ten to twelve teachers that meet the criteria recruited. The participants were informed that there was no incentive or compensation for participating in the research study.

For recruitment at the school level, the researcher provided a Letter of Cooperation (Appendix C) to document and seek approval from the school superintendent to conduct the school site study. Once approval is received, the researcher will also use an on-line publicly available faculty and staff list to identify and then contact each potential teacher individually by e-mail to solicit their participation in the study. The initial solicitation e-mail included an introduction about the researcher, a detailed purpose and goal of the study, what the study involved, expectations as a participant, estimated time involved as a participant, and the ethical safeguards that will be implemented with fidelity. Once a teacher communicates their willingness to participate in the study. The researcher provided the study participants with the Informed Consent form by e-mail, including name, e-mail address, and telephone number. The follow-up e-mail containing the consent form will also include a statement sharing. They

contacted the researcher by e-mail, phone, or text to further discuss the study, request additional information, or ask additional questions. Additionally, the follow-up e-mails included a request for their contact information for any follow-up communication that may be necessary.

Upon returning the consent form, the researcher contacted the participants by phone or e-mail to schedule a one-time face-to-face private interview at the school in a location and at a time that is comfortable and convenient for the teacher. The interview may be held in the school conference room, the teacher's office space, or their classroom. At the beginning of each interview, participants were provided with an introduction to the study. They were allowing asking any questions they may have regarding the study. Participants were also be informed they may end their participation in the study at any time, even though they have signed the consent form.

The interviews lasted for approximately 40 to 50 minutes were recorded using an independent recording device for confidentiality and security purposes. The recordings were stored on the device and can only be accessible by the researcher. If feasible, written notes of participant's responses were documented during the interviews. However, the recording device was the primary source for documenting responses to ensure appropriate attention was provided to asking the questions and purposefully listening to each participant. Once each audio recording is complete, information was transferred to a computer with security access. The audio recording, interview notes, transcripts, and coding were stored on a password-protected computer. The researcher was the only user of the recording and electronic devices. The password for the personal computer was shared or known to anyone other than the researcher. If a participant

presented barriers to a face-to-face interview, they were being offered the option to conduct a telephone interview instead. The telephone interview was recorded using the speakerphone option to ensure all audio was accurately recorded to transcribe and code the data. The transcripts and coding of phone interviews were also be stored securely on a password-protected personal computer.

Once each interview has ended, participants were thankful for their time and asked if they have any additional questions. Once each interview was transcribed, each participant was asked to verify the transcription's accuracy. Upon each participant's approval, a verification of the transcript and a debriefing session was held to exit the study's participant to secure a private location. There should be no need for follow-up interviews to plan the main interview questions, follow-up questions, probes, the recording device, verification of transcription by participants, and the debriefing session.

The debriefing session asked the participants if they have any additional questions about the study and if they have any feedback that may improve their experience as participants in the study. This debriefing session also represented a form of follow-up with each participant to gain valuable, actionable insights that may support future qualitative research.

Data Analysis Plan

The research question explores the participants' perceptions of effective collaborative practices with early childhood teachers' PLC was based on the five dimensions within the conceptual framework. The qualitative data gathered from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed to answer the studies' research question. Transcripts of the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using Microsoft Word documents and Excel spreadsheets to code and identify themes. Additionally, the coding was used to identify themes and new themes that may emerge and were aligned to the five dimensions and the research question. Creswell (2009) recommended that codes should emerge during the data analysis process.

Data saturation reached using Creswell's (2009) recommendation for analyzing qualitative data. Furthermore, Fusch and Ness (2015) revealed that data saturation could be attained with a minimum of six interviews when a researcher was focused on the major themes within the data rather than the quantity of data. The researcher will begin the initial phase of analyzing the data by transcribing all interviews from the recording application into a Microsoft Word document. Once transcribed, the researcher shared the transcription with the individual participant for their approval. Upon the participant's approval, the open coding data analysis process was begun. According to Saldana (2016), open coding is a first cycle coding method and a structure that allows reflection to occur for the researcher. Similarly, Merriam (2009) described open coding as a process of making notes in the margins of your line-by-line transcription.

To analyze the phenomenon thoroughly, Creswell's (2009) six-step data analysis process for this study included transcribing the data first and then reviewing the data for

reflection purposes. Next, the data were split into individually coded segments, then categories. Finally, the categories were labeled as a part of the first cycle coding process. Followed by a coding process of discoveries or themes learned from the participants, their processes, or the phenomenon. Next, the themes evolved into a qualitative narrative that articulates the findings from the semi-structured interviews with all the participants. Finally, the researcher exercised strategic exploration and reflection strategies to interpret and make meaning to the research question. The participants' discrepant cases through the semi-structured interview data and coding were acknowledged in the data. Lastly, discrepant cases in this qualitative study were beneficial to the overall findings, even though they only represent a few participants. The discrepant cases were viewed as valuable data and may lead to data recording or a more in-depth analysis and understanding of the phenomenon.

Trustworthiness (Qualitative and Mixed Methods)

Credibility

Babbie (2017) noted that internal invalidity accounts for only some of the challenges researchers face while conducting qualitative research and presenting their findings. Hence, establishing credibility is a critical part of the research design.

According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), a qualitative researcher attempts to establish credibility by implementing the validity strategies of triangulation, member checking, presenting a thick description, discussing negative cases, specific observation periods or interviews, and having an external auditor.

According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), a significant strength of qualitative interviewing is that it produces highly credible results. In qualitative research, credibility and trustworthiness are synonymous, Connelly (2016); therefore, trustworthiness is critically essential to this research study. The researcher established credibility by triangulating the interview data that is coded. Triangulation is defined in social research as the ability to corroborate the data. The researcher also demonstrated credibility by triangulating the data through coding as similar themes and codes emerge within the evidence. The researcher achieved credibility by interviewing participants who are knowledgeable about the research problem.

Additionally, credibility was established through member checks to establish the accuracy of the answers provided during the interview process and each participant's transcripts. A quality review was conducted through the peer review process so that a colleague may confirm that the coding process was conducted thoroughly and transparently. The peer reviews were conducted to provide internal validity to the design of the study. Since it was essential for the researcher to consistently reflect upon the data, reflexivity was established through journaling to chronicle the research experience with personal bias. The researcher also journals about the interviews, participants, and the coding and analysis process. Through these design processes, the researcher intended to conduct a study that eliminates any intentional threats to its credibility.

Transferability

Babbie (2017) explained that when a study's results can be generalized beyond the sample study to a different population, external validity was established. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), qualitative research aims to develop descriptive, context-

relevant statements. External validity was ensured by obtaining in-depth and substantial details from the participants. Therefore, the details from this study will exhibit transferability to a broader context while maintaining context-specific richness. The rich details and thick descriptions will allow readers of the study to generalize the findings to their population or situation. By establishing the studies' design, journaling, comprehensive interview notes, coding, transcripts, member checks, and the data analysis, transferability was established. Additionally, the methodology and data analysis provided information about the fieldwork so readers can generalize the findings to other teachers, schools, or PLC.

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research was comparable to reliability in quantitative research (Shenton, 2004). Dependability simply refers to the stability of the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Correspondingly, Babbie (2017) defined reliability as the quality of measurement methods that suggested that the same data would be collected each time in repeated observations investigating the same phenomenon. For this study, dependability was obtained by checking and triangulating the data through the coding process. These two member checking and triangulation methods and offering a rationale for these choices were confirmed that the researcher appropriate study design based on the research question. To further establish this study's dependability, audit trails were conducted to provide documentary evidence of recorded interviews, the sequence of data collection methods, and data analysis procedures.

Confirmability

Objectivity within a study refers to the studies confirmability (Shenton, 2004). Furthermore, confirmability is the degree to which the study would yield the same findings if investigated using the same methodology. Therefore, confirmability within a study would not present evidence of bias, emotions, or imagination. To ensure confirmability, the researcher documented the study's methodology, data analysis procedures, and findings. Since credibility is essential to a study, the researcher engaged in reflexivity by being transparent about the values, personal biases, and PLC position. This transparency, reflexivity, and objectivity process allowed other researchers to replicate the study.

Ethical Procedures

There are essential ethical procedures that must be addressed and adhered to when conducting qualitative research. The IRB must first provide the approval to proceed with the study. The researcher submitted copies of the solicitation communication, consent form, and prospectus/proposal to provide their approval. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), the IRB was an essential safeguard for participants and accountability throughout the research process. Additionally, the IRB is responsible for reviewing research proposals and overseeing ongoing research projects. The IRB's oversight ensured the diligent and ethical researcher who ensures confidentiality, anonymity, and transparency.

The researcher obtained all required approvals from the district's superintendent, identified the school's principal, and all participants to address all ethical codes and conduct an ethical study. The IRB application was submitted and approved before proceeding with the data collection method. Also, the Letter of Cooperation from the superintendent was submitted, which provided approval to recruit participants. The

researcher finally obtained participant consent forms. The consent form entails participants agreeing to the research before it begins. Ravitch and Carl (2016) suggested that a consent form should include an overview of the research goals, a statement about the voluntary nature of the study, a list of requirements as a participant, details allowing participants to withdrawal from the study at any time, and a statement about the confidentiality of the data. These ethical processes informed actions; however, the researcher's communication and behaviors were determined ethical for the study.

Ravitch and Carl (2016) described the relational approach to qualitative research as being open to changing opinions, and the research approach as the data emerges throughout the research process. Through being reflexively engaged with participants, the researcher learned from participants who may have different perceptions, experiences, and realities about PLC. During the interview process, the interviewee and the interviewer were seen as equals throughout the study to avoid power issues. The researcher always had participants' welfare in mind and did not harm them in any way.

The data from the research addressed through ethical processes. Participants will be assigned a number and will never be identified by name. The audio recording, interview notes, transcripts, and coding was stored on personal password-protected electronic devices. The researcher was the only user of the devices, and the password was not shared with other individuals. Additionally, all data of any kind related to the study will be kept secure at all times and destroyed through electronic deletion at the appropriate time.

Summary

In this chapter, the researcher described the study's methodology by including the research design and rationale, the researcher's role, and participant selection. The researcher also described instrumentation followed by procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection. This chapter also includes the data analysis plan, how the researcher ensured trustworthiness, and how the researcher addressed ethical procedures guided by the IRB.

Chapter 4: Results

The findings and analysis as a result of interviewing the research participants are presented in this chapter. This research study was designed to examine early childhood teachers' perceptions of PLC in relation to their understanding of how PLC nurture teacher leadership; school leaders support PLC; members within the PLC share authority and decision-making; PLC supports a shared vision for teaching and learning among colleagues; stakeholders actively involved in developing and implementing the school's shared vision, and value; collaborative learning that occurs as a result of your PLC; team members within your PLC work together to gain new knowledge and instructional strategies, and then apply the new learning to their classroom; PLC supports the sharing of instructional practices with other colleagues; supportive conditions that exists because of your PLC; and factors that foster a professional learning community.

In order for the researcher to gather the necessary data for this research study, the researcher interviewed the study participants via telephone. A total of ten early childhood teachers were interviewed for this qualitative research study. The researcher gathered the data for this research study over ten days in June 2020. All the teachers interviewed for the researcher's study were employed at one Title 1 elementary school implementing PLC for at least three years. The researcher used Creswell's (2009) and Esterberg's (2002) procedures to analyze and code the recorded interview data. Esterberg (2002) stated that qualitative data (i.e., interview data) should be analyzed line by line to identify themes and categories of interest. Creswell (2009) added that researchers should look for codes to emerge during the data analysis process. After thoroughly reviewing the data

through the open coding process, the researcher analyzed the data for emerging themes. The six steps of Creswell (2009) method were used to analyze the data in this study.

Participants were identified using alphanumeric codes for the interview process and for the research study to maintain confidentiality. Discrepancies were evident with one participant who did not feel professional learning communities existed at the school as it should with building leaders and that teachers did not share to enhance teacher learning. Although this data was an outlier, this may add insight to the overall understanding of the phenomenon. Therefore, a qualitative case study was conducted for the purpose of better understanding prekindergarten through third grade teachers' perceptions of how early childhood professional learning communities enhance teachers' instructional practices. I used a basic qualitative approach to answer the primary research question:

RQ1: What are early childhood teachers' perceptions of how early childhood professional learning communities enhance teachers' instructional practices?

I will first describe in Chapter 4 the setting where the study was conducted. Next, I will describe how the data was collected. A thorough description of how the data was collected will be followed by how the data was analyzed through the use of coding. Then, a detailed description will be provided of the study's results. Finally, the chapter will conclude with the studies evidence of trustworthiness.

Setting

The setting for this study was a Title I elementary school in a southeastern school district in the United States of America. The school district where the study was conducted has had their state education agency assume governance twice in the last 10

years. Also, the rural elementary school identified in this district is comprised of prekindergarten through second grade students and offers a 9 month or one hundred eighty days of instruction for their students. The student poverty rate is 94%, the attendance rate is 92%, students with disabilities is 7%, and the number of students retained is less than 1%. Additionally, the number of teachers at the school with advanced degrees is 60%, teachers with continuing contracts is 52%, the attendance rate for teachers is 95%, and teachers receive 7 full days of required professional development and teacher in-service days each year which is when students are not in the building. Finally, the per pupil expenditure was \$12,849 for the 2018-2019 school year at the identified school.

This elementary school is comprised of 24 certified teachers. The student engagement section of the 2018-2019 school report card noted that 82.3% of teachers reported that they were satisfied with the social and physical learning environment. The teachers also responded to the 2018-2019 classroom environment section of the school report conveying 85% have been a teacher at the school for more than three years, 14.3% have one year of teaching experience, and 0% are teaching out-of-field. Furthermore, this rural Title I elementary school has teachers who promote academic achievement, strive to increase their professional capacity, endeavor to improve student outcomes, and are committed to providing quality instruction to their students according to their school's website.

Summary Statistics of Interviewees

A total of 10 elementary teachers were interviewed regarding professional learning communities at their school. Reported in Table 1 are the characteristics of study participants. Females accounted for 90.0% and males accounted for 10% of the study participants. The majority of the study participants (70.0%) categorized themselves as African American or Blacks and (30.0%) as white. The age of participants ranged from 21 to 50 years. Most of the participants were in the age of range between 30 and 39.

Shown in Table 2 are the number and percentage of the study participants based on selected school characteristics. All of the study participants attended elementary schools (100.0%).

Table 1

Research Participant Demographics

Variables	Number of Interviewees	Percentage of Interviewees
Gender		
Female	9	90.0%
Male	1	10.0%
Racial Ethnicity		
Black	7	70.0%
White	3	30.0%
Age Range		
21 - 29	3	30.0%
30 – 39	5	50.0%
40 – 49	1	10.0%
50 or older	1	10.0%

Table 2*Selected Professional Characteristics About the Interview Participants*

Characteristics	Number of Interviewees	Percentage of Interviewees
Grade Level		
PreK	3	30.0%
K	3	30.0%
1 st	2	20.0%
2 nd	2	20.0%
Years of Teaching		
Less than 5 years	1	10.0%
5 – 9 years	2	20.0%
10 – 15 year	3	30.0%
16 – 20 years	0	0%
19 – 25 year	1	10.0%
More than 25 years	3	30.0%
Years Teaching at Current School		
Less than 4 years	6	60.0%
4 – 9 years	3	30.0%
10 – 15 years	0	0%
More than 15 years	1	10.0%
Highest Educational Attainment		
Bachelor	4	40.0%
Masters	4	40.0%
Educational Specialist	2	20.0%
Doctorate	0	0%

Data Collection

For this basic qualitative study, I received approval from Walden University's IRB (# is 06-09-20-0728890). The formal approval was received by e-mail before sending research study invitations to recruit participants and conducting qualitative interviews to gather data. Recruitment occurred by receiving approval from the district

superintendent. Once I received approval from the superintendent, the superintendent then identified the school where the research study would take place. Once the school was identified, the superintendent placed me in contact with the school's principal. Then the school principal provided me with the contact information for the early childhood teachers. I then contacted each teacher individually by sending them a research invitation by e-mail along with the consent form. The invitation and consent form communicated to those who were interested in participating in the study to reply to the e-mail by typing "I Consent". The consent form provided additional background information about the study, research procedures, sample interview questions, the voluntary nature of the study, the benefits, and most important the confidentiality that would be provided as a result of their participation in the study. When participants expressed their consent to participate in the study, I scheduled a telephone interview.

A total of 10 early childhood teachers voluntarily participated in qualitative interviews. The interviewing of participants took 17 days, beginning Friday, June 10, 2020, through Monday, June 27, 2020. Ten early childhood teachers participated in the interviews for this study. The superintendent and the school principal were contacted for permission to conduct the study. The superintendent signed a Letter of Cooperation. After receiving permission from the district and school and Walden's Institutional Review Board approval (IRB#), I sent the teachers an individual e-mail to solicit their participation in the study. The initial solicitation e-mail included an introduction of the researcher, a detailed purpose and goal of the study, what the study involves, expectations as a participant, estimated time involved as a participant, and the ethical safeguards implemented with fidelity. Ten teachers returned the signed consent form indicating their

interest and approval in participating in the study. Upon receiving the signed consent form, I contacted each teacher individually to schedule an interview at a mutually agreed upon date and time for the teacher and myself.

Of the 10 early childhood teachers who consented to participating in the study, 2 were national board certified teachers. The group of interview participants included 9 females and 1 male and 7 African American and 3 white teachers, resulting in a sample that is not as diverse as it relates to race or ethnicity (see Table 1).

One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted in less than three weeks. The interviews with each research participant ranged in length from 38 to 73 minutes. An interview protocol was used to ensure that interviews were consistent (see Appendix C). Interview data was recorded using the Otter voice recording application and limited notes were taken during the interview because I wanted to focus on the questions and intently listen to the interviewee. Recordings and notes were transcribed immediately following each interview, allowing me to acquire an initial sense of the data gathered, reflect on the interview process as well as closely analyze the data provided.

Data Analysis

The primary research question was answered by thoroughly analyzing the transcripts multiple times and using open coding with thematic analysis. Data gathered from the interviews is being kept secure and confidential on my personal home computer which is password protected. Also, the interview recordings are being stored on the Otter web-based video recording platform which is also secure and confidential with my unique username and password for protection. Creswell's (2009) and Esterberg's (2002) procedures for data analysis and coding were followed as I transitioned from one coding

cycle to the next cycle. Esterberg suggested that qualitative data should be analyzed line by line and fragment by fragment to identify themes and categories that emerge. Creswell posited that researchers should thoroughly analyze the data through the coding cycles and look for codes and themes to emerge during the iterative process. As I systematically analyzed the data, emerging themes became evident using the open coding process. I was able to collapse and expand certain codes and the patterns, frequency, and similarities presented in the coding after a thorough review caused the themes to develop through the iterative process.

To analyze the data gathered, I used Creswell's (2009) suggested phases to analyze the recorded interview data for my study. Immediately after each interview I listened to the interview recording several times to allow myself to reflect on the participants responses. While listening to the recorded interviews for reflection purposes only, I took personal notes about what thoughts and ideas were emerging. This process of note taking and reflection allowed me to track my thoughts and record my personal comments. After listening to the interview responses for reflection only, the next few times I listened to the interviews to transcribe the recording in writing for accuracy. After an individual interview was transcribed, I carefully read the transcription and reviewed my initial handwritten reflections. Next, I began a detailed review and analysis using my first and second coding process of organizing the data into fragments and then into categories, and labeling the categories with words that were used by the research participants.

Next, all of the transcripts were reviewed several times to process the information and record additional comments, similarities, differences, and data frequency presented

by research participants. The emerging codes were then organized according to the relationships with one another, which presented emerging themes. These themes were assigned based on labeling the categories with verbiage that was used by research participants. One theme that emerged was professional development, which comprised ways in which the research participants believed certain factors or circumstances would qualify a professional development session as beneficial for their professional growth. This generalized theme was then collapsed into smaller subthemes based on the responses of the participants.

The next phase of the coding process involved a continuation of the iterative process of cross-checking themes with what was transcribed from the semi-formal interviews. Lastly, the researcher interpreted the meaning of the coded data. Throughout this final phase of the coding, the researcher focused intently on meaning the participant's perceptions of their experiences with the early childhood professional learning communities. Acknowledgments were noted of discrepant cases by including participant responses and experiences that did not emerge as themes. While two participants presented discrepant responses, these responses can be insightful when adding a complete description of the phenomenon. These two participants' responses were not discrepant for all ten research questions. For example, the question, "How do school leaders support professional learning communities?" the interviewee responded with, "I know we are in a lot of meetings." This participant's response was not similar to other interviewees regarding this question. Another example was that participants were asked to "Describe how your professional learning community supports a shared vision for teaching and learning among colleagues." The interview responded by saying, "Our grade level is very

supportive of one another. We help each other out when we need to.” Another example, participants were asked, “How are all stakeholders actively involved in developing and implementing the school's shared vision and value?” One of the interviewees responded by saying: “They hold community meetings once a month and people get to speak in private sessions.” When the study participants did not respond appropriately to how the question was asked, the researcher did not solicit another response from the participants. Once the questions were asked, the responses were recorded and reported vibration for the researcher's research study.

In analyzing the participants’ interview transcripts, the frequency of several patterns and similarities emerged within the data. The resulting key themes were identified from participants’ responses to the interview questions.

- Collaboration allows teachers to improve instructional strategies
- Several support structures exist through professional learning communities

Theme 1: Collaboration Allows Teachers to Improve Instructional Strategies

The time and opportunity to collaborate with other teachers was a recurring theme throughout the data analysis and coding process. Participants expressed collaboration helps them support their students better, helps them improve their instructional delivery, affords them the opportunity to share and learn as well as fosters and promotes a professional learning community. Participants shared the following perceptions: Participant 10 expressed that,

Our professional learning community nurtures teacher leadership because we are allowed to teach and learn from other teachers based on our need.

Teachers teach in each other’s classrooms to help teachers accomplish a teaching

strategy. A professional learning community is good when teachers work together and help each other. We are always helping each other to become better teachers. Almost every time we are together, we are learning from each other how to be a better teacher.

In reference to how collaboration allows teachers to improve, Participant 6 stated,

Teachers share cross-curricular information talking about how mathematics strategies look and sound in other classrooms, like music or art classrooms, and preparing students for the state test.

Participant 5 explained a process used during collaboration for teachers to improve through their professional learning community. P5 shared,

Members within the PLC share authority and decision-making by getting suggestions from all teachers and trying new teaching strategies presented by teachers. The group will facilitate the ideas of a teacher to determine what may or may not work in the classroom.

Participant 9 echoed the statements of the benefits of teacher collaboration and commented that,

The teachers also learn about resources, materials, and technology that we can use in the classroom. Teachers learned a lot from each other. Collaboration is a crucial part of fostering the development of a professional learning community.

Theme 2: Support Structures Exist through Professional Learning

Communities

Overall the participants in the research study believed that numerous support structures exist in their professional learning community which influenced the

learning of teachers. They also agreed that the district office strongly supports professional learning communities and because of the district office support, state level support is provided. Collectively, the participants agree that several support structures exist and are a benefit to their professional growth and professional learning community structure. Participant 9 stated that,

School leaders support professional learning communities by having regular professional development and by communicating with staff and providing feedback to all teachers.

Participant 7 echoed similar sentiments regarding various support structures by sharing,

Grade level support was paramount because of the expertise of teachers at the same grade-levels within professional learning communities. Teachers encourage each other and support each other, and they all give each other a chance to solve a problem during our meetings. School leaders also support professional learning communities by ensuring that the necessary resources are available for the professional learning communities.

According to Participant 1 teachers supported each other more because of professional learning communities. Participant 1 stated,

Teachers received more support from building and district-level administrators because of professional learning communities.

Participant 3 expressed that,

Teachers involved in professional learning communities get together and show each other how to use different computer programs.

Participant 8 communicated that,

The state department of education's staff also provide teachers the opportunity to visit other schools and classrooms outside their schools to view other lessons and practices at other professional learning communities. Participant 8 also shared that another support condition that existed in the professional learning community was the relationship bonding of colleagues. Their school used data to set goals during professional learning communities to support their shared vision among their teachers at the various grade levels.

Participant 4 shared that,

Teachers used Zoom meetings and emails to support each other in professional learning communities.

According to P6,

Teachers developed a resource notebook to support each in the professional learning community.

Results

Interview Questions

1. Development of Teachers

IQ 1: Describe ways in which the professional learning community nurtures teacher leadership.

The information gathered via the interviews regarding professional learning communities nurturing of teacher leadership appears to have some similarities among the individuals interviewed. Many of the study participants agreed that to improve teacher leadership, schools would need to develop a support system to improve teachers' confidence. Participants also agreed that collaboration and teamwork among teachers could contribute to the leadership process. P10 stated that "Our professional learning community nurtures teacher leadership because we are allowed to teach and learn from other teachers based on our need. The principal allows us to lead our PLC. We are able to attend professional learning conferences that interest us." (See Appendix A).

Having grade level chairs to work with teachers involved in professional learning communities by sharing information obtained from conferences and workshops was unanimously expressed by participants. P8 stated that "Our professional learning committee tends to look at the grade level chairs for leadership. So, it depends on each grade level. My grade level is very supportive and backs the grade level chair, and we kind of help look out for each other and make sure that everyone's getting the materials" (See Appendix A). It is important to note that P5 disagreed with the other participants in

the study. P5 stated “I do not think that it does” (See Appendix A). Interviewee P5 felt that the professional learning community did not nurture teacher leadership.

IQ2: Support for Professional Learning Communities

IQ2: How do school leaders support professional learning communities?

The data showed that school leaders supported professional learning communities in various formats such as classroom observations, professional development workshops, shared lesson plan meetings, conferences, webinars, and administrators' participation in meetings. Most of the participants agreed that school leaders (i.e., district and building level) supported professional learning communities by attending and participating in meetings regarding professional learning communities.

Another way in which school leaders supported professional learning communities was by participating in professional development training. P8 stated during the training sessions, teachers talk to the school leaders regarding the assistance they need for their schools. P9 also echoed the sentiments of P8. Stating that school leaders “support professional learning communities by having regular professional development and by communicating with staff and providing feedback to all teachers (P9).”

School leaders also supported professional learning communities by the development of a monthly calendar. According to P7, teachers received a calendar each month informing them of the various events that will occur in that month. School leaders also support professional learning communities by ensuring that necessary resources are available for the professional learning communities. They also agreed that the district office strongly supported professional learning communities.

IQ3: Shared Authority and Decision-Making

IQ3. Describe how all members within the PLC share authority and decision-making.

When examining how all members within the professional learning community share authority and decision-making, it appears that most of it is done at group meetings by grade level chairs. P1 indicated that their school comes together as a group once a week to review the mission statement and share ideas about things that worked or did not work. Each teacher is given a chance to lead in the decision-making process. In P2's PLC, grade level chairs share authority by allowing teachers to volunteer or delegate responsibilities to the teachers to be a part of the decision-making process. This grade level PLC also used timekeepers, recorders, and facilitators to manage consistent meetings with their colleagues. The information from those meetings was shared with others via email with those who attended or did not attend various meetings. As stated by P9, during "...grade-level meetings, all teachers' ideas and opinions are valued. Responsibility is shared among the group of teachers."

P5 stated that members within the PLC share authority and decision-making by getting suggestions from all teachers and trying new teaching strategies presented by teachers. The group will facilitate the ideas of a teacher to determine what may or may not work in the classroom. Decisions are made collectively by the teachers at their grade level. P6 expressed, "From the grade level the decision is made, then we take it to the school leadership team. We take all the concerns or the agreements to the leadership team, and then from there, we make a decision. So, everyone will be able to have input."

P7 reported that teachers encourage each other and support each other, and they all give each other a chance to solve a problem during our meetings. Communication with each other allows each individual to voice their opinions about the issue presented in

the PLCs, according to P8. P10 said that teachers have specific roles and responsibilities in the meetings. However, teachers do share the leadership roles for PLC meetings. They worked together in the decision-making process at the building and district levels when developing the agenda for meetings.

IQ4. Supports for Shared Vision for Teaching and Learning

IQ4. Describe how your professional learning community supports a shared vision for teaching and learning among colleagues.

The data showed that professional learning communities support the need for a shared vision for teaching and learning among colleagues. P1 stated that their school "... always have visions for what we need to do, we try to set good values and goals. We develop clear student-centered objectives." P2 talked about their school vertical articulation meetings. At their school, there were grade-level meetings involving faculty and staff, and at every meeting, the school's mission statement is read because it reminds them of what they need to do regarding setting ethical values and goals.

P2's responses were very similar to P1's responses regarding research question 4. P2 stated that their school also has vertical articulation meetings. The entire school meets first and breaks out in small group meetings to remind teachers about the vision of their school. This school also read the mission during each meeting. Also, at the school meetings, teachers develop goals and objectives and objectives for students.

At the school P4, teachers are encouraged to provide input and share how they feel about the topic or subject being discussed. One school had the motto of "Helping teachers that needs help" (P4) - using best practices from teachers within the learning community as well as at schools outside the learning community. Focusing on the

strength and weaknesses of our students will make a difference in their academic achievement. This school worked together to improve instructions in the classrooms and interventions by working on pull-outs.

P8 stated that their school used data to set goals to support their shared vision among their teachers at the various grade levels. According to P9, their school, "... set goals and so forth, so our shared vision is based on what is needed as a grade level, and what is needed, individually and holistically by our classes, and our students." P10's PLC used lots of the same teaching strategies and techniques to ensure their students are learning. These teachers teach in each other classrooms to help teachers accomplish a teaching strategy.

IQ5. Stakeholder Involvement in Shared Vision and Value

IQ5. How are all stakeholders actively involved in developing and implementing the school's shared vision and value?

The data showed that stakeholders are actively involved in developing and implementing the school's shared vision and values by working with teachers, principals, and outside stakeholders such as parents, nurses, and dentists. P1 defined their school as a Parent Community school because their school has connections with the community.

P2 stated that their school used a phone blast to all of the parents to keep them informed and solicit their support for our school. Back to school events for parents and the community was a useful method of communication between the two groups. P2 also stated that "... individual teachers reach out through newsletters and phone conversations. Some grade level PLC also used Parent Teacher Organizations to share their school vision and values with parents. Schools used their School Improvement

Council as a vehicle for communicating their shared vision with the community and stakeholders. P2 also shared that they developed a reading group inside the school and get the staff involved - everybody involved in our school.

P4 indicated that they had community meetings with guest speakers in private sessions. They also held monthly meetings with parents and board members. All stakeholders are invited to attend the meetings in order to get them involved in the schools' shared vision and values. However, P10 stated that "... we try to find ways to involve the stakeholders." Schools revised their vision and goals throughout the year with teachers, students, administrators, parents, community, and stakeholders. The Parent Teacher Organization and other community meetings were how the school also communicates their goals and visions with parents and stakeholders. Parents volunteering in the school played a vital role in assisting schools in communicating their goals and vision with parents and stakeholders. Learning about the school's shared vision and values occurred when guests visited the school to attend or conduct workshops. P5's PLC had a panel of men that came and spoke with 5 to 8-year-old boys to help them get the message out about the school's shared vision. The school used business owners and leadership luncheons to get the school's shared vision out to the community.

P7 firmly stated that their school and district are aware of what is happening in their grade level team. The district is actively involved in the development and implementation of the school's shared vision and values. The superintendent is always in the sessions to ensure that stakeholders are actively involved in the development and implementation of the school's shared vision and values. The Social Outreach Program keeps the communication with parents and stakeholders weekly following up through

newsletters, phone calls, and communication blast outs. One team held community meetings with various activities to encourage communication and collaboration with stakeholders and the communities (i.e., business places, churches, outreach groups). One team also has students communicate with community leaders and have the community leaders serve mentors at our schools which is tremendously helpful in bridging the gap between the school, stakeholders, and the community, according to P8.

IQ6: Collaborative Learning

IQ 6. Describe any collaborative learning that occurs as a result of your professional learning community.

Based on the data presented by study participants, collaborative learning occurred as a result of professional learning communities with teachers collaborating by sharing new learning techniques and sharing those newly learned teaching strategies and practices with other teachers at various grade levels. Participant 3 could not state a better reason for sharing information "...always sharing ideas in our classroom to help students improve their knowledge".

The study participants also stated that the professional learning community taught them about the standards and how the standards should be used at the various grade levels. Study participants believed that collaborative learning was needed for grade-level planning for all grade levels regardless of standards. Teacher P4 said that their school does "What students need to know to go on to the next grade level and what they will be taught at the next grade level according to the standards."

Participants discussed the usage of research ideas based on teaching strategies and shared them with teachers during professional learning communities. Teachers shared

things such as collaborative learning about classroom management, intervention within the classroom as well as pullouts; learning how to use data and how to apply new teaching practices based on the data; doing "... vertical articulation to discuss the strengths of our students..." (P6) sharing cross-curricular information talking about how mathematic strategies look and sound in other classrooms, like music and art classrooms, and preparing students for the state test. Participants 7 stated that "lots of time working with the writing component of the state testing during a professional learning community."

Participants also discussed the usage of LLI during the professional learning communities regarding collaboration. Participants stated that LLI was used to group students who are on the same level working with those various strategies, for example, reading. According to P9, LLI groups were created to focus "... on the development and improvement of students reading" during the collaboration process. Teachers used research-based strategies; they learn about new professional learning opportunities from each other. The teachers also learn about resources, materials, and technology that we can use in the classroom. Teachers learned a lot from each other. In summary, P10 stated that "We are always helping each other to become better teachers. Almost every time we are together, we are learning from each other how to be a better teacher".

IQ7. Knowledge and Instructional Strategies for Classrooms

IQ 7: How do team members within your professional learning community work together to gain new knowledge and instructional strategies and then apply them to your classroom?

The data showed that team members within the professional learning community work together in various ways to gain new knowledge and instructional strategies and applying them to classrooms. One of the primary ways is through workshops. “Workshops on campus and off-campus with new instructional strategies” (P1) as well as field trips together as a team. Workshops at each grade level and grade-level meetings were used to nurture teacher leadership.

The usage of school meetings also was a primary way for team members within the professional learning community to work together to gain new knowledge and instructional strategies for classrooms. According to P3, school meetings were used to share what teachers learned and discuss the things that went well and things that did not work well in classes. At the meeting, teachers are to implement new things and have the chance to practice in their classrooms. Also, at the meetings, teachers have time to bounce ideas off of each other (i.e., what worked and what needed to be tweaked). Teachers talked about how distance learning via webinars was to assist teachers with understanding innovative strategies for the classrooms.

Another primary way to was through conferences. Conferences were used by PLC to share what teachers have learned and how it may be used in the classroom. P5 stated that their grade level team goes out of the state to attend conferences and professional workshops to obtain new teaching strategies and techniques. When a teacher attends a conference or workshop, according to P5, they usually come back and present the new teaching strategies and techniques to other teachers, grade-level leaders, and administrators. Once the information is presented to other teachers, they are encouraged to implement the teaching strategy and explain the benefits of the new strategy. All

teachers are encouraged to go and try what works, or what they think will work for them and their classes.

Another team development technique was to start small and go large. P7 stated that their school "... try to take small steps, so we are not doing too much at one time" by doing one thing at a time. A timeframe is given to teachers to let them know when the leader teacher will come and see how they have implemented a specific new strategy that they choose in their classroom. The teachers are observed and given feedback on the areas where they were the strongest. They also give feedback about how they can improve their instructions for their classes.

Another primary way to nurture teachers is through in-service and preservice training. P8 stated that teachers discussed things in the classroom and what they learned from personal experiences in the classrooms and how to apply teaching strategies in the classroom. P8 also stated that were provided feedback about what worked or did not work in the classrooms for new and veteran teachers. The school used different teachers to serve as the lead teacher to present professional development courses at different times of the school year. They also had teachers taking the Read to Succeed course to improve their knowledge and teaching strategies for their reading classes.

Another primary way for team members within professional learning communities to work together to gain new knowledge and instructional strategies and apply them to their classroom is to get together and analyze test data and anecdotal information for each child weekly. When strategies are suggested, teachers examine the pros and cons and use it if it is practical or beneficial to the students.

Another primary way to was to teach a lesson together, do activities together, watch each other teach a lesson in order to improve the lesson. P10 stated that they give each other feedback about their teaching strategies. Teachers give each other feedback after teachers have observed each other teach a lesson in the classroom. Team members in professional learning communities also worked together to gain new knowledge and instructional strategies for classrooms based on the data from their classes. PLC also had teachers to work on advanced degrees in their area of specialization. The PLC teams believed that advanced education programs could provide teachers with new and emerging techniques and strategies in teaching. Then team members can use the strategies in a professional learning community to work together to gain new knowledge and instructional strategies for their classrooms.

IQ8: Sharing of Instructional Practices

IQ8: Describe how your professional learning community supports the sharing of instructional practices with other colleagues.

Based on the data, professional learning communities support the sharing of instructional practices with their other colleagues once a week in meetings. P1 stated that they asked teachers if they "have any problems that we need to build on to help solve." Another way in which professional learning communities support the sharing of instructional practices with their other colleagues is by attending conferences. Teachers that attend the conferences must come to their PLC and share new and emerging teaching strategies with their colleagues, especially at grade levels. P2 stated that they are always talking about what they want their students to master and how the students will master various skills.

Another way in which professional learning communities support the sharing of instructional practices with their other colleagues is through cutting edge technology. One PLC used Google Academy online to share instructional practices with their colleagues. It was surprising to note that P4's PLC did not encourage their professional learning community to share instructional practices with their colleagues.

Another way in which professional learning communities support the sharing of instructional practices with their other colleagues is through weekly grade-level meetings, especially for new teachers. P5 stated that "you come, you sit, you share what you see." Another way in which professional learning communities support the sharing of instructional practices with their other colleagues is via faculty and staff meetings. Their principal allows the teacher to share new findings with their colleagues. Another way in which professional learning communities support the sharing of instructional practices with their other colleagues is through the district and state training. Also, the information was shared with our grade-level colleagues. Teachers also were encouraged to speak to their grade level above and the grade level below, according to P9. P9 stated that "We work with all teachers and share what we notice, what trends we see. We cooperate with the other teachers and make efforts to modify them. We analyze and share the areas of concerns and the areas of strengths.

IQ9: Supportive Conditions

IQ9: Describe any supportive conditions that exist because of your professional learning community.

Based on the data, various supportive conditions existed because of professional learning communities. According to the P1, teachers supported each other more because

of the professional learning communities. P1 also stated that teachers received more support from building and district-level administrators because of professional learning communities. P2 also echoed the same statement about building and district level administrators who were very supportive in their effort to help students master the standards because of their involvement with professional learning communities. Another supportive condition that existed in the professional learning community was the usage of technology. P3 reported that teachers involved in professional learning communities would get together and show each other how to use different computer programs. P4 talked about how teachers used Zoom meetings and emails to support each other in professional learning communities. According to P6, teachers developed a resource notebook to support each in the professional learning community. The resource notebook was developed to help any struggling teachers. The resource notebooks provided struggling teachers with the contact information of teachers that can assist them with their classroom issues. Literacy coaches also were used to support the needs of teachers in professional learning communities.

Another supportive condition that existed with professional learning community was grade level support. P7 stated that grade level support was paramount because of the expertise of teachers at the same grade-levels within the professional learning communities. Another supportive condition that exists in the professional learning community was state-level support. According to P8, the state department provided staff to their school in order to provide selected training to teachers in the areas of English Language Arts and mathematics. The state department's staff also provide teachers the opportunity to visit other schools and classrooms outside their schools to view other

lessons and practices at other professional learning communities. Another supportive condition that existed in the professional learning community was the relationship bonding of colleagues. Because of the professional learning community, according to P9, their teachers, staff, and administrators function as a family. Positive relationships made it easy for colleagues to work and collaborate. Another supportive condition that existed because of the professional learning community was the usage of teacher observation. P10 stated that teachers observed each other and provided each other with both positive and negative feedback. P10 also stated that teachers enjoyed receiving feedback from each other and learning from each other as well as with each other. The acceptance of feedback occurred because of the development of professional learning communities.

IQ10: Fostering of Professional Learning Communities

IQ10: What are the factors that foster a professional learning community?

When examining the various factors that foster professional learning communities, the most popular answer was the opportunity to meet and collaborate. Regular meetings with teachers and administrators readily foster the development of professional learning communities. The information obtained from P1 and P3 regarding the fostering of professional learning communities, they stated that teachers must have respect for each other. P2 also stated that teachers must have mutual respect for one another. P2 quoted that "Being able to be respectful of each other's opinions. That is if teachers are willing and open to share their thoughts with others and to be able to give honest feedback on all situations."

Another way to foster a professional learning community is by presenting materials to teachers in a hands-on-hands format. Having short training sessions also can foster professional learning communities. It was paramount that training sessions were provided during the summer period or other cycles during the school year. Another way to foster a professional learning community is by presenting information that is interesting to teachers. The training session should not be mandated, but the I Do, You Do, We Do types of learning sessions to better foster professional learning communities (P6 and P7). Teachers can access resources quickly and efficiently is paramount to foster the development of professional learning communities.

Another way to foster a professional learning community is through teacher ability to work together. According to P8, this will only occur if people want to work together. The engagement factor is another factor that fosters positive professional

learning communities. Another way to foster a professional learning community if teachers act as professionals. P9 stated that teachers, "... have to except criticisms professionally." P9 also stated that collaboration is a crucial part of fostering the development of a professional learning community. P10 provided an excellent summary of what factors are needed to foster a professional learning community. As stated in the works of P10 - "Factors that foster PLC are teachers who are willing to share, be honest and open, and people who share the workload. A PLC is good when teachers work together and help each other. It is also helpful when we get to decide what we want to meet about and when we get time to practice what we have learned."

Reported in Table 3 is a summary of themes related to the interview question. The interviewees' first central theme was collaboration and the second central theme was support. The collaboration theme allowed teachers to improve instructional strategies, helped teachers support students better, improved instructional delivery, and afforded teachers the opportunity to share and learn. The support theme provided teachers with support structures with PLC at the building, district, and state levels. This theme also provided teachers and school leaders the opportunity to support colleagues with resources, collaborative unencumbered time, and feedback. Teachers were able to support, offer feedback, and provide instructional resources when trying new strategies in their classroom with students. However, all of the interviewees did not fully agree with the collaboration and support themes of PLC. One interviewee felt that their PLCs did not provide them with total collaboration or support as compared to their colleagues.

Table 3*Summary of Themes Related to Interview Question*

Theme 1: Collaboration	Theme 2: Support
Collaboration allows teachers to improve instructional strategies	Support structures exist within PLC
Collaboration helps teachers support their students better	School, district, and state leaders support PLC
Supports teachers with improving their instructional delivery	Teachers and school leaders support colleagues with resources and feedback
Affords teachers the opportunity to share and learn	Teachers support each other when trying new strategies

Evidence of Trustworthiness

The most important criteria of a qualitative research study is credibility or trustworthiness which is the equivalent of internal validity (Connelly, 2016). In qualitative research, credibility or trustworthiness “refers to the degree of confidence in data, interpretation, and methods used to ensure the quality of a study” (Connelly, 2016, p.435). Readers of the research study must be able to trust that a study’s findings are valid and reliable based on data and not on the researchers own bias or predispositions (Shenton, 2004). I also conducted member checks by allowing participants to verify their transcripts. Credibility for this study was also demonstrated by an iterative coding process which was based on the verified transcripts. Additionally, prior to finalizing themes I once again analyzed each participants’ transcripts for one final review. Finally, I

initiated a peer review by having a colleague review the transcripts, coding, and themes to confirm the alignment of the transcripts and coding to the identified themes for this study.

Transferability

Transferability or external validity refers to the degree that the results of the qualitative research study can be applied beyond the context of the study by gathering descriptive data from participants (Beck, 2009). This basic qualitative study compromises significant details to allow readers to determine if their own study is aligned enough to the situation in order for the findings to be applicable. The results of this study could potentially generate hypotheses for further research.

Dependability

The dependability of the interpretation of the data was accomplished by using open and thematic coding strategies. According to Shenton (2004), dependability in primary qualitative research is equivalent to quantitative research reliability. Additionally, dependability describes the study's reliability because impending research would result in the same findings after conducting the same research methods and design. The convergence validated the dependability among themes or categories and the process of allowing all participants to verify their transcripts. Furthermore, dependability was established by thoroughly describing the research design and rationale, methodology, procedures for recruitment, and the data collection process.

Confirmability

According to Shenton (2004), confirmability refers to the study's objectivity. To establish confirmability, a researcher must ensure the findings are a result

of authentic data that has been gathered and analyzed absent of bias to the best of the researcher's ability. While conducting a qualitative study a researcher is expected to interpret and analyze each participant's perceptions and avoid their own opinions or assumptions. Establishing confirmability by implementing with fidelity a process of reflexivity. Transparency was presented in the study by sharing the findings after a thorough and methodical analysis process.

Summary

In this chapter I briefly reviewed the purpose of the study, described the setting where the research was conducted, and presented relevant participant demographics. I also provided an overview of the data collection process as well as the step by step process of how the data analysis was conducted. Chapter 4 also includes the results found from the research questions and offers evidence of the study's trustworthiness by describing the process implemented to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability within the study.

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to better understand prekindergarten through third grade teachers' perceptions of how early childhood professional learning communities enhance teachers' instructional practices. Themes included: collaboration allows teachers to improve instructional strategies and several support structures exist through professional learning communities. Through those support structures teachers are able to improve their instructional practices. All of the research participants agreed that the phenomenon of professional learning communities is beneficial to the professional growth of teachers when supports are intertwined with collaboration with other colleagues. All of the teachers who

participated in this study expressed that professional learning communities were beneficial to some degree when supportive collaboration is practiced (RQ1).

In Chapter 5, the researcher will summarize and interpret the study's findings, describe the limitations to trustworthiness, share recommendations for future research, and offer the potential impact for positive social change. Finally, the researcher will provide a conclusion that captures the essence of the study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to better understand prekindergarten through third grade teachers' perceptions of how early childhood professional learning communities enhance teachers' instructional practices. The problem to be addressed by this research is it is unknown to what extent PLC conducted with prekindergarten through third-grade teachers improves instructional practices. As the researcher, the researcher's interest was to closely examine professional learning communities' phenomenon to determine the factors that contribute to teachers enhancing their instructional practices while engaged in professional learning communities. These early childhood teachers offered their perceptions as they were engaged in professional learning communities due to their district's and school's expectations. Furthermore, it explored how teachers made meaning of their participation in the professional learning community process based on their individual and collective experiences.

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data for the research study. According to Almeida, Faria, and Queirós (2017), a qualitative methodology is appropriate for a basic qualitative study to understand better beliefs, attitudes, and meanings about a phenomenon. In this study, the participant interviews were used to better understand prekindergarten through third-grade teachers' perceptions of how early childhood professional learning communities enhance teachers' instructional practices. The interviews allowed the researcher to gain detailed first-hand perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and opinions about PLC's phenomenon. Each participant responded to 10 interview questions regarding PLC enhancing instructional practices while allowing the

researcher to remain focused on the problem statement and the purpose of the study. The participant responses to the interview questions were aligned to the research question and helped me to gain a better understanding of their beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of how PLC enhances early childhood teacher's instructional practices. The two major themes that materialized after a thorough coding process were (a) collaboration allows teachers to improve instructional strategies and (b) support structures exist through professional learning communities.

Interpretation of the Findings

After the analysis of the participants' transcripts and the coding process the findings confirm that PLC are successful and beneficial to enhancing teachers' professional growth. The implementation of PLC alleviates teachers working in isolation and establishes collegiality and a collaborative learning environment for all members of the learning community. Evidence from the findings indicated that providing consistent opportunities for professional dialogue appears to be advantageous as a result of school structures being put in place for each grade level to collaborate for the purpose of enhancing teacher knowledge through PLC.

The research participants' semi-structured interviews showed that the implementation of PLC for early childhood teachers is a critical component to ensure collaboration leads to enhancing instructional practices. Most importantly, the findings from this study, as reflected in the literature, suggest that PLC need to work and learning together to find the best ways to enhancing and improve teacher professional growth.

Based on the peer-reviewed literature in this study, teachers are the essential ingredient in improving schools' teaching and learning environment.

Other research studies regarding PLC supported the findings of this research study. Postholm and Waage (2016) stated that teachers must have the opportunity to work together, discuss their teaching experiences, observe their colleagues, and provide feedback. This research study's findings were consistent with the research study of Postholm and Waage (2016). The information obtained from P1 and P3 regarding fostering professional learning communities stated that teachers must respect each other. P2 also stated that teachers must have mutual respect for one another. P2 quoted that, "Being able to be respectful of each other's opinions. That is, if teachers are willing and open to share their thoughts with others and to be able to give honest feedback on all situations." The term feedback was a consistent finding of this research study.

The collaboration was a significant finding of a study by Wagner, Ossd, Parra, and Proctor (2019) regarding PLC; this research study supported this finding. The collaboration was a central theme that surfaced within this research study and other studies by Colmer, 2017; Damjanovic and Blank, 2018; Sjoer and Meirink, 2016; and Vooget et al. 2016). Woodland and Mazur (2015) stated the importance of collaboration within the teachers. The teachers echoed this sentiment interviewed for this study.

These teachers used school meetings as a primary way for team members within the PLC to work together to gain new knowledge and instructional strategies for classrooms. According to Horn and Kane (2016), strong PLC foster trust that supports teachers with trying new instructional strategies to develop new instructional practices.

This study and Horn and Kane (2016) support that findings PLC foster new instructional practices.

Attorps and Kellner, 2017 stated that PLC could enhance instructional practices. The findings of this study also indicated that PLC could enhance instructional practices. The five PLC dimensions stated by Olivier and Huffman (2016) were primary themes of this research study findings. The themes were supportive leadership, value, vision, collective learning, application, shared personal practices, and supportive conditions.

Thornton and Cherrington (2019) noted that it is essential that PLC have a clear purpose and focus on achieving goals and enhancing teachers' professional practice for optimal benefits. For Question 4, P1 stated that their school "... always have visions for what we need to do, we try to set good values and goals. We develop clear student-centered objectives." This statement supported what Thornton and Cherrington noted in their 2019 study.

The research question that was developed for this study was designed to help me better understand prekindergarten through third grade teachers' perceptions of how early childhood professional learning communities enhance teachers' instructional practices. There was one research question used to report the results of data collected from the open-ended semi-structured interview questions. The research question was:

RQ1. What are early childhood teacher's perceptions of how early childhood professional learning communities enhance teacher's instructional practices?

Interpretation of RQ1

As a result of the interview questions with this study, the data revealed teachers perceived PLC at their school site as a process which supports collaboration and relevant learning. Collaboration was a major theme that surfaced as each participant expressed how they learned, practiced strategies, dialogued, analyzed data, attended conferences, provided feedback, and observed classrooms together among many other daily professional practices. Another major theme was the support structures that were in place as a result of PLC. Since they met together consistently they were able to assist each other with implementing new learning, supporting each other with teaching new strategies, gaining support and feedback from school leaders and colleagues, assisting in a colleague's classroom with students, and supporting each other with preparing for school and state assessments. Data analysis indicated that participants were unanimous in the perception that collaboration supports their learning and because of the collaboration various support structures assist the PLC in enhancing their instructional practices. These findings align to the five dimensions of meaningful collaborative learning in order to increase teaching and learning for teachers and their students (Olivier and Huffman, 2016). According to Olivier and Huffman (2016), the five essential dimensions are shared and supportive leadership, values and vision, collective learning and application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions.

Table 4*Theme 1 Related to RQ1*

Participant	Theme 1: Collaboration Allows Teachers to Improve Instructional Strategies
P1	Well like I said, we share data and we discuss ways that are old and new that work for students. We observe in the classrooms, we have district professional development workshops, I would say online conferences, such as we did with the COVID outbreak. We share test results and then go from there to see if our activities and objectives are working well. We meet as a team. Every week and we share lesson plans and celebrations, so it keeps everybody on the same page.
P2	We collaborate throughout the year to make sure that our students are have whatever they need to be successful in the next grade level.
P3	We are always sharing ideas in our classroom to help students improve their knowledge.
P4	We share ideas with each other about what works for our kids.
P5	The teachers get together to collaborate as one. So we make sure that across the board we meet together as a grade level to plan that lesson. And then for the upper grades we might share what we are doing. Upper grades might take it a little bit further, but definitely looking at the standards, planning the lesson together.
P6	When we do vertical articulation and we discuss strengths, we also share with other grades things the students need to know before they come to us. This helps strengthen the grade level. We share cross curricular information. We talk about how will the literacy and math strategies look and sound in another classroom. We even discuss how it would look in music or art class.

Table 4 (Continue)*Theme1 Related to RQ1*

Participant	Theme 1: Collaboration Allows Teachers to Improve Instructional Strategies
P7	And we actually had a couple of days where we were out of the classroom together and developing, not really a curriculum, but developing, like planned lessons for us to follow so we can all be on the same target because what we found out was with the writing portion of the test we're all focusing on different things.
P8	I may get two students from another class and one student from a separate class, and they come into my classroom and I might read with them or give them some reading strategies. So that's one way that we collaborate for the betterment of the child.
P9	We work with all teachers and share what we notice, what trends we see. We cooperate with the other teachers and make efforts to modify. We analyze and share the areas of concerns and the areas of strengths.
P10	Like I said we meet with each other and we discuss strategies and how to improve on those strategies. We have time to observe each other while we are teaching and give feedback. We share positives and areas for improvement. We enjoy receiving feedback from each other and learning from each other.

Table 5*Theme2 Related to RQ1*

Participant	Theme 2: Support Structures Exist through Professional Learning Communities
P1	With teacher leadership, I would say that we improve confidence, we share data, we have a support system for one another, we celebrate our successes, and we work on the things that need working on.
P2	They come and offer assistance all the time. They are visible. They attend our grade level meetings. We share the minutes from our meeting and they provide feedback and share with us.
P3	I am able to learn from the other teachers in my group about the computer. I sometimes even go to their house to learn more about the computer. We get together and we show each other how to use these different computer programs.
P4	We help if a teacher needs help.
P5	It makes you feel like you have completed something and that you have made a difference for your students. That alone gives you the sense that the professional learning community and sharing of ideas, strategies, getting that support, really means a lot and makes sense.
P6	They ask us what we need the most support in. The leaders ask us what we feel is important. They try to provide the professional development around those areas of need or areas of weakness. It is based on our needs.
P7	Our grade level is very supportive of one another. We help each other out when we need to.

Table 5 (Continue)*Theme2 Related to RQ1*

Participant	Theme 2: Support Structures Exist through Professional Learning Communities
P8	We do have a lot of support. We have people from the state that come and train us. We do have quite a bit of things.
P9	They support professional learning communities by having regular professional development and by communicating with staff and providing feedback to all teachers.
P10	We support each other and help each other as needed. Sometimes we teach in the other person's classroom to help them accomplish a teaching strategy.

Limitations of the Study

The primary limitations of this study were the sampling method and sampling size. The researcher used convenience sampling. A convenience sample is a non-probability sampling method where the sample is taken from a group of people easy to contact or reached by the researcher. The sample size was also a primary limitation. Only ten early childhood participants were interviewed for this research study. These ten participants used PLC at one public elementary Title I school. These individuals' PLC usage is not reflected in the large population of elementary teachers who used PLC. Furthermore, as the researcher I assumed all participants were authentic and honest during the interview process. Therefore, I analyzed the interview responses assuming

they were accurately and truthfully sharing their perceptions as a result of their engagement in PLC.

The interview method used by the researcher to collect the data for this study has limitations. An interview in qualitative research is a conversation where questions are asked to elicit information. The researcher interviewed the study participants to uncover the meanings of central themes in the subjects' life and world from their point of view. Interviewing participants can paint a picture of what happened in a specific event, tell us their perspective of such an event, and give other social cues. Social cues, such as voice, intonation, body language, etc. of the interviewee, can give the interviewer a lot of extra information that can be added to the interviewee's verbal answer on a question. Whether verbal or nonverbal, this detailed description level can show an otherwise hidden interrelatedness between interviewer and interviewees. First, there can be complications with the planning of the interview. Not only is recruiting people for interviews hard, due to the interview's typically personal nature, planning the interview, and confirming the time of the interview can be difficult. Also, participants can cancel or change the time of the interview at the last minute.

During the actual interview, the researcher might miss some information. It can arise from the immense multitasking that the interviewer must do. Not only do they have to make the respondent feel very comfortable, but they also have to keep as much reading the questions correctly as possible, write down as much as they can if necessary, and think of follow up questions. After the interview, the coding process begins, and with this comes its own set of disadvantages. First, coding can be too time-consuming. The researchers may miss data during the interview. Another limitation is that the dictation

may not be interpreted correctly by the researcher. As the researcher, it assumed all participants were authentic and honest during the interview process. Therefore, the researcher analyzed the interview responses assuming they were accurately and truthfully sharing their perceptions due to their PLC engagement. The researcher constructed the interview protocol and questions for this study and was they designed to support the conceptual framework. Notes were purposefully not taken during the interviews in order to listen carefully to the interviewee.

The recordings of the interviewees were immediately transcribed word-for-word at the completion of the interview, reviewed for accuracy and validated by the individual participants. There were no discrepancies in the transcriptions based on each participants' validation of the transcripts. Therefore, understanding the factors within their PLC that enhance teachers' instructional practices is limited to the early childhood teachers' perceptions and experiences in this study. As a result of the limitations presented based on the methodology of the study there is a potential for adding to the knowledge of PLC through further study, expansion, and generalizability.

Recommendations

This study and most studies cited in this research study used qualitative methodologies to obtain the research data for PLC studies. Bryman (1988: p 46) wrote that "qualitative researchers prefer an approach to the study of the social world which seeks to describe and analyze the culture and behavior of humans and their groups from the point of view of those being studied." This approach may or may not be the best method for gathering data for research studies regarding PLC because of the limited

number of individuals involved in the research study. Some researchers believe that the quantitative research approach might be the best method for collecting data regarding PLC. Quantitative research is the systematic empirical investigation of observable phenomena via statistical, mathematical, or computational techniques. The method allows the researcher to investigate a large number of individuals using a systematic process. The researchers can generalize from the sample to the population; this cannot be done in qualitative research. This research study is recommending that future research studies regarding PLC should use mixed-method research designed. The Mixed Method research design allows researchers to use qualitative and quantitative research designs' best features. Mixed methods research includes mixing qualitative and quantitative data, methods, methodologies, and/or paradigms in a research study or set of related studies. One could argue that mixed methods research is a special case of multimethod research.

Additionally, increasing the sample size to include teachers from other schools, geographical locations, a larger grade span of teachers, and the teachers' years of experience within PLC may allow for a more in-depth analysis of the factors that enhance teachers' instructional practices.

Recommendations for further research regarding PLC are paramount to developing new teaching strategies and techniques to improve elementary students' academic performance through collaboration. This process is referred to as collective learning. Collective learning and application are described as the teachers' opportunity to share information, work collaboratively to plan, solve problems, and improve learning opportunities in their classroom through collaboration with colleagues (Olivier & Huffman, 2016). Capraro et al. (2016) found that if teachers have adequate time for

collaboration, they can improve their instructional practice by obtaining and using knowledge from other teachers rather than working in isolation. According to Dufour and Reeves (2016), an actual PLC functions as a collaborative team rather than in isolation and takes collective responsibility for student learning.

This study and other studies have found that collaboration among teachers can enhance teachers' knowledge, leading to improved student performance. Hence, if decision makers and educational leaders use the findings from PLC research they could possibly pervade the individualism and bureaucracy that exist in education. Additionally, social change in education can potentially be impacted by improved instructional practices and student outcomes as a result of communities of practice or PLC. Therefore, it is fundamentally possible that when a community of learners collaborates they could transform teaching and learning resulting in positive social change that produces teachers with a higher capacity to implement evidence-based instructional strategies and more students who meet or exceed state and national academic and career standards.

When students can perform the three r's (i.e., reading, writing, and arithmetic) at grade level, they will be productive citizens in society. Productive citizens bring positive change to their communities through education and employment. Our society only changes when it most valuable assess changes. The people are the most important assets of a community, especially if they are educated. Well, educated students will have the opportunity to continue their educational experience in other educational arenas. Higher education leads to higher-paying jobs, which leads to better communities, which leads to better citizens, which leads to a better social change in our society.

Consequently, Buttram and Farley-Ripple (2016) claimed that PLCs provide one option for fostering teacher collegiality and shared accountability. Hence, numerous researchers' familiar premise is that a collaborative design embedded within PLC positively influences professional learning and practice (Colmer, 2017; Damjanovic and Blank, 2018; Sjoer & Meirink, 2016; Voogt et al., 2016). Because there is no consistent way in how teachers should collaborate, more research is needed in PLC. Additionally, researchers need to consider further studies to track and explore how PLC directly impacts student achievement explicitly. If our schools can genuinely educate our students, the communities in which these schools are located will change significantly. Social change wants to occur in most communities until the people of those communities become better educated. That why paramount for schools to find new strategies for better education students from low-performing schools. Students from low-performing schools make less of an impact on our society than students from high-performing schools. Social change involves alteration of the social order of a society. The social changes occur when the people in our society are educated across the board regardless of gender, racial ethnicity, social status, income, or religion.

Finally, the investigation into the influence PLC have on enhancing instructional practices and transforming social change in education may afford scholars and early childhood teachers the opportunity to gather a more in-depth knowledge base about the contextual factors that influence the implementation of PLC to enhance instructional practices. According to the research change in the educational arena as a result of best practices with PLC may nudge the professional learning community process closer to its potential role as a necessary protocol of transformative learning for teachers will can

increase life long learners therefore benefiting our society with well educated and productive citizens.

Implications

The findings of the current study have implications that may add to positive social change. First, the findings that emerged in this study may assist district and school leaders and teachers who engage in PLC with implementing practices that foster and promote instructional practices. Therefore, effective PLC may bring about positive social change by improving the quality of education and how PLC and teachers work together to increase best practices (Pang & Wang, 2016). Correspondingly, this qualitative research may lead to positive social change by developing improved PLC, which could improve teacher self-efficacy, thereby producing more confident and competent educators (Gilbert et al., 2018) and, ultimately, young children. An understanding of PLC practices may improve instructional strategies, which may improve students' academic achievement. The researcher learned that professional learning communities could improve the quality of instructional practices if the PLCs are implemented based on this study's findings and other studies referenced in this document.

Conclusion

Teachers are the school's most potent resources. The teacher is one who transfers the knowledge they gain through formal and informal training to our students. The more knowledgeable a teacher, the more knowledge they will transfer to our students. Based on those premises, this is why PLC is paramount in the educational systems today. PLC exemplifies social constructivism, which allows teachers to learn from one another to enhance professional practice. Teachers collaborating through PLC enhance collegial

learning and allows teachers to share and learn evidence-based practices both in formal and informal settings. Bannister (2015) noted that teacher communities are a learning resource for teachers in the same content area, school, grade level, or teachers with a common problem of practice whose collaboration is intended to provide a robust setting for teacher leaders to student learning. Gee and Whaley (2016) asserted that the use of collaborative PLC is the best and professionally rewarding way to enhance professional learning. Teacher collaboration is also widely acknowledged as a powerful tool for professional teacher learning and sustainable school improvement (Gee & Whaley, 2016; Sjoer & Meirink, 2016).

This study of ten elementary teachers at one Title I school revealed several themes related to PLC. Based on the evidence, collaborative learning occurred due to professional learning communities with teachers collaborating by sharing new learning techniques and sharing them with other teachers at various grade levels and within the same grade level. One teacher could not state a better reason for PLC "...always sharing ideas in our classroom to help students improve their knowledge". The evidence also reflected that teachers believed that the PLC taught them about the standards and how they should be used at the various grade levels. Study participants believed that collaborative learning was needed for grade-level planning for all grade levels regardless of standards. "What students need to know to go on to the next grade level and what they will be taught at the next grade level according to the standards."

Again, the evidence showed that teachers within the professional learning community work together in various ways to gain new knowledge and instructional strategies, and applying them to classrooms benefit both teachers and students at the end

of the day. In summary, “We are always helping each other become better teachers. Almost every time we are together, we are learning from each other how to be a better teacher” to improve student achievement. This process can indeed be achieved through the usage of PLC in our schools. Postholm and Waege (2016) stated that it is critical for teachers to have the opportunity to work together, discuss their teaching experiences, observe their colleagues, and provide feedback to better their practice.

However, the study participants provided ways in which PLC could be improved and things that did not work well in PLCs. Participants stated that what is needed is individually and holistically by classes for students is different depending on the teacher and the students. Teachers also conveyed that their PLC needed more professional development that was planned and chosen by them as well as the need to be more involved in the decision-making process. Some participants stated that they needed new strategies and practices for mathematics in the strand of number and operation because it was a weakness in their PLC. Other participants need help with the implementation of strategies and practices that can improve students reading performance. Finding ways to involve stakeholders was another paramount issue that study participants needed improvement with for their PLC. The need for help with learning research-based strategies, resources, material, and technology was also the needs of study participants.

Some participants stated that large groups did not work, but small groups worked very well in PLCs. They stated that pull-out worked in PLCs, but none pull-out did not work well in PLCs. Participants who worked with PLCs at various education levels stated that PLCs worked well at the elementary level, not the high school level. There was no mention of the middle level and PLCs. It is important to note that one participant stated

that “not teaching the materials in the books, but teaching students how to become a better person and become a person who had learned and to be a good citizen.

Few discrepant responses occurred on some of the questions asked to the study participants. None of the study participants reported negatively to every question asked by respondents regarding PLC. For example, a participant stated that “I do not think that it does.” This participant did not answer the question. Another participant stated that “I know we are in a lot of meetings.” They also did not answer the question. Another example, “We share ideas with each other about what works for our kids. We help if a teacher needs help”. This participant also did not answer the question. Another discrepant response was “They hold community meetings once a month and people get to speak in private sessions.” The question was not addressed based on the participant response. Also, another discrepant response was “We meet a lot,” that was not a response to the question, but, the response of the study participant. However, nearly all of the study participants suggested that elementary school should invest in PLCs. They believed that PLCs created an environment that allowed teachers to collaborate as well as support each other in their education arena.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Describe any ways your professional learning community nurtures teacher leadership.
2. How do school leaders support professional learning communities?
3. Describe how all members within the PLC share authority and decision-making.
4. Describe how your professional learning community supports a shared vision for teaching and learning among colleagues.
5. How are all stakeholders actively involved in developing and implementing the school's shared vision and values?
6. Describe any collaborative learning that occurs as a result of your professional learning communities.
7. Describe how your professional learning community supports the sharing of instructional practices with other colleagues.
8. How do team members within your professional learning community work together to gain new knowledge and instructional strategies and then apply the new learning to their classroom?
9. Describe any supportive conditions that exist because of your professional learning communities.
10. What are factors that foster a professional learning community?

Appendix B: Five Dimensions of Conceptual Framework and Interview Questions

Conceptual Framework	Interview Questions
1. Shared and Supportive Leadership	Describe any ways your professional learning community nurtures teacher leadership.
1. Shared and Supportive Leadership	How do school leaders support professional learning communities?
1. Shared and Supportive Leadership	Describe how all members within the PLC share authority and decision-making.
2. Shared Vision and Values	Describe how your professional learning community supports a shared vision for teaching and learning among colleagues.
2. Shared Vision and Values	How are all stakeholders actively involved in developing and implementing the school's shared vision and values?
3. Collective Learning and Application	Describe any collaborative learning that occurs as a result of your professional learning communities.
3. Collective Learning and Application	How do team members within your professional learning community work together to gain new knowledge and instructional strategies and then apply the new learning to their classroom?
4. Shared Personal Practice	Describe how your professional learning community supports the sharing of instructional practices with other colleagues.
5. Supportive Conditions	Describe any supportive conditions that exist because of your professional learning communities.
5. Supportive Conditions	What are factors that foster a professional learning community?

Appendix C:
Letter of Cooperation

Dr. Margaret Gilmore, Superintendent
Allendale County School District
3249 Allendale - Fairfax Hwy
Fairfax, SC 29827

Re: Doctoral Research

As a doctoral student at Walden University, I am in the process of conducting research for my dissertation. The study involves conducting interviews with early childhood teachers in grades prekindergarten through third grade to investigate the perceptions they have of effective collaborative practices with their professional learning communities. To move forward with my research, I am requesting permission to conduct interviews in your school district with one elementary school. The interview will not involve, students, parents, administrators, or other instructional support staff. The interview questions will only ask about teachers' perceptions of collaborative practices within professional learning communities. The one-on-one interviews will last approximately forty-five minutes by telephone.

Potential participants will be contacted via email. For those teachers meeting the criteria and agreeing to participate in the study, interviews will be conducted virtually at a mutually agreed upon date and time. All responses will be handled in a confidential manner. Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) will approve my study once I have obtained approval. Your cooperation is greatly appreciated, as it will enhance this qualitative research study. If you have any questions about the research, please contact me at 803-206-0355.

If your permission to conduct the study is granted, please confirm in writing by e-mail to andress.carter-sims@waldenu.edu.

Highest regards,

Andress Carter-Sims

Appendix D:
Participation Invitation Letter

Dear Invitee,

My name is Andress Carter-Sims. I am currently a doctoral student at Walden University. I am kindly requesting your participation in a doctoral research study that I am conducting titled: Early Childhood Teachers' Perceptions of Professional Learning Communities. The purpose of this qualitative research study is to better understand prekindergarten through third grade teachers' perceptions of how early childhood professional learning communities enhance teachers' instructional practices. The study involves participating in a private interview which includes 10 questions which will be approximately 45 minutes as well as an additional 10 minutes or so to review the interview transcript for accuracy. The total time of participation should be an average of one hour. Your participation is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. Please note that all data collected will be kept private and confidential. If you would like to participate in the study, please read the Informed Consent letter which is attached. Your participation in the research will be of great importance to assist in social change in the field of early childhood education that has the potential to improve the quality of education and the way that professional learning communities and teachers work collaboratively to improve instructional practices. The study also has the potential to increase best practices that may lead to positive social change through the development of improved professional learning communities which could then improve teacher self-efficacy thereby producing more confident and competent educators and ultimately young children.

Thank you for your time and consideration to this invitation.

Sincerely,

Andress Carter-Sims, Ed.S.

Doctoral Student

Walden University

Name: Andress Carter-Sims

Title: Early Childhood Teachers' Perceptions of Professional Learning Communities