2021

Administrators' and Teachers' Perceptions of Professional Learning Communities as Replacements for Traditional Professional Development

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Abstract

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MS, Walden University, 2017

BS, Bowie State University, 2006

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

Professional learning communities (PLCs) positively influence students' and teachers' success. Yet, traditional professional development, involving passive learning, is still widely used. The problem addressed in this qualitative case study is little is known about administrators' perceptions about PLCs as replacements for traditional forms of professional development (PD). Administrators' and teachers' perceptions of PLCs should be explored to learn more about why PLCs are underutilized in schools, despite their proven effectiveness. The primary conceptual framework used for this study was Knowles' adult learning theory supported by Contextual learning theory. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit eight participants – four administrators and four teachers - from a school in the Mid-Atlantic United States to participate in this study. Data were collected via semistructured interviews and previous years' PD agendas. Interview data were transcribed and coded manually. A six-phase thematic analysis led to the identification of four emergent themes: (a) Relationships and collaboration create sense of community; (b) Shared local and immediate issues or interests influence buy-in; (c) Ongoing, focused work leads to sustainable change; (d) Cycles of feedback and reflection improve practice; (e) Logistical planning eases tensions; and (f) Shift in mindset is needed for buy-in. Implications for positive social change include the fact that more is understood about the support or resources needed to fully support PLCs, which have been shown to have a positive influence on student achievement.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my Mumdear who led by example, showed me that I can do anything I put my mind to, and who stressed the importance of education over everything. It is also dedicated to my children, Caleb and Kyndal, who have been understanding, supportive, and my biggest cheerleaders! This doctorate degree is for you. I love you.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my family and friends for supporting me and believing in my goals and dreams. You all have been my personal cheering squad and my dose of honey, making life sweeter while I have focused on school.

I would also like to thank my mother, Ingrid, for providing support to my family while I matriculated through school – and always. My children are lucky to have a Gigi and like you! I love you.

Thank you, Dr. Hallums, for your encouragement. Your kind words kept me going throughout this process and you helped me remember that I could do this. I will forever be grateful for your time and attention and will never forget the positive impact you have had on me and my will to keep going. Thank you.

I would also like to acknowledge my committee member, Dr. Alexon, who worked to support me and provide valuable feedback that helped me throughout this process.

I want to thank all my professors at Walden who have provided guidance and have helped lay the foundation for my doctoral study. I learned much from each of you and in each of your courses. I am a much better student, writer, and researcher because of my time with each of you.

Thank you to my study participants who sacrificed their time to participate in my study during a global pandemic. I greatly appreciate your time!

Lastly, but not least, I would like to acknowledge and show compassion for myself because this process pushed me far beyond limits I thought existed for me. I am proud that I persevered and did not give up on myself. I will never forget this journey!

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

This study explored administrators' and teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities (PLCs) as replacements for traditional professional development (PD). While previous studies have already shown that PLCs may positively influence student achievement (Ronfeldt et al., 2015), there still is a lack of evidence of PLCs being used as a primary strategy for school improvement (Brown & Militello, 2016). Since the positive influence of PLCs on student achievement is already known, this study was conducted to explore administrators' and teachers' perceptions or attitudes towards shifting the culture of PD at their schools from one that is mainly passive to more active. This study has implications for positive social change because the results of the study may be used by other teachers and administrators to make decisions about whether to use more of a PLC model at their schools or continue to offer and facilitate traditional PD. Further, by better understanding how administrators perceive PLCs as replacements for traditional PD, and the resources administrators need to fully support PLCs, structures might be created to more frequently implement PLCs in schools and positively influence students and teachers.

The rest of this chapter will provide more detailed information about this study. The background will be discussed, including information about PLCs and their effectiveness in schools. The current problem that this study sought to understand and the purpose for conducting this study will be stated and further explained. Additionally, the research questions that guided this study and the conceptual framework that underpinned this study will be detailed. Then, the nature of the study, which provides a synopsis of

how the study was conducted, will be discussed, followed by definitions of terms important to this study. Next, assumptions made in this study will be stated, including reasons why they were made. The scope and delimitations of the study will be explained to provide information about the boundaries of the study and its transferability. This section will be followed by an explanation of the study's limitations due to a variety of factors, including researcher bias. Next, the significance of the study and its contribution to the current literature and field will be explained, as well as the implications for positive social change. Lastly, the summary will synthesize all the information presented in this chapter.

Background

Although PLCs have been shown to have a positive influence on student achievement, teacher collaboration, and overall school improvement (Macias, 2017), many schools still use less effective, more traditional forms of PD. The current literature suggested PLC structures are supported by adult learning theories because they are driven by adults' needs, relevant to their current situations, and allow adults to construct knowledge from each other through collaboration (see Hardy, 2016; Holmqvist, 2017; Mohan et al., 2017). On the other hand, traditional, more passive, and less collaborative forms of PD are still widely used, even though they have been shown to have little sustained impact on improved outcomes for teachers' practices or their students' achievement (Attard, 2017). In this study, I aimed to better understand how teachers and administrators perceive PLCs as replacements for traditional forms of PD. This study addressed the gap in the literature about administrators' and teachers' perceptions of

PLCs as replacements for traditional PD. While much is known about PLCs and their effectiveness when implemented in schools, much is still not known about administrators' and teachers' perceptions of them being used instead of traditional PD (Brown & Brown & Militello, 2016).

The site selected for this case study is situated in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The school, a private school in an urban city, serves over 800 children in Grades PreK-12. The school has a lower division that serves students in Grades PreK through 5; a middle division that serves students in Grades 6 through 8; and an upper division that serves students in Grades 9 through 12. The school offers several types of professional development. Some of the professional development is offered cross-divisionally, while other opportunities are offered within divisions. At the time of the study, there were no PLC structure in place. Therefore, this study was necessary to better understand administrators' and teachers' perceptions of PLCs as replacements for traditional forms of PD.

Problem Statement

The problem is that little is known about administrators' and teachers' perceptions about PLCs as replacements for traditional forms of professional development (Brown & Militello, 2016). While teacher autonomy in schools can encourage innovation and creativity, it can also create isolated educational settings in which teachers focus solely on their content areas, which might inhibit students' abilities to develop real-world, interdisciplinary skills (Owens, 2017). Teacher isolation may make it difficult for school administrators to create cohesive educational environments in which professional

development consists of teachers learning from, and with, one another. Traditional PD tends to involve passive learning and does not require much collaboration (Mohan et al., 2017). Teachers sometimes use new knowledge gained from traditional PD, albeit, in autonomous ways in their classrooms.

School leaders should know what the PD needs are for their faculty. These leaders influence the form and function of PD in their schools. Bahous et al. (2016) explained that administrators have the power to set the tone or expectations for teachers' participation in collaborative teams that may be tasked with improving teaching and learning in ways that traditional PD fails. Successful PLCs require the full support of school leaders, and some administrators might even choose to participate in a PLC (Bahous et al., 2016). Ronfeldt et al. (2015) found that PLCs had a positive influence on student achievement in schools. Lindvall and Ryve (2019) described the collective participation of PLCs as an effective means of positive results in schools. However, teachers need more access to PLCs (Smith et al., 2017). For education leaders who plan PD, it is important to understand administrators' and teachers' perceptions about PLCs as replacements for traditional forms of professional development (Brown & Militello, 2016).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore school administrators' and teachers' perceptions about PLCs as replacements for traditional means of PD. In this case study, administrators' and teachers' perceptions were explored using individual interviews. The qualitative data gathered during this study provided a better

understanding of the research problem and may lead to change to existing organizational structures within schools that support PLCs, rather than continue to implement traditional forms of PD. PLCs not only promote active learning and engagement, but they also shift school culture from a community of disjointed classrooms to a network of collaborators, focused not on teaching, but on learning (DuFour, 2004).

According to DuFour (2004), there are three "big ideas" that underpin PLCs: (a) a focus on student learning, (b) a culture of collaboration, and (c) a focus on results. Ronfeldt et al. (2015) found that PLCs had a positive influence on student achievement in schools. Furthermore, Pirtle and Tobia (2014) asserted that school administrators play a key role in successful PLCs. In fact, successful PLCs require the full support of school leaders, and some administrators might even choose to participate in a PLC (Bahous et al., 2016). This study provided insight into school administrators' and teachers' perceptions about PLCs as replacements for traditional, more passive forms of PD, and help inform the resources or education they might need to fully support, and provide structure for, effective PLCs that replace traditional PD within their schools.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study were intended to address the problem statement that little is known about administrators' and teachers' perceptions about PLCs as replacements for traditional forms of PD. The site for this study was a school that, at the time of this study, did not currently use a PLC model for PD, despite the many benefits PLCs provide. The following research questions guided the research

process to learn more about administrators' and teachers' perceptions of PLCs as replacements for traditional PD:

RQ1: What are administrators' and teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities as replacements for traditional professional development in a school in the Mid-Atlantic?

RQ2: How do administrators and teachers in a school in the Mid-Atlantic perceive a transition from traditional PD to PLCs?

Conceptual Framework

PLCs not only promote active learning and engagement, but they also shift school culture from a community of disjointed classrooms to a network of collaborators, focused not on teaching, but learning (DuFour, 2004). To support this qualitative case study, adult learning theory was used because it provides insight into why PLCs have been found to be effective at facilitating learning for adults. Knowles (1985), credited with popularizing this theory, held several beliefs about adult learners which, when leveraged, may have positive implications for adult education. The five basic beliefs are:

- Adult learners prefer to be self-directed
- Adults have life experiences which should be used to support learning
- Adult learners are naturally primed for learning about new topics and new situations
- Adults learners are interested in solving new problems
- Adult learners are intrinsically motivated to learn (Knowles & Associates, 1985).

Another contributor to adult learning theory, Mezirow (1997), described the learning process for adults as transformative. Mezirow's work contributed to the idea that adults learn when old experiences and ideas are challenged by new experiences. These experiences may create new meaning and understanding, through processes of critical reflection, especially with others, such as in a PLC.

Imel (2000) suggested that contextual learning theory has several main traits that relate to adult learning theory: (a) an emphasis on situation-based problem solving, (b) the promotion of self-regulated learning, (c) the use of personal experience and prior knowledge, and (d) collaborative learning. Effective PLCs are driven by teachers and are situation or problem-focused, they are, by design, supported by (and support) adult learning and contextual learning theories. Together, these theories help establish norms or guidelines for effectively engaging adult learners, including in PLCs.

Since effective PLCs are centered around “collective inquiry,” the adult learners’ needs to direct the learning process and focus on situation (or school/classroom) based problems will be met during the process. Thus, the research questions helped elicit more information about school administrators’ and teachers’ perceptions about PLCs as replacements for traditional PD, which does not tend to be supported by andragogy (see Attard, 2017).

Nature of the Study

A qualitative case study design was used to gather data and better understand the central phenomenon, which is administrators’ and teachers’ perceptions about PLCs as replacements for traditional forms of PD. Since administrators’ and teachers’ perceptions

were being explored through this study, semistructured interviews were conducted because they allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of participants' perspectives, individually and collectively (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Although the interview guide was mostly structured, with the same base questions asked of each participant, follow-up questions in response to participants' unique experiences and perspectives allowed me to collect data that represented a wider range of perspectives (see Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This research approach allowed for a more complete understanding of administrators' and teachers' perceptions of PLCs as replacements for traditional PD.

In this case study, I used the interview approach outlined by Ravitch and Carl (2016) to explore administrator and teacher perceptions of PLCs as replacements for traditional PD through semistructured, half-hour long interviews. An interview protocol was developed and used to help keep the interviewer and participant focused. The interview protocol also allowed me to organize interview questions ahead of time, which made the analysis of the data more efficient (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Interviews were recorded, then transcribed. Precoding memos were used to reflect on the entire interview process. Coding aids in the analysis of the data to identify themes, which supported the identification of convergent and divergent perspectives (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Further, archival data were analyzed for themes and additional information not revealed during the interview process.

A group of 8 participants, 4 school administrators and 4 teachers, were interviewed regarding their perceptions of PLCs as replacements for traditional PD.

Among the criteria of the study was that teachers who were interviewed could not work in the middle school because I supervised teachers in the middle school division. Participants were asked about their perceptions of effective PD and their feelings about PLCs as replacements for traditional PD. I used a semistructured interview methodology to allow for more in-depth information to be gathered with both focus and flexibility (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This qualitative research method provided a detailed examination of the perceptions of administrators and teachers regarding PLCS as replacements for traditional PD. The qualitative case study was the most appropriate design for this study because it allowed me to explore a specific phenomenon in a specific location (see Rowley, 2002), in this case, administrators' and teachers' perceptions of PLCs as replacements for traditional PD at a school in the Mid-Atlantic.

Definitions

Professional Development: Any experience related to one's work and improving one's practice (Mizell, 2010).

Professional Learning Community: A collaborative group of educators who work participate in ongoing, job-embedded shared learning and action research focused on improving student learning outcomes (DuFour, 2004).

Traditional Professional Development: A professional development experience that usually features one-way communication, or a central expert or presenter imparting knowledge on someone else (Attard, 2017).

Assumptions

Assumptions are the researcher's underlying thoughts or paradigms (Burkholder et al., 2016). This study was conducted with the following assumptions: (a) administrators and teachers will have perceptions regarding the replacement of traditional PD with collaborative learning through PLCs, and (b) administrators and teachers will be willing to share their perceptions and professional insights regarding ways that PLCs might improve instructional and learning outcomes and the resources needed to make the shift happen. These assumptions were made because they support the case study method and this study's methodology, including interviews, relies on these assumptions to be effective.

Scope and Delimitations

Administrators' and teachers' perceptions of PLCs as replacements for traditional PD were explored within this study using the interview methodology. This topic of study was selected to learn more about the little-known perceptions of administrators and teachers regarding the replacement of traditional PD with PLCs, and the resources or support needed to make the transition. PLCs have already been shown to positively influence student achievement (Ronfeldt et al., 2015). Though using PLCs as a means to facilitate shared learning is no longer a novel concept, there is little research on administrators' and teachers' perceptions about PLCs as replacements for traditional PD (Brown & Militello, 2016).

This case study was limited to one independent school in the Mid-Atlantic. The focus of the interview questions was to better understand how administrators and teachers

perceive the replacement of traditional PD with PLCs, and the transition from one model to the other. The results of this study are transferable to other educational institutions. After all, not only have PLCs been shown to be effective (Holmqvist, 2017), but traditional PD has been shown to be ineffective (Attard, 2017). This information could be used in a variety of educational settings where PD is used to facilitate training or learning for teachers and administrators. Further, data gathered during this study might be used to maximize teachers' learning opportunities offered by schools. This study could be easily replicated to apply to other types of schools, including public schools, later.

Limitations

This case study was carried out with full awareness of the following limitations. Interviews were conducted with administrators and teachers at only one school in one state. The study was limited to one independent school. All eligible participants were asked to contribute to this study, except middle school teachers, due to my positionality as a middle school administrator at the site at the time of the study. Interviews were conducted with 8 administrators and teachers. The administrators consisted of divisional and cross-divisional leaders - administrators who work directly with teachers in multiple divisions. The sample also included teachers from lower and upper divisions. The interviews around 30 minutes and were completed within a month. There were no budgetary considerations for this study.

Significance

This study is important to the education field because of the implications for positive social change for teachers and students. Attard (2017) asserted that, unlike PLCs,

traditional PD is “ineffective for teacher development and improvement of practice” (p. 40). Also, a study conducted by Park et al. (2019) showed that administrators’ support has a positive influence on PLCs, which positively influence student achievement. Therefore, by better understanding how administrators and teachers perceive PLCs as replacements for traditional PD, more was also learned about what they need to fully support these collaborative structures that have been shown to positively influence students. The findings of this study provided insight into school administrators’ and teachers’ perceptions about PLCs as replacements for traditional, more passive forms of PD, and might help inform the resources or education they might need to fully support, and provide structure for, effective PLCs that replace traditional PD within their schools.

Summary

The frameworks of Knowles (1985), Mezirow (1997), and Imel (2000) were used to guide qualitative case study research methods to explore administrators’ and teachers’ perceptions of PLCs as replacements for traditional PD. A better understanding of administrators' and teachers' perceptions of PLCs as replacements for traditional PD resulting from data from interviews may be used by teachers and administrators in diverse educational settings to make informed decisions about effective ways to improve schools. The implications for positive social change include increased use of PLCs to positively influence student achievement.

In Chapter 2, I will review and describe the literature which supported the need for this study. The literature review will include a review of the existing work of researchers who have already contributed to the existing body of knowledge about PLCs

in schools. The review will also provide historical and contemporary perspectives on the use of traditional PD and PLCs.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

While research provides evidence of the effectiveness of PLCs over traditional PD (Attard, 2017), the problem is little is known about administrators' perceptions about PLCs as replacements for traditional forms of PD (Brown & Militello, 2016). The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore school administrators' and teachers' perceptions about PLCs as replacements for traditional means of PD. This literature review is organized by themes. However, it is important to note, for the purpose of contextualizing the central phenomenon of this study, that literature currently shows that there are many benefits to facilitating PLCs in schools. Two main benefits are (a) PLCs are effective means of increasing student achievement in schools (Ronfeldt et al., 2015) and (b) PLCs have been shown to foster collaboration among teachers, leading to more sustained positive change in schools (Macias, 2017).

The rest of this chapter will contain a detailed literature review of the current research around topics presented in this study. Next, the search strategy will be described, including information about search engines and keywords that were used to narrow the search. Then, literature about the conceptual frameworks will be reviewed, followed by a review of the literature related to key concepts and the variable. Lastly, the summary will conclude the chapter and reiterate the main points found in the literature review.

Literature Search Strategy

This literature review was conducted using sources from several search engines and libraries. Google Scholar was accessed to find recent scholarly, peer-reviewed articles. Walden University library provided another platform for examining literature

related to this study. Search topics included the following: conceptual framework, professional learning community, action research, and traditional professional development. Keywords or search terms used to aid in my search are *professional learning community*, *collaborative learning*, *adult learning*, *action research*, *professional development*, and *traditional PD.*

The literature search process was an iterative one that included many trials and errors. The search process began with terms like *professional learning community* being used to locate resources in Google Scholar. However, I found that term to be, at times, too limiting. Instead, I began to use the search term *collaborative learning* as a means of broadening my search and yield more results. This process was effective when used while searching Walden's library database as well.

Conceptual Framework

This qualitative case study was conducted using two conceptual frameworks: adult learning theory and contextual learning theory. While adult learning theory was the dominant theory in this study, both theories helped provide insight into the reasons PLCs have been found to be effective at facilitating learning for adults. Knowles (1985), credited with popularizing adult learning theory, held five basic beliefs about adult learners which, when leveraged, may have positive implications for adult education.

Adult Learning Theory – Knowles and Mezirow

Knowles

Knowles theorized that adult learners' needs are vastly different from those of children (McGrath, 2009). Rather than using a pedagogical approach to engaging adults

in the learning process, Knowles asserted that that adults' experiences should be used in new learning situations (McGrath, 2009). This shift in paradigm is known as *andragogy*, or the science of adult learning (Zmeyov, 1998). Knowles propagated andragogy and supported its use with his 5 beliefs about adult learners. The first belief held by Knowles was that adult learners prefer to be self-directed. This means that, rather than having prescribed learning experiences, adult learners would prefer to contribute greatly to their learning (Knowles, 1985). Another belief was that adults have life experiences that should be used to support learning (Knowles, 1985). For example, adults' prior or existing knowledge, based on their own experiences, should be leveraged to facilitate new learning, and make new connections. This belief supports the idea that adult learners are active learners. Knowles (1985) asserted that adult learners are naturally primed for learning about new topics and new situations. This belief is directly related to Knowles' belief that adult learners are interested in solving new problems. Lastly, Knowles believed that adult learners are intrinsically motivated to learn (Knowles and Associates, 1985). Add summary and synthesis to balance out the use of information from the literature with

Knowles' (year) contributions to adult learning theory contrast greatly with *pedagogy,* which, although generally discussed when speaking about child learners, is used in an approach to adult learning as well (McGrath, 2009). Pedagogy, unlike andragogy, relies on the assumption that learners are dependent upon teachers to gain new knowledge (McGrath, 2009). Knowles' adult learning theory distinguished the

unique needs and characteristics of adult learners from those of children learners (Franco, 2019).

Mezirow

Knowles is not the only theorist to conduct research on adult learners. Another contributor to adult learning theory, Mezirow (1997) described the learning process for adult learners as transformative. Adults' view of the world is transformed when new experiences refine their understanding of past experiences (Taylor, 2000). Mezirow (2003) named adults' unique capability to be critically self-reflective as vital to adults' learning experiences. Mezirow's (1997) work contributed to the idea that adults learn when old experiences and ideas are challenged by new experiences, much like the action research cycle of PLCs. These experiences may create new meaning and understanding, through processes of critical reflection, especially with others, such as in a PLC. According to Mezirow, the adult learner's experience is the starting point of new learning (Taylor, 2000), and the teacher's role is to help adults become more self- reflective of those experiences and previously held beliefs (Mezirow, 2003). According to Mezirow (2003), these metacognitive processes, during which adult learners think about previously held dispositions and consider new perspectives, are critical to the transformative learning adults experience.

Contextual Learning Theory

In addition to adult learning theory, contextual learning theory serves as a conceptual framework for this study. Imel (2000) suggested that contextual learning theory has several main traits that relate to adult learning theory. The first trait is an

emphasis on situation-based problem solving (Imel, 2000). This refers to the process of solving problems related to one's current setting or situation. The second trait is the promotion of self-regulated learning or learning that is driven by the adult's own needs (Imel, 2000). Another trait is the use of adults' personal experience and prior knowledge in new learning situations (Imel, 2000). The final trait of contextual learning theory is collaborative learning or the facilitation of shared learning among a group of adults who share similar goals (Imel, 2000). Effective PLCs are driven by teachers and are situation or problem-focused, they are, by design, supported by (and support) adult learning and contextual learning theories. Together, these theories help establish norms or guidelines for effectively engaging adult learners, including in PLCs.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variable

Professional Learning Communities

A PLC is a means of professional development that may be used to improve teaching and learning, and lead to more positive outcomes for students (Carpenter, 2017). PLCs offer teachers the opportunity to examine their practice and the impact on student learning more closely. In a PLC, teachers may do this reflective work alongside others and work toward individual and shared goals that are aligned with the school's or district's vision (Ghedin & Aquario, 2020). According to Knowles' (1985) adult learning theory, teachers may benefit greatly from participation in PLCs because the learning is driven by the teachers themselves. PLCs may aid in improving teachers' practice and developing teacher leaders who work to improve schools.

The establishment of PLCs at schools is not enough to see positive results. Easton (2017) wrote about the significance of accountability measures needed to ensure trust in PLCs and yield positive results for teachers and students. Though accountability may look many ways, there are some critical components that should be present. One way to increase accountability is to establish goals and norms for the PLC prior to engaging in any work (Easton, 2017). Shared goals will help keep PLC participants focused on the work at hand, while norms (or agreements) will serve as guides to the way the work will carries out (Easton, 2017).

One of the critical areas of accountability is individual accountability (citation). Individuals must be able to show that they are making reasonable efforts to improve their practice and work toward the goals of the PLC. Another critical area of accountability is group accountability. PLCs should document their collective progress and share with the wider community. Doing this also helps build trust in PLCs (Easton, 2017). School leaders must also have a level of accountability to support PLCs by providing the resources needed to sustain them. School leaders should be responsible for monitoring the PLC's progress and effectiveness (Bouchamma & April 2020). School leaders should also provide any additional support, including financial support and/or creating a schedule that includes ample time for PLCs to meet (Easton, 2017). For example, a common planning time that is built into the schedule would allow teachers the opportunity to share information and engage in collaborative planning and reflection more easily (Alsarawi, 2019).

Ronfeldt et al. (2015) found that PLCs have been shown to have a positive influence on student achievement. Participants of effective PLCs focus on learning or improving the students' experiences. In addition to positive outcomes for students, PLCs have been shown to have positive outcomes for adults. Johnson et al. (2018) stated that the comradery fostered through PLCs has been found to decrease teacher isolation. A decreased sense of isolation can lead to greater job satisfaction and performance. Middlehurst et al. (2018) discussed a specific pedagogical approach to collaborative learning, *action learning*, which can be used to describe an effective PLC. Action learning can be used interchangeably with action research, which is a main tenet of PLCs. When teachers are engaged in effective action learning through their participation in PLCs, they are engaging in dialogue, sharing work with others, and contributing to a larger professional community (Parker et al., 2016). Smith et al. (2017) pointed out that PLCSs offer adults the opportunity to co-construct meaning and new learning, leading to a greater sense of community and individual and collective advancements in practice. Wolbers et al. (2017) discussed reflection and reflexiveness, or the ability to make change over time to current practice, as a main component of action learning. PLCs rely on these practices to be effective. As Whitworth and Chiu (2015) described it, the result of changes in attitudes and practice are part of what make PLCs effective at positively impacting student achievement. Add summary and synthesis throughout the paragraph to balance out the use of information from the literature with your own analysis.

Macias (2017) proposed that teacher-led PD, such as effective PLCs, might offer a platform for education reform, especially on the school level. However, there is a gap in

research “on bottom-up structures in educational settings” (Macias, 2017). These “bottom-up structures” Macias (2017) refers to are spurred by teachers themselves and focus on the issues they see in their classrooms. Doğan and Yurtseven (2018) indicated a shared sense of purpose and commitment to school improvement have been found to also be positive outcomes of PLCs. These outcomes help build community and positive school culture. Additionally, Macias (2017) recognized that PLCs provide the structure for collaboration and shared learning that is necessary in schools. Although there are many elements of PLCs and other effective PD, Lindvall and Ryve (2019) described “collective participation” as one of the essential elements of effective PD. Hardy (2016) indicated, like PLCs, effective PD is "job-embedded" and involves a community of practice, focused on action research, that can be used to solve problems within a community of learners. This job-embedded PD is especially effective at spurring positive change in schools when one of the most valuable resources – time - is properly allocated (Christiansen & Robey, 2015). PLCs, like other forms of effective PD, are typically longer-term and ongoing (Trust et al., 2016).

This is vastly different from traditional professional development more widely offered, which often involves a presenter from outside the organization presenting on topics that may or may not be related to teachers’ current needs. Holmqvist (2017) indicated effective PD is related to a teacher’s natural environment like that of ongoing PLCs. This type of learning, contextual learning, is particularly in line with how adults learn best. Mohan et al. (2017) found that effective PD is focused on improving teaching and learning in one’s current setting. In a study conducted by Mohan et al. (2017),

teachers reported that they feel most engaged in PD when they are working collaboratively to spur positive change in their schools. Though, there must be administrative or institutional support for PLCs to ensure they are effective and have a sustained positive effect on schools (Bahous et al., 2016). DuFour and Reeves (2015) added that school leaders' support is crucial to help maintain the focus for PLCs and help provide the structure needed for effective PLCs to be effective and beneficial for all teachers. Further, Steyn (2015) emphasized the school leader's role, as a person who initiates a shift in culture toward one of shared learning, is impactful and positively influences a PLC's success. Park et al. (2019) also described this shift in culture as one of shared instructional leadership, which includes a culture of feedback on a variety of self-identified areas including, but not limited to curriculum and instructional practices (Tam, 2015). Rather than professional development being top-down, all teachers should routinely participate in the process of improving instructional practices through collective problem-solving (Van Lare & Brazer, 2013), openly sharing successes and challenges (Herrelko, 2016). After all, a top-down approach, even to PLCs, could undermine the potential for sustainable teacher and student-growth (Schaap & de Bruijn, 2018).

There are many ways to describe PLCs. According to DuFour (2004), there are three "big ideas" that underpin PLCs: 1) a focus on student learning, 2) a culture of collaboration, and 3) a focus on results. A review of the literature about these three big ideas is below.

A focus on student learning. Effective PLCs are aimed at addressing issues that impact students. In order to address these issues, teachers must be willing to examine

their own practice, but with a focus on ensuring those practices positively influence student learning (Lee & Ip, 2021). To do this, participants must be willing to refine their practice based on new learning so that student outcomes are improved. In a study, Dogan et al. (2016) examined the impact of PLCs on teachers' knowledge and ability to meet students' needs. These researchers found that PLCs led to inquiry-based practices that improved student learning outcomes (Dogan et al., 2016). School leaders must also ensure that teachers have the time and space to allow teachers to focus on student learning. Teachers need time to collect and review data and plan for any necessary changes to positively influence student learning (Dogan et al., 2016).

A culture of collaboration. PLCs take teachers out of their confined classrooms and into a community of practice. PLCs only work when participants are willing to share, engage in critical reflection, and are open to feedback. In a collaborative culture, teachers regularly share student work artifacts, lesson plans, and other data (Lee & Ip, 2021). This allows teachers to learn from one another and hold each other accountable for implementing strategies and new learning acquired through the PLC (Pang & Wang, 2016). The collaborative nature of PLCs encourages the sharing and learning of diverse perspectives, widening teachers' range of responses to issues faced in the classroom. Further, as a result of collaborating in PLCs, teachers and administrators may be more equipped to make decisions and changes in curriculum that might better serve their students (Lee & Ip, 2021).

A focus on results. PLCs are different from traditional PD because they are drivers of accountability (Pang & Wang, 2016). Unlike one-and-done PD workshops,

participants of PLCs, ultimately, report to the group of people with whom they regularly engage in shared learning. The ongoing nature of PLCs is what supports the focus on results over time. While some PLCs may decide to meet for a specified period of time, others may choose to meet and continue the cycle of action learning until the desired results have been seen. This focus and dedication to results also build teachers' self-efficacy as they begin to see themselves are drivers of positive social change (Lee & Ip, 2021; Pang & Wang, 2016).

Traditional Professional Development (PD)

According to Attard (2017), traditional PD is a professional development experience that usually features one-way communication, or a central expert or presenter imparting knowledge on someone else. Traditional PD topics are usually selected by school-based or district-level administrators and delivered to groups of teachers at a time (Clark et al., 2018). Smithet al. (2017) pointed out that traditional PD, such as workshops are the most widely offered form of teacher PD; however, traditional PD is ineffective because it is often hierarchical, fragmented, and decontextualized. Traditional PD often fails teachers because it fails to be focused on teachers and their learning and is rarely sustained enough to have an impact on their practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Learning is a social process that involves communication with others and reflection, which traditional PD often lacks (Smith et al., 2017). Attard (2017) discussed how traditional PD fails to fully engage teaching professionals because it tends to lack personalization. Therefore, while teachers may learn new skills at a traditional PD workshop, there is little evidence that the newly learned skills are applied in the

classroom (Attard, 2017). Zide and Mokhele (2018) pointed to the lack of teacher input in the planning of traditional PD as the main reason that traditional PD does not affect sustainable positive change in classrooms. As a result, there is often little buy-in for the traditional PD to positively influence teaching and learning.

Carpenter (2016) found that, many times, traditional PD is irrelevant to teachers' lived experiences in the classroom. Therefore, teachers are often disengaged, deeming traditional PD to be of little value, and they take very little back to their classrooms for minimal positive change (if any) (Bayram & Canaran, 2018). To further explain why traditional PD is often ineffective, Korthagen (2017) discussed a more comprehensive and iterative approach to PD that includes theory and practice. Traditional PD focuses too much on theory, providing little to no time for teachers to practice (Korthagen, 2017).

Even more than a lack of time to practice is the commonality among most traditional PD opportunities of a lack of the necessary time for follow-up so that teachers have an opportunity to evaluate the new strategies based on practice, and make changes if needed (Wake & Mills, 2018). Bautista and Wong (2019) described a framework for high-quality PD, which may be used to describe why traditional PD is largely ineffective. For example, for PD to be effective and transformational, there must be ample time to learn and interact, and to process and try new things (Bautista & Wong, 2019). Traditional PD does not tend to offer the time and space to collaborate and engage in action learning.

A study conducted by Soodmand Afshar et al. (2017) found that although traditional, often "one-shot", PD opportunities were most widely used, they were the least

favorite among teachers. An article written by Vangrieken et al. (2017) provided an interesting take on PD, pointing out that traditional PD may be masked as PLCs. In these instances, as the authors describe, districts may dictate every aspect of the "PLC' including the focus area (often tied to district-wide initiatives), the length of time, and the members or PLC participants (Vangrieken et al., 2017). These situations describe ways that traditional PD may be passed off as a PLC. Whereas, in a true PLC, teachers and the students they teach are the primary stakeholders and drive the focus of the PLC (Vangrieken et al., 2017).

Summary and Conclusions

The literature review shows evidence that there have already been many studies conducted that have focused on PLCs and the effectiveness of them to spur positive change in schools. According to the literature, PLCs actively involve adults in the learning process and tend to result in more buy-in and more sustained change in schools (Lindvall and Ryve, 2019). Whereas, traditional PD usually involves topics selected by a school administrator or district-level administrator, without regard to teachers' individual needs (Korthagen, 2017 and Attard, 2017). A review of the literature on adult learning theory (Knowles, 1985 and Mezirow, 1997) and contextual learning theory (Imel, 2000) provided me with insight into why PLCs might be effective.

Effective PLCs are built on the main tenets of these theories, which is why they tend to be so engaging for adult learners. Further, effective PLCs are structured very much like a cyclical process involving adequate time for identification of shared needs and goals, research, implementation, and evaluation (Wolbers et al., 2017 and

Middlehurst et al., 2018). The next chapter will focus on the research method for this study and will provide information about the design, participant selection, and data collection and analysis. Then the trustworthiness of the study will be discussed, followed by ethical procedures that were used to help ensure the legitimacy and safety of this study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore school administrators' and teachers' perceptions about PLCs as replacements for traditional means of PD. Despite the promise that PLCs hold for professional learning and positive change within schools, they remain underutilized compared to traditional PD methods (Brown & Militello, 2016). Therefore, I aimed to understand how school administrators and teachers feel about using a PLC model to drive professional learning and school improvement over traditional PD. The study participants were administrators and teachers at a school in the Mid-Atlantic United States and the study employed the qualitative case study research design. Not only did this study provide a better understanding of how administrators and teachers perceive PLCs, but it also led to an increased understanding of supports and resources needed to facilitate PLCs.

The remainder of this chapter will present the research questions that guided this study and will include a discussion about the research design and the rationale for choosing this design for the study. The role of the researcher will be explained to include information about any relationships I might have had with participants, in addition to researcher biases that had to be managed throughout the process. This chapter will also provide information about the methodology, which includes the data collection process and selection of participants. Next, the trustworthiness of this study will be defended by evidence of its credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This section will be followed by a look at ethical procedures related to this study, which help ensure

the safety of participants and adherence to institutional review board (IRB) guidelines. Lastly, the summary will provide an overview of the chapter.

Research Design and Rationale

The predominant research question that guided this qualitative case study addressed the problem statement that little is known about administrators' and teachers' perceptions of PLCs as replacements for traditional PD. An additional research question written below not only supported the predominant research question, but also led to more learning about how administrators and teachers perceive a transition from traditional PD to PLCs, including support and resources need to facilitate them. The study included the research questions below, with RQ1 serving as the predominant research question and RQ2 as the supporting research question.

RQ1: What are administrators' and teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities as replacements for traditional professional development in a school in the Mid-Atlantic?

RQ2: How do teachers and administrators in a school in the Mid-Atlantic perceive a transition from traditional PD to PLCs?

The research questions were designed to provide specific data related to the central phenomenon of study - administrators' and teachers' perceptions of PLCs as replacements for traditional PD. The questions, which guided me in understanding this phenomenon, were aligned with a qualitative case study using interviews as the primary means of collecting data. This study was not conducive to quantitative research methods because I was seeking to better understand how administrators and teachers perceive

PLCs as replacements for traditional PD. A quantitative design would not have allowed me to pursue open-ended, in-depth inquiry like a qualitative design did (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Due to the nature of this study, I chose an exploratory case study that was conducted and analyzed using qualitative methods – one-on-one interviews and the review of archival data. An exploratory case study is one in which a researcher will delve into a topic to learn something about a relatively new phenomenon (Swedberg, 2018). Further, a case study allows the researcher to study a phenomenon within a particular locale, which offers additional convenience if the researcher has relatively easy access to that locale (Burkholder et al., 2016). Interviews will allowed me to gain valuable, in-depth information from participants that other methods might not have captured. By using this qualitative design, participants' in-depth input assisted with a better understanding of the problem. The interviews allowed me to converse directly with school administrators and teachers, people impacted by the phenomenon of study. Therefore, this approach suited a study built around the predominant question, "What are administrators' and teachers' perceptions of PLCs as replacements for traditional PD?'

There are several qualitative research designs I could have chosen for this study. For example, an *ethnography* requires an immersive experience which will allow the researcher to almost become a participant as well (Burkholder et al., 2016). I did not choose this research design because ethnography usually involves the study of a particular facet of a group's culture or behavior, and the participation of the researcher in that facet of the group's culture or behavior (see Hammersley, 2018). Since the

participants did not participate in PLCs at the time of this study, it would not have been appropriate to use an ethnographic study deign to learn more about the research problem. A *phenomenology* study is one in which the researcher seeks to derive common themes among a group (citation). The researcher conducts interviews with members of a group spread among a wider geographical location and looks for similarities among the shared experiences of members of that group (Burkholder et al., 2016). Though I could have chosen this research design, I chose not to because this method would have been more time-consuming and less feasible. *Grounded theory*, another type of qualitative research design, is specifically used to formulate theories (Burkholder et al., 2016). The research questions and the problem of the study did not indicate a need to formulate a new theory, only better understand a phenomenon. Though these research designs are very useful in learning more about many problems, none but the qualitative case study were the best fit for this study.

Role of the Researcher

My role as the researcher in this study was to conduct a trustworthy study with as little bias as possible through the facilitation of individual interviews and the examination of previous PD agendas. As a qualitative researcher, especially, I had to be constantly aware of how my own biases, background, culture, experiences, etc. could potentially influence my interaction with participants and interpretation of data (see Creswell, 2014). The influence of my biases could have negatively impacted the reliability of data. As an interviewer, I had to maintain neutrality and exhibit nonjudgmental behavior, so I do not influence participants during the interview process (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

I had to also keep in mind my role as an employee and supervisor at the case study site at the time of this study. Although I worked at the case study site as a middle school assistant principal, I used purposeful sampling to ensure that I did not supervise any of the potential participants of this study. By using purposeful sampling, I avoided unfair influence over participants as I provided no input in the evaluation of the potential participants, and usually had little contact, other than casual conversation, with the potential participants.

Methodology

This case study explored administrators' and teachers' perceptions of PLCs as replacements for traditional PD. The qualitative case study design was the most useful design for this study because it allowed me to gain open-ended and more in-depth information from participants. For this study, I used semistructured interviews to collect most of the data. Semistructured interviews allowed me to prepare a great deal for the interview by having an interview protocol containing a script and list of questions I planned to ask of each participant (see Appendix A and Appendix B). However, this interview structure also provided flexibility in terms of order of the questions and specific wording of the questions based on the flow of the conversation (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). During interviews, I record field notes to capture information I wished to review or use later in the data analysis process. The rest of this section provides details about participant selection, data collection and analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations of the study.

Participant Selection

The head of school provided permission for the case study to be conducted at the school. For this case study, the sample consisted of 8 teachers and administrators. Therefore, purposeful sampling was used to ensure that all the participants are divisional and cross-divisional administrators at this site. The participants were chosen based on their participation in, or roles in the planning of, professional development offerings at the school – particularly related to teaching and learning. Thus, these participants were selected based on their proximity to the phenomenon (see Creswell, 2014). For this study, teachers in the elementary and high school divisions and administrators were targeted as participants. They were contacted by email to provide information about the study as well as to ask for their participation. Purposeful sampling allowed me to ensure that participants were chosen who had a firsthand experience with the phenomenon to be studied (see Creswell, 2014). Further, purposeful sampling ensured that careful attention was given to guarantee that none of the participants were supervised by me.

Instrumentation

To explore administrators' and teachers' perceptions of PLCs as replacements for traditional PD, I conducted semistructured qualitative interviews and gathered archival PD data. Semistructured interviews were chosen because this type of interview offers flexibility. Semistructured interviews allowed for a more natural conversation between interviewer and participant, and I was able to ask certain follow-up questions, as needed, or rethink the order of questions during an interview (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Although planning and preparation was still a priority, I was able to be more responsive

to the participant using a semistructured interview, while not compromising the integrity of the study. To help facilitate the interviews, a researcher-produced protocol was used that includes a list of questions that were asked of administrators and teachers (see Appendix A and Appendix B). This list of open-ended questions, including possible follow-up questions, led to a clearer understanding of administrators' and teachers' perceptions of PLCs as replacements for traditional PD. Open-ended interview questions were the most appropriate form because they allow researchers to gain information about participants' attitudes or perceptions about a new phenomenon (Burkholder et al., 2016). Specific actions were taken to ensure the validity of the interview protocol, including the avoidance of biased or leading phrases, and the avoidance of the word 'and' in interview questions (Burkholder et al., 2016). Biased language refers to words or phrases that might evoke a response in a participant not intended by the interviewer (Burkholder et al., 2016). Leading phrases refer to words that indicate a possible opinion or value held by the researcher and might influence the participant's response (Burkholder et al., 2016). The word 'and' in an interview question could lead to confusing data being collected. For example, a question that asks a participant to provide a response to a question about 2 variables could lead to data that is difficult to discern (Burkholder et al., 2016). This is why all questions listed on the interview protocol are clear and concise and are directly related to the study's problem.

In addition to data collected from semistructured interviews, archival data were be used to collect information. Archival data is information that has already been recorded and stored (Burkholder et al., 2016). To better understand administrators' and teachers'

perceptions of PLCs as replacements for traditional PD, I also sought to gain a better understanding of the prior professional development experiences at the school. There are several questions Burkholder et a. (2016) suggested that a researcher considers before using archival data:

- Does the organization have the data?
- Are the data of good quality?
- Are the data relevant to my study?
- May I gain access to the data?

These questions guided the selection of archival data for use in this study. Previous years' PD agendas were collected and analyzed to better understand the types of PD that have already been offered at the school for 5 years prior to the start of the study. By collecting and using archival data in my study, I was able to answer questions without having to ask participants to recall this information during interviews (Burkholder et al., 2016). I reviewed the archival data during and after conducting interviews to help me gain more understanding of the PD priorities of the school. My analysis of these data did not influence the types of questions I asked participants. However, the PD agendas provided additional information that supported data that gathered during the interviews.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Qualitative research allows the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon through the use of more open-ended data collection methods such as observations and interviews (Creswell, 2014). This research study focused on exploring administrators' and teachers' perceptions of PLCs as replacements for traditional PD. The

participants included teachers and administrators at a school in the Mid-Atlantic at which I worked. For this case study, participants were recruited for the study based on their current roles within the school. Purposeful sampling was used to identify potential participants who were teachers and administrators that did not closely work with the researcher. Upon receiving approval from Walden University's IRB, I emailed prospective participants providing them with detailed information and requesting their participation. This email contained pertinent information such as background about the study and its purpose and requested that they provide informed consent to participate in the study, including being recorded during interviews. Participants were asked to respond via return email indicating whether they are willing to participate. Individuals who provided consent were selected as participants in the study. I provided my contact information so that participants may ask questions before providing consent. I also assured participants that their participation in the study will be kept confidential and their identities will be anonymous.

After receiving informed consent from participants, I provided interested participants with more information and disclosures about the study. I scheduled individual interviews with each participant via email. Interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the participants, for about one half-hour each. Prior to the scheduled interviews, I prepared a script and a list of interview questions to help stay organized during the interviews. Preparing a script also helped me keep data organized for the analysis process. Interviews were conducted using Zoom as a virtual platform. Each interview was recorded on Zoom and using my phone's voice recorder feature, with

participants' permission. I also took notes during the interviews. I notified participants that they would receive transcripts of their interviews and may schedule a follow-up call to debrief and review initial notes. Participants were encouraged to contact me if they had additional questions or concerns.

Data Analysis Plan

This study was conducted to explore administrators' and teachers' perceptions of PLCs as replacements for traditional PD. To better understand their perceptions, I utilized qualitative research methods such as interviews and the review of archival data. The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are administrators' perceptions of professional learning communities as replacements for traditional professional development in a school in the Mid-Atlantic?

RQ2: How do administrators in a school in the Mid-Atlantic perceive a transition from traditional PD to PLCs?

Participants were selected using purposeful sampling from one school. I selected 8 participants (teachers and administrators). Data were collected from individual interviews and archival data to answer research questions. Every effort was made to schedule interviews at a time that was convenient for the participants and to ensure participants felt safe and to share freely.

After data were collected via video and audio recording, and journaling, the data were analyzed to determine if themes emerged. The first step in understanding the data were to conduct a *preliminary exploratory analysis*, which involved perusing the data and jotting down relevant notes or observations (Creswell, 2014). Ravitch and Carl (2016)

described this as precoding and recommends the researcher writes a memo to note any initial thoughts or learnings from the data. Next, the data were coded so that larger bits of information could be broken down into smaller bits and more easily analyzed. Coding involves labeling data to aid in organization of data and make critical analysis more feasible (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Coding not only helps a researcher look for commonalities among data and interpret data, but it also allows the researcher to identify negligible information that might have been collected during the interview process (Creswell, 2014). All these steps aided in the determination of common themes or findings. It is important that, when analyzing data and identifying emerging themes, discrepant cases are not ignored (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The plan for inconsistent data were to reexamine and triangulate the data to see if the discrepancy could be resolved. Otherwise, the discrepancy would simply be noted.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of a study is crucial to the validity of the study. Ravitch and Carl (2016) asserted that the trustworthiness of a study is indicative of the study's rigor. There are four main indicators of trustworthiness. Trustworthiness of a study refers to its credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Amankwaa, 2016).

Credibility

Credibility is related to reliability and refers to the integrity of the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). For example, I had to take all measures to ensure that I provided disclosures to participants and did not deceive them in any way. This included the data collection and analysis process. I had to accurately represent participants' thoughts and

ideas as they intend for me to receive them. One way I promoted credibility of my study was by conducting member checks. Member checking is a technique that involves allowing participants to review the data to ensure their responses are accurately represented by the data record (Creswell, 2014). I emailed participants a copy of the transcription of their interviews to allow them to review and confirm or refute any data.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the idea that another researcher would be able to use my case study research design and apply it to a new site with a similar problem (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Therefore, I ensured that all elements of my study were in alignment and that the study is replicable. To achieve transferability, I used the provided evaluation tools such as the dissertation rubrics and checklists to align all elements of the study. This will provide a detailed roadmap for other researchers to follow should they choose to study a similar phenomenon.

Dependability

"Dependability refers to the stability of the data" (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 189). This means that measures are taken to ensure that the data is reliable. For example, data were collected from face-to-face interviews and archival records. These data were be checked against each other to ensure consistency. Further, discrepant data were analyzed to determine the degree of inconsistency within data.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the objectivity of data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Member checking was used to provide oversight of the data collection, recording, and analysis

process. I sent participants copies of the transcriptions of their interviews for their reviewing and editing purposes. Each participant was given a copy of the transcript to suggest any changes to the data or clear up any possible misinterpretations. This not only increases credibility, but it will also increase confirmability because participants confirmed I accurately captured their perceptions during the interview (Amankwaa, 2016). Also, since qualitative data methods require interpretation by the researcher, conducting member checking helped decrease bias, which is important for trustworthiness (Creswell, 2014). Another way to promote trustworthiness is through peer debriefing. Like member checking, peer debriefing involves allowing an external reviewer to evaluate the entire research process (Nowell et al., 2017).

Ethical Procedures

There are ethical considerations that must be considered when conducting a qualitative study. Ethical procedures help ensure the safety of participants and the integrity of the study. The IRB is responsible for reviewing and approving research proposals so researchers may move forward with a study in a way that in line with university and U.S. standards. These standards govern the entire process from recruitment or participants to the treatment of data post-study. Before conducting the study, I obtained IRB approval to move forward. Once I obtained IRB approval to conduct my study, I used measures to protect participants from the first recruitment efforts. All participants were required to provide informed consent to participate in this study. Informed consent involves knowing the details of the study, including its purpose (Creswell, 2014). To be able to do this, participants were fully made aware of the intent

of the researcher and were informed that consent may be withdrawn at any time. No participants chose to withdraw participation; however, if they did, I would have ceased their participation immediately and would have destroyed all data related to the participant. I did not attempt to coerce participants to participate in the study. Additionally, since this is a case study, all efforts were made to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the educational setting to minimize risk to the participant (Burkholder et al., 2016). I assigned letters and numbers to participants to protect their identities and refrained from using the school's name in the study to further protect the identities of all participants (Creswell, 2014). Data were stored on a USB flash drive that will be kept in a locked drawer in my home. The flash drive will be destroyed 5 years after the completion of the study.

Summary

The problem being addressed by this study is there is little known about administrators' and teachers' perceptions of PLCs as replacements for traditional PD. A qualitative study is in alignment with the problem because qualitative research is based on inquiry and allows a researcher to better understand how people see the world (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The methodology detailed above provides insight into the way this study was carried out. The use of a case study as the research design and semistructured interviews as the primary data collection instrument were intentional means of gaining a more in-depth understanding of administrators' and teachers' perceptions of PLCs as replacements for traditional PD. Participants of this study were carefully selected to ensure they possess a wealth of knowledge about the phenomenon.

Careful consideration was also given to prevent any conflicts of interest and other ethical issues. Qualitative researchers, like quantitative researchers, should be rigorous and maintain high levels of integrity to ensure trustworthiness of the study. Therefore, strategies like peer debriefing and member checking promote trustworthiness of this study.

The next chapter will include the results of this study. First, the setting of the qualitative case study will be described. Then, details about the data collection and results will be discussed. Next, evidence of trustworthiness will be presented. A summary of the chapter will end the chapter.

Chapter 4: Results

The research problem was that little is known about administrators' and teachers' perceptions about PLCs as replacements for traditional forms of PD (Brown & Militello, 2016). Traditional PD tends to involve passive learning and does not require much collaboration with colleagues; therefore, new learning is not often shared, and opportunities for collective positive change in schools is missed (Mohan et al. 2017). On the other hand, PLCs involve collective efforts to learn more about and improve outcomes around particular issues within schools (Brown et al., 2018). Although there is an abundance of research that supports the implementation of PLCs as an effective strategy to positively influence student achievement (Ronfeldt et al., 2015), there still is a lack of evidence of PLCs being widely used for that purpose (Brown & Militello, 2016).

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore school administrators' and teachers' perceptions about PLCs as replacements for traditional means of PD. This study led to the discovery of administrators' and teachers' attitudes about PD, including school structures that support or pose challenges for PD like PLCs. It was important to understand administrators' and teachers' perceptions because while teachers are the ones who work most closely with students, administrators are the ones who, ultimately, provide the support for these structures (Bahous et al., 2016). Research was needed to learn more about why administrators and teachers might prefer or choose to support PLCs over traditional PD (or vice versa). The information gained from this study might lead to positive organizational change within schools.

The predominant research question that guided this qualitative case study addressed the problem statement that little is known about administrators' and teachers' perceptions of PLCs as replacements for traditional PD. An additional research question was written to not only support the predominant research question, but also to learn more about how administrators and teachers would perceive a transition from traditional PD to PLCs, including support and resources need to facilitate them. The study included the research questions below, with RQ1 serving as the predominant research question and RQ2 as the supporting research question.

RQ1: What are administrators' and teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities as replacements for traditional professional development in a school in the Mid-Atlantic?

RQ2: How do teachers and administrators in a school in the Mid-Atlantic perceive a transition from traditional PD to PLCs?

An exploratory case study was the qualitative design chosen to conduct this study. A case study allows the researcher to study a phenomenon within a particular locale, which offers additional convenience if the researcher has relatively easy access to that locale (Burkholder et al., 2016). An *exploratory* case study is one in which a researcher will delve into a topic to learn about a relatively new phenomenon (Swedberg, 2018). One-on-one virtual interviews and the review of archival data were used to gather information about perceptions of PLCs as replacements for traditional PD. The interviews allowed me to gain valuable, in-depth information from participants that other methods, like surveys, might not have adequately captured. By using the exploratory case study

design, participants' in-depth input was captured and provided a better understanding of the problem. The interviews allowed me to converse directly with school administrators and teachers, people impacted by the phenomenon of study.

In the rest of Chapter 4, there will be a comprehensive discussion of the findings of this qualitative case study. The chapter will explain the setting, data collection and analysis methods, results, and evidence of this study's trustworthiness. This chapter will also provide include information about factors that impacted the study, including the fact that interviews had to be conducted virtually due to the global pandemic and participants were under a greater deal of stress during that time.

Setting

The study was conducted in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States of America. This region is significant because it includes diverse geographic areas, including urban, suburban, and rural locations – all near one another. This geographic diversity also as lends itself to the diverse educational options available in this region including individual or large homeschool co-ops, public neighborhood schools, public charter schools, and a number of independent and private schools. The site selected for this study is a private school in an urban city that serves over 800 children in grades PreK-12. The school has a lower division that serves students in Grades PreK through 5; a middle division that serves students in Grades 6 through 8; and an upper division that serves students in Grades 9 through 12. The school offers several types of professional development. Some of the professional development is offered cross-divisionally, while other opportunities are offered within divisions. At the time of the study, there were no

PLC structures in place. Therefore, this study was necessary to better understand administrators' and teachers' perceptions of PLCs as replacements for traditional forms of PD at this site, and other similar sites.

Initially, it was planned to gather data during in-person face-to-face interviews. However, at the time of this study, the COVID-19 global pandemic forced changes to the original data collection method, and the site was closed, with all teachers and administrators being sent home to work. The participants in this study, like many others around the world, were impacted by the COVID-19 global pandemic. Increased levels of anxiety and uncertainty related to personal and professional matters likely impacted participants' participation in this study. At least one participant acknowledged their increased stress level during the interview, which had to be done via the web platform, Zoom, since all participants were working from home to help slow the spread of the virus. There was also one teacher participant who, originally, had agreed to be interviewed. However, after the school was shut down, the participant declined to participate.

There were four administrators and four teachers who agreed to participate in the study. The administrators included one principal, one assistant principal, and two other school-wide administrators. The teachers included two lower (elementary school) teachers and two high school teachers. No middle school teachers could participate due to my administrative role. Each participant was assigned a unique identifier to protect their identities. These unique identifiers ranged from TA -TD for teacher participants and AA-AD for administrator participants, and they are referenced in this study and saved

records. During the data transcription and analysis process, any identifying information was removed to ensure confidentiality and protect participants' privacy. Table 1 shows the role, division, and years of experience for each participant.

Table 1

Participant Profile

Participant	Role	Division	5-10 years in education	11+ years in education
TA	Teacher	Upper		X
TB	Teacher	Lower	X	
TC	Teacher	Lower		X
TD	Teacher	Upper	X	
AA	Administrator	N/A		X
AB	Administrator	N/A	X	
AC	Administrator	Upper		X
AD	Administrator	Lower		X

All participant interviews were conducted via Zoom, a web-based video and audio-conferencing platform. Zoom provides security features which helped to ensure confidentiality and participants' privacy. Participants were sent a unique link to access the Zoom meeting, along with a unique password to gain entry to the meeting. Although audio may be recorded with or without video, all participants chose to keep their video on to proceed with a virtual face-to-face interview. Therefore, audio and video were captured of all interviews.

Data Collection

To better understand the research problem of this qualitative case study, 2 data sources were used in this qualitative case study. The primary source of data were open-ended, semistructured virtual face-to-face interviews. Individual interviews were conducted with four school administrators and four classroom teachers. Each one-time

interview lasted about 30 minutes. Some interviews lasted longer, while others were slightly shorter, depending on the length of time a participant spoke when answering a question. Interviews were scheduled on days and at times convenient for the participant. The second data source were the records of professional development offerings for years 2015-2020. This information was provided by a school administrator and reviewed by me.

Interviews were the primary source of data for learning more about participants' perceptions about PLCs as replacements for traditional PD, in addition to their perceptions about a transition from traditional PD to PLCs (see Creswell, 2014). Two interview protocols, one for administrators and one for teachers, were developed and used to guide the interviews, ensuring consistency in the questions asked and the type of information gathered. The protocol included an introduction to the study, interview norms, and interview questions. Participants were also reminded of their right to opt out at any time.

Virtual Interviews

Interviews are a trustworthy qualitative data collection method for gathering data about a research problem and for promoting researcher reflexivity during the data collection process (Brown & Danaher, 2019). The conceptual framework and nature of this study informed the development of the interview protocols used during the virtual interviews. Due to the potential ambiguity of the topics of PD and PLCs, the questions were designed to learn more about specific perceptions about these topics. The interview

protocols supported remaining focused on the research problem and consistently gathering information to help answer the research questions.

Virtual interviews were scheduled to last about 30 minutes via Zoom. The actual length of each interview depended on the length of time participants took to respond to interview questions. Actual interview lengths ranged from 19 minutes and 27 seconds to 48 minutes and 46 seconds. Probing questions, as listed on the interview protocol, were asked to gain clarity around a response or to elicit a more detailed response from a participant. Zoom was chosen as the virtual platform to host the interviews because it allows video and audio-only options. However, all participants chose to be interviewed showing video in addition to audio. All interviews were recorded and saved in the cloud to my password-protected account. The video recordings were captured as well as audio-only files. The audio was also captured separately using a voice recorder app on a mobile device. All files were stored in the cloud, on my computer's hard drive, and to a universal serial bus (USB). This was done to ensure that data would not be lost and may be retrieved. Recording each interview allowed me to fully focus on building rapport with participants and take less detailed notes during the interview process. Interviews were transcribed using a voice-to-text feature within Google docs. Rather than solely relying on this feature, I listened to each interview as it was being transcribed to ensure accuracy and make any necessary corrections.

A total of 61 pages of transcripts were generated from the recorded interviews. The interview transcripts were saved on a USB, my computer hard drive, and a cloud-based, password-protected account. Interview notes were recorded and stored in the

margins of the saved versions of the transcriptions. Table 2 shows the number of pages of transcripts recorded from each interview. Table 2 also displays the date, time, and duration of each interview. Each transcript was organized and reviewed, by question, to identify data that supported the creation of codes and the formation of categories and themes.

Table 2

Virtual Interviews of Study Participants

Participant	Date and Time of Interview	Duration (min:sec)	Number of Pages of Transcripts
TA	June 7, 2020	35:58	9
TB	June 9, 2020	48:46	10
TC	June 6, 2020	33:31	9
TD	June 14, 2020	20:39	6
AA	June 9, 2020	37:43	8
AB	June 13, 2020	19:27	6
AC	June 10, 2020	23:28	6
AD	November 24, 2020	35:48	7

Past PD Agendas

PD agendas from 2015-2020 were collected and analyzed. The agendas provided information about the type of PD that had been offered at the school for 5 years prior to the start of this study. The agendas contained lists of PD offerings for specific PD days once per month throughout the school year. School administrators and teachers were provided with these lists ahead of the PD days to decide which PD sessions to attend.

The PD agenda data were analyzed to determine whether the information supported the data collected during the virtual interviews. The data also served as background information that was used to help paint a more complete picture of the case

study site. This background information included the school's apparent PD priorities and the PD formats typically offered.

Data Analysis

I began a thematic analysis of the data after all the interviews had been conducted. First, to transcribe the data, I opened a new document in Google Docs. I selected the 'voice typing feature' and played the recording of the interview near the microphone of my computer so that the program would capture the audio and convert the speech to text. As each interview was being transcribed, I listened carefully while reading to ensure that no errors were being made, and corrected transcription errors immediately. After each transcription was completed, I listened to the entire interview again while reading along to the transcription. This allowed me to familiarize myself with the data, an important first step in thematic analysis (see Nowell et al., 2017).

After having read through each through each transcription at least two times, I began to organize the data to make it easier to code. I created a chart for each of my interview questions and inserted the participants' responses in the chart. Table 3 shows a category-based analysis (Kuckartz, 2019) similar to the charts I created. The only difference is I created a chart for each question, rather than one chart containing all questions and all responses. This change was done mainly due to lack of space.

Table 3

Category-based Analysis

Participant	Topic A	Topic B	Topic C	Summary/Notes
TA				
TB				
TC				
TD				
AA				
AB				
AC				
AD				

I used a systemic approach to coding using the charts I created for each interview question. The codes, or short words or phrases, summarized the data (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019) and represented key ideas that were present within each response. There are two main types of coding from which qualitative researchers often choose – *inductive* and *deductive*. Inductive coding involves deriving codes directly from the data; while deductive coding involves using the data to support codes already predetermined (Nowell et al., 2017). For this exploratory case study, I chose to use inductive coding.

After assigning codes to the data, I reread the codes, this time, making note of codes that were similar or seemed to fit together to form a category. I used color coding to aid in this process. For example, the first time I assigned a unique code to data, I used a unique color to highlight that code. Each time that same code or related code appeared in subsequent text, I used the same color to highlight the code. This process allowed me to form categories and make note of nuances and discrepant data (see Creswell, 2014). Notes about the codes and categories were added in the margins of the Google Doc and linked directly to the codes and categories. Finally, I transformed the categories into

themes to expound upon the meaning of the data (see Saldaña, 2015). In addition to interview data, archival data were collected to examine professional development offering at the school from 2015–2020. This professional development topics and agendas provided insight into some of the ways the school supported the teachers' professional growth and practice.

For the thematic analysis of the data gathered during this study, *open* and *axial* coding techniques were used. According to Williams and Moser (2019), open coding is a first level of coding used to describe raw data. A second level of coding, axial coding, involves categorizing codes that represent similar ideas (Williams & Moser, 2019). There were six phases in the thematic analysis process: Phase 1: *Familiarizing Myself with the Data,* Phase 2: *Generating Initial Codes,* Phase 3: *Searching for Themes,* Phase 4: *Reviewing Themes,* Phase 5: *Defining and Naming Themes,* and Phase 6: *Producing the Report* (Nowell et al., 2017). More details about the phases of thematic analysis are below.

Phase 1: Familiarizing Myself with the Data

The first phase in thematic data analysis is to become immersed in the data (Nowell et al., 2017). During this phase, field notes recorded during the interviews were reviewed. Interview audio and transcripts were also reviewed twice to ensure accuracy and to begin to reflect on the data and patterns that began to emerge (Nowell et al., 2017). Although no codes were written during this phase, I organized the data to prepare for the coding process. Charts were created, one for each interview question, to prepare for category-based analysis and begin to look for patterns among participants' responses to

each interview question (see Kuckartz, 2019). Professional development data were organized and reviewed. While reviewing the organized data, I wrote reflexive notes and comments to describe my thoughts, feelings, or questions about the data.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

The generation of initial codes was performed using a manual open and in vivo coding process. Open coding consists of organizing raw data by identifying concepts and data to support the concepts (Williams & Moser, 2019). In other words, open coding is the first step in making sense of the data by chunking ideas based on the data and assigning a code that "characterizes" the data (Williams & Moser, 2019). During this phase, participants' responses were carefully and thoroughly reviewed within the charts created. Concepts that emerged within the data were highlighted and assigned open codes or in vivo codes, codes pulled verbatim from the data (Saldaña, 2015). During this process, reflexive notes were written to capture thoughts about the data, emerging themes, and patterns. The codes derived during this phase helped make sense of the raw data. Open and in vivo coding methods were combined to label chunks of data that consisted of repeated words or central ideas. After the open coding process was complete, axial coding was used to combine the initial codes into categories. This was also done by color-coding as similar codes, and the supporting data, were highlighted using the same color, making it easier to group codes into categories.

Phase 3: Searching for themes

For this study, an inductive thematic analysis approach was used including open coding and axial coding (Nowell et al., 2017). The initial codes were derived from the

raw data. Axial codes were identified as groupings or categories of the initial codes. From there, the axial codes were further analyzed for patterns and ideas related to the research questions and temporary themes were written as they emerged. Categories with the most codes emerged as the temporary themes. Williams and Moser (2019) described themes as a "higher level of abstraction" (p. 52). The temporary themes identified during this phase were directly connected to the data and captured broad ideas expressed by participants (Nowell et al., 2017).

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes

The selection of themes allows a researcher to express "categories of organized data…as story-filled expressions" (Williams & Moser, 2019). During this phrase, I reviewed the themes and the data and the stories they told. In this phase a matrix was developed to show each emergent theme, supporting data, and a short interpretive summary (Saldaña, 2015). I reviewed the themes to ensure there was enough data to support the story. Themes without sufficient data were further refined (Creswell, 2014).

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

This phase included finalizing the themes and determining how each theme told a part of the story of this study and related to the research questions (Nowell et al., 2017). During this phase, it was also necessary to determine whether each presented theme was sufficiently connected to the data and how. This was done by creating concept maps for each theme to show the relationships among the themes and the axial and open codes. The themes, categories, and codes were reviewed for alignment and to ensure that no further refinement was necessary (Williams & Moser, 2019).

Phase 6: Producing the Report

After the themes were finalized, the entire analysis and final report was written in a clear and accessible way. The themes and supporting data, including direct quotes or passages, were expressed to show the findings about the topic of study. To establish credibility, all relevant results were discussed in the final report and member checking was done to ensure consistency among participants' views and my interpretations (Nowell et al., 2017). Table 4 shows an overview of the themes, categories, and codes derived from the data.

Table 4

Overview of Codes, Categories, and Themes

Codes	Categories	Themes
RQ1: What are administrators' and teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities as replacements for traditional professional development in a school in the Mid-Atlantic?		
• cohort • come together • breakout groups • bonding	• Cohort-based • Groups of People • Relationship-driven	1. Relationships and collaboration create sense of community.
• grounded in research • benefit • useable • needed	• Related to Practice • Applicable and Transferable • Shared Focus	2. Shared local and immediate issues or interests influence buy-in.
• enduring quality • participatory • reoccurring •	• Reflective • Over Time • Not One-and-Done	3. Ongoing, focused work leads to sustainable change.
• challenging • thinking deeply • reconnect • journaling • cyclical practice • action-oriented	• Reflective Practice • Iteration • Action Research • Changes Practice • Novelty	4. Cycles of feedback and reflection improve practice.
RQ2: How do teachers and administrators in a school in the Mid-Atlantic perceive a transition from traditional PD to PLCs?		
• not an add-on • dedicated space • physical space • dates	• Time • Setting • Frequency	5. Logistical planning eases tensions.
• recognition • willing participants • support • training • access to data • money	• Growth Mindset • Collaborative Mindset • Positive Mindset • Support	6. Shift in mindset is needed for buy-in.

Results

The results of this study are based on the thematic analysis of the data collected from interviews of school administrators and teachers. Participants were asked questions related to PD and PLCs to learn more about administrators' and teachers' perceptions of

PLCs as replacements for traditional PD. The thematic analysis of the data collected was performed using open and axial coding methods. No cases were discrepant in this study.

Teachers engage in various forms of professional development to improve their professional practice and outcomes for their students. PLCs serve as one model for PD and have been shown to positively influence change within schools (Brown & Militello, 2016). This study aimed to lead to an understanding of why, despite PLCs' positive influence on schools, they remain underutilized (Brown & Militello, 2016). The selected site for this exploratory case study was chosen because of the researcher's proximity to participants. The research conducted in this study led to insight into the PD preferences of administrators and teachers, in addition to supports needed to sustain effective PD models such as PLCs. The following research guided this study and were answered as a result of the thematic analysis of the data.

RQ1: What are administrators' and teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities as a replacement for traditional professional development in a school in the Mid-Atlantic?

RQ2: How do teachers and administrators in a school in the Mid-Atlantic perceive a transition from traditional PD to PLCs?

Four divisional (lower and upper) and cross-divisional (school-wide) administrators and four lower and upper teachers were interviewed using a semistructured interview protocol. The semistructured interviews allowed for the instrument to collect similar data, while leaving space for flexibility (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Administrators' and teachers' responses were recorded using video and audio. The

data were transcribed using the 'voice typing' feature in Google Docs. The transcription data were organized by research question to prepare for category-based analysis (Kuckartz, 2019). I analyzed participants' responses by question, looking for patterns. I assigned a code, or descriptive label, to these patterns of words or phrases. Then, I looked for patterns among the codes to assign categories. Next, I analyzed the categories for emergent themes that were directly related to the research questions. Lastly, the data were revisited to ensure alignment among the themes, categories, and codes.

Research Question 1: What are administrators' and teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities as replacements for traditional professional development in a school in the Mid-Atlantic?

To answer this question, I asked interview questions that would help me understand several layers to a potential response. For example, the interviews began with questions about participants' thoughts of effective and ineffective PD. In their responses, participants began to, essentially, describe PLCs as effective PD. It is important to note that participants' descriptions of effective PD were provided prior to the definition of PLCs was given. While the participants did not explicitly name PLCs as effective PD, several did make references to at least one of the elements of PLCS: 1) a focus on student learning, 2) a culture of collaboration, and 3) a focus on results (DuFour, 2004). For example, TA described effective PD as an experience in the following way:

> *…[It] makes me think more critically about my practice. And I think all of that, that it's research-driven, it's directly applicable, it's provocative. Another, how can I*

say this, it's relationship-driven, that it's building some kind of relationship that will be available, accessible, and sustainable over time.

Other participants also identified elements of PLCs when describing effective PD. Participant TC went on to describe a previous effective PD experience as learning about "something I needed to improve." Here, Participant TC noted that effective PD was related to a local issue that needed change. Another participant made references to local and immediate issues connected to effective PD experiences. Participant TD described effective PD as an opportunity "[to work] with my peers to actually internalize information or think about what we were learning." Participant TD went on,

And, so, it's like a cyclical practice, rather than just a one-time meeting. I've found that helps me hold myself accountable and actually think about the implementation process, rather than just writing a bunch of notes.

I found it interesting that before even being asked a question directly related to the primary research question, participants were already answering it and describing the way they felt about PD as it was and PD as they wished for it to be. All participants, even prior to being directly asked, indicated, to varying degrees, they preferred PLCs to traditional PD.

Well, I'm pretty intrigued right now with using action research as a professional development tool, so I'll try to describe that. I would not say that I have mastered that. One of the things I like about using action research as a professional development tool is that I believe that good teachers do this naturally. They don't call it action research. They're not necessarily saying to themselves as they drive

> *home from work, and they're thinking "Boy, that 6th grade math lesson could've gone better" or while frying up some cabbage thinking, "Tomorrow, I really need to capture this because there are some misconceptions. I could tell that my students had a misconception about something." But I think that, in fact, is in a nutshell action research. And I think to help teachers see that they do that naturally, that they do reflect on their own experiences with students and away from students, and they're constantly sort of refining and iterating in their heads, even if they're not formalizing the steps of that, I think is really important* (Participant AA).

In the previous excerpt, Participant AA acknowledged that while "good teachers" naturally engage in action research, it is often not done systematically or collaboratively, as is the case with formally established PLCs (Parker, Patton, & O'Sullivan, 2016). The pattern of preferring PLCs over traditional PD continued to emerge for administrators and teachers, and was especially clear when participants were directly asked how they would feel about implementing PLCs as PD rather than traditional PD. Participant TB thoroughly expressed excitement about the idea:

> *I also really do enjoy the meeting in small groups, consistent small groups where we can truly collaborate, where I feel like my voice is heard, and where I feel like we are all taking ownership over the work we're doing, and we're moving forward. I think at a larger workshop where, again, it's kind of facilitated by someone else, not that there isn't a place for that, but I think that ultimately, the reason why PLCs are so effective is because of the smaller group which means that there are more classes and time. It means there are more voices heard. It means people who are*

> *investing the time also get to dictate the direction in which it goes in. And I think that's very meaningful. And also, the action-oriented piece means that the people who are investing the time are also the people who are holding each other accountable. And because those goals or those action steps that you develop yourself, you obviously developed as a group, so you are more likely to follow through with them and invest in them because you helped develop them.*

During the interviews, some participants' perceptions were aligned with the current body of research about professional development. They expressed disappointment with traditional PD leaving little room or expectation for implementation or application of new learning (Korthagen, 2017). Participants, therefore, described excited about the positive implications of PLCs as replacements for traditional PD.

> *Yeah, I think it would be really transformative for our school community. I, personally, would be really excited. I think I always want to get better at my craft. And I think It's easier to do that in collaboration with your peers. And I think that's one of the only ways we can actually make larger systems-wide change that's not just in our individual classrooms. I think we get some pretty amazing speakers but then we're not able to ever implement what they recommend* (Participant TD).

The support for PLCs as replacements for traditional PD was consistent among administrators and teachers. Participants AA, AB, AC, and AD – all school administrators – expressed favor of PLCs over traditional PD. Participant AB named "increased collaboration, increased openness to feedback, increased creativity, much more focus on teaching and learning as a craft at this school" as ways such a change

would impact the school. Another administrator, Participant AD, expressed support for PLCs:

> *I would look at that in a very positive way. I feel like any time you can get a professional learning group together to share ideas, you're going to get more by… it's kind of like Dewey, right? Learning by doing. If you're action-oriented and you're working with a like-minded group, you're going to gain so much more than you are in sitting in a space and having an outside lecturer come in and talk with you.*

The data gathered from participants around this RQ revealed several themes. The themes emerged after careful thematic analysis of the data referenced above and other data. Four themes provided broad, high-level summaries of participants responses as related to the RQ1:

Theme 1: Relationships and collaboration create sense of community.

Theme 2: Shared local and immediate issues or interests influence buy-in.

Theme 3: Ongoing, focused work leads to sustainable change.

Theme 4: Cycles of feedback and reflection improve practice.

Table 5 displays RQ1, themes, axial codes, and sample excerpts.

Table 5

RQ1 Themes, Axial Codes, and Sample Excerpts

RQ1: What are administrators' and teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities as a replacement for traditional professional development in a school in the Mid-Atlantic?

Theme	Axial Codes	Sample Excerpts
1. Relationships and collaboration create sense of community.	• Cohort-based • Groups of People • Relationship-driven	*One that is small, cohort-based allows for relationships to develop. Deep sharing and discussion with others about the concepts learned* (Participant AB). *I would say the most effective experience that I've had have been really collaborative* (Participant TD).
2. Shared local and immediate issues or interests influence buy-in.	• Related to Practice • Applicable and Transferable • Shared Focus	*Second, that it is directly applicable in my classroom. So, I'm picking from that learning experience something that I can use tomorrow, next week, next month with my students that will have an impact on my practice* (Participant TA). *…working with a like-minded group, you're going to gain so much more than you are in sitting in a space and having an outside lecturer come in and talk with you* (Participant AD).
3. Ongoing, focused work leads to sustainable change.	• Reflective • Over Time • Not One-and-Done	*The fact that it was a consecutive seven- day experience meant that… we're given time to reflect* (Participant TB). *the most powerful have been spacious... over the course of several days sometimes* (Participant AC).
4. Cycles of feedback and reflection improve practice.	• Reflective Practice • Iteration • Action Research • Changes Practice • Novelty	*reflect on their own experiences… and they're constantly sort of refining and iterating…* (Participant AA). *action research and so there is a clear purpose and direction for the work* (Participant AA).

Research Question 2: How do teachers and administrators in a school in the Mid-Atlantic perceive a transition from traditional PD to PLCs?

Just like the first research question, the second, and subordinate, research question was answered through participants' responses to more than one interview question. In my reflexive notes, I noted that while all participants supported PLCs as replacements for traditional PD and indicated school structures that would support the transition,

participants also expressed concerns about barriers to full PLC implementation that would need to be removed or altered. One of the barriers that was mentioned several times was mindset. Rather than viewing PLCs as an integrated part of one's practice, participants acknowledged that people would likely view PLCs as another burden on top of an already heavy load. Participant TA stated,

> *...make sure that the PLC participation is not just an add-on to an already overfull academic life, that it's seen in balance with all the other things that school requires of me as a professional. So, helping to sustain a balanced approach to teachers' time I think would encourage more participation.*

Another participant, TC, agreed that people's mindsets and a lack of commitment might be a barrier to PLCs as replacements for traditional PD.

> *So, knowing that, people who don't get on board from the beginning to a PLC, they're going to say, "Oh, it's different. Oh, here we go." I just...I feel like sometimes the negative attitudes...there's going to be pushback because it's something new. It's something different. "That's not how we did it before." Or, "Oh. It's something new just like...and I can name...and I've only been there for two years...this, this, this, and this. They start real strong and they kind of...there's no follow through. So that's...I think getting everyone on board and seeing the benefit.*

Participant TB also stated,

> *I think a lot of people are just kind of used to, "Oh yeah, this group is meeting," and they hang out. And they're like, "Oh, I can leave early." Or, like, "Oh, I can't make it." Or, like nothing gets done. That's about it.*

An administrator acknowledged that a "base challenge" is administrator support. During the interview, this participant described ways that administrator support should look, including the types of resources administrators should allocate to make PLC implementation possible.

> *I actually think the base challenge is the people. Just people being open and willing to try a different structure to foster learning. And by people, I mean division administrators primarily in this case for this topic. Because again, we could rethink resources we do have, especially time. So, it's more of an open… having an open mind growth mindset around this. And coming to consensus around it. I think that would be the biggest* (Participant AA).

Participant TD spoke about a mindset around a fear of change as a barrier to full-on PLC implementation. Participant TD stated,

> *I think a big one would be, like I spoke to earlier, that fear of change. I think that a lot of people...I could see some people thinking that it was going to be more work. And I think they are more work than traditional PD, but they are way better. And so, I would definitely hear some people complaining about that*.

Participant AC also described that ways fear might thwart a transition from traditional PD to PLCs,

I think, you know, neutralizing or mitigating some of those voices of people who, you know, would be the snipers and try to take it down before it even got a chance to...There's just people on every faculty who see anything new as a threat and a change as a threat. And I think it comes out of that anxiety. "Well, is this going to cause more stress or reduce my time. Or is this going to take more out of me away from my students?" All those natural anxieties start to emerge and they manifest in negativity. You get a few of those powerful voices and they can really start to steer public opinion, if you will. I think that...making a clear and compelling case for its value would be really important. And maybe it's the kind of thing that you pilot...you grow incrementally or establish...sort of...proof of concept.

While participants expressed some concern over people's mindsets that might serve as obstacles, none suggested that these obstacles were reasons to not implement PLCs as replacements for traditional PD. Participants' responses suggested that thoughtful planning and transparent communication about the plans, might help to calm potential fear and anxiety about such a change PD was offered and engaged with. Most participants referenced scheduling as a barrier. They acknowledged that the existing school schedule makes it difficult to fit new meetings and sustain them over time.

I immediately go to logistics. Thinking about the schedule and opening a door for all of our teachers in [the school] to have, if that was something that [we] felt would be a positive, enriching experience for the … teachers, which I feel would be. Any time a group can come together and share ideas and learn in an action-oriented setting, it would require looking at the school year, and establishing a schedule

that would provide for that experience to be positive, giving teachers an opportunity to fully experience the professional learning community. And just reflecting on my own situation from being a teacher and an administrator, when you're given opportunities to embrace professional learning and take some of the other weight off of your day, or off of your schedule, you can get so much more out of it (Participant AD).

Participant TA shared,

…lack of time. Like many schools, it feels like we always have so many competing priorities. We all want to care about all of them, and to do all of them. And the barrier that I've heard some colleagues describe, and I've experienced this myself, I don't know how I can commit to something that's going to require 10 hours a week. I don't have it, I can't find it. So, I think the overcommitment of our time.

Another participant acknowledged that, while time might appear to be a barrier, the true barriers might be a lack of time management. As Participant AD stated, "time can often be a crutch as well." Participant AA also described the tradeoff involving time people perceive as an obstacle. Participant AA stated, "You know people feel like, 'But I have to do this, so I can't possibly give up more time to do this.'"

Participant AA continued,

Probably also… well I don't know, maybe we have the time, I was going to say also some structural thinking about the time we do have, but if we…rethought obviously professional days that's an obvious one, and weekly or biweekly meetings, the time we put into meeting structures. That's probably quite a bit of time, so I retract that.

I'm not going to say time. It would just be a rethinking, the willingness to reimagine how we use time.

The data gathered from participants around this RQ revealed 2 themes. The themes emerged after careful thematic analysis of the data referenced above and other data. Like the themes that emerged around RQ1, the themes that emerged around RQ2 represent broad, high-level summaries of participants responses as related to RQ2:

Theme 5: Logistical planning eases tensions.

Theme 6: Shift in mindset is needed for buy-in and support.

Table 6 displays RQ2, themes, axial codes, and sample excerpts.

Table 6

RQ2 Themes, Axial Codes, and Samples Excerpts

RQ2: How do teachers and administrators in a school in the Mid-Atlantic perceive a transition from traditional PD to PLCs?		
Theme	**Axial Code**	**Sample Excerpts**
5. Logistical planning eases tensions.	• Time • Setting • Frequency	*it's a very very busy place* (Participant AA). *I think time is probably the biggest barrier* (Participant AC) *I'm struggling right now with the..my time..and value..just...for example...the distance learning* (Participant TC). *not only is it hard to meet with people, but as I think I alluded to, the day is exhausting, because you're running around doing a billion things in 1 day. The schedule's just draining* (Participant TB).
6. Shift in mindset is needed for buy-in and support.	• Growth Mindset • Collaborative Mindset • Positive Mindset • Support	*I think some siloing of work discourages teachers from truly sharing and being collaborative, and I think the culture of the school is one that is very private, and so there are a lot of closed doors* (Participant AB). *mindset wise…there are a lot of teachers, and myself included sometimes...I think change is not natural to most people* (Participant TD) *All those natural anxieties start to emerge and they manifest in negativity* (Participant AC). *willing participants, support...administrative support, colleague support* (Participant TC).

After analyzing the data using open and axial coding, the data were analyzed further to determine themes. The themes were analyzed to ensure they told a story about the data and were related to the research questions. The themes determined in this study were derived inductively; they came directly from the data (Nowell et al., 2017).

Four themes emerged from RQ1: What are administrators' and teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities as a replacement for traditional professional development in a school in the Mid-Atlantic?

Theme 1: Relationships and collaboration create sense of community.

Theme 2: Shared local and immediate issues or interests influence buy-in.

Theme 3: Ongoing, focused work leads to sustainable change.

Theme 4: Cycles of feedback and reflection improve practice.

Two themes emerged from RQ2: How do administrators and teachers in a school in the Mid-Atlantic perceive a transition from traditional PD to PLCs?

Theme 5: Logistical planning eases tensions.

Theme 6: Shift in mindset is needed for buy-in and support.

Although the themes were distinct, some of the axial codes that formed the themes were related. For example, participants' indication of time as a barrier (axial code) was related to Themes 5 and 6. While some participants indicated there was a true lack of time, others suggested that perhaps people's mindsets about time or willingness to spend the time was the true barrier. Rather than label one or the other interpretation as discrepant, I chose to include both as they describe different phenomena. Therefore, neither was discrepant.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of a study is crucial to the validity of the study. Ravitch and Carl (2016) asserted that the trustworthiness of a study is indicative of the study's rigor. There are four main indicators of trustworthiness. Trustworthiness of a study refers to its credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Amankwaa, 2016).

Credibility

Credibility is related to reliability and refers to the integrity of the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). For this study, I provided disclosures to participants and did not deceive them in any way. Participants were informed of their right to cease participation in this study at any time, including during the data collection and analysis process. Disclosures were written in the initial invitation email and read from the interview protocol before, during, and after the interview took place. I accurately represented participants' thoughts and ideas as they intend for me to receive them. This was done by capturing video and audio recording on two devices. I also promoted the credibility of my study is by conducting member checks. Member checking is a technique that involves allowing participants to review the data to ensure their responses are accurately represented by the data record (Creswell, 2014). I emailed participants transcripts of their recorded interviews to allow them to review and confirm or refute any data.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the idea that another researcher would be able to use my case study research design and apply it to a new site with a similar problem (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Therefore, I ensured that all elements of my study are in alignment and that the study is replicable. To achieve transferability, I used the provided evaluation tools such as the dissertation rubrics and checklists to align all elements of the study. Guided by the rubrics and checklists, I was provided with a detailed roadmap for other researchers to follow should they choose to study a similar phenomenon. I also made sure to write a detailed description of my study so others could easily replicate it.

Dependability

"*Dependability* refers to the stability of the data" (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 189). This means that measures are taken to ensure that the data is reliable. For this study, data were collected from virtual ace-to-face interviews and archival records. These data were checked against each other to ensure consistency. I found no discrepant data in this study; however, had there been discrepant data, I would have analyzed it to determine the degree of inconsistency within data.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the objectivity of data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Member checking was also used to provide oversight of the data collection, recording, and analysis process. I sent participants copies of the transcripts from their interviews to be able to suggest any changes to the data or clear up any possible misinterpretations. This will not only increase credibility, but it will also increase confirmability because I allowed participants to ensure I accurately captured their perceptions during the interview (Amankwaa, 2016). Also, since qualitative data methods require interpretation by the researcher, member checking helped decrease researcher bias, which is important for trustworthiness (Creswell, 2014). Another way I promoted trustworthiness was through peer debriefing. Similar to member checking, peer debriefing involves allowing an external reviewer to evaluate the entire research process (Nowell et al., 2017). I reviewed my codes, themes, and categories with another Walden doctoral researcher to ensure clarity and alignment among the three levels of coding.

Summary

I explored administrators' and teachers' perceptions of PLCs as replacements for traditional PD. I also explored their perceptions of a transition from traditional PD to PLCs. As a result of this study, I found that all participants favored PLCs over traditional PD and would support the change. Both administrators and teachers name positive influences on teachers, their practice, and school culture as probable results of a transition to PLC model for PD. For example, administrators and teachers expressed optimism about increased collaboration, sustainable positive change, and the application of new learning. One of the main reason's participants expressed support for PLCs as replacements for traditional PD was the focus on action learning. Participants decried one-time presentations that left them with little to no time to reflect and practice. The results of this study also confirmed previous studies' finding that, while PLCs are highly favored, they are underutilized. This study also uncovered some of the reasons why. Participants blamed negative attitudes and mindsets for the underutilization of PLCs and named them as a huge barrier to a possible transition from traditional PD. Some of the mindsets described centered around resisting change itself. Other mindsets centered around resistance to feedback or accountability. The other major theme that emerged from the data were related to a perception that there is not enough time to implement PLCs. Initially, the data revealed that participants perceived there to not be ample time to schedule PLC meetings. However, further examination of the data suggested that at least two participants presented a different idea around time – people do not manage it wisely.

In chapter 5, I will provide a more detailed discussion and interpretation of the data, as well as implications for future practice. I will also discuss ways my findings confirm, refute, or extend knowledge in the field of education. Recommendations for further study will be presented as well as final conclusions.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore school administrators' and teachers' perceptions about PLCs as replacements for traditional means of PD. The problem was that little was known about administrators' and teachers' perceptions of PLCs as replacements for traditional PD, despite an existing body of research that suggested the effectiveness of PLCs (see Brown & Militello, 2016). A qualitative case study design was used to gather data and better understand the research problem. Data were primarily gathered through semistructured virtual face-to-face interviews. Past PD agendas were also reviewed to learn more about the PD opportunities that had been offered at the site. This research approach allowed for a more thorough understanding of administrators' and teachers' perceptions of PLCs as a replacement for traditional PD as described in the findings summarized below.

A key finding was that administrators and teachers fully support implementing PLCs as PD rather than traditional PD. Other key findings were related to administrators' and teachers' perceptions of structural barriers that might impede the implementation of PLCS, elements of PD administrators and teachers found to be effective, and resources and support they might need to fully implement PLCs. Overall, the key findings suggest that administrators and teachers support and prefer PLCs over traditional PD, but lack to support and resources to implement them.

In the rest of Chapter 5, details about the key findings will be explained. The chapter will also include an interpretation of the findings, study limitations,

recommendations, implications. The chapter will end with final conclusions about this study.

Interpretation of the Findings

Research already suggests that PLCs are effective means of increasing professional knowledge and improving outcomes for students (Carpenter, 2017). Specifically, the action research inspired by PLCs is driven by local and immediate issues in the classroom and involves an iterative and collaborative process (Middlehurst et al., 2018). The findings of this study reveal why PLCs are not more widely implemented in schools, despite the positive implications for students. The process used for generating these findings included notetaking, transcribing, and coding data, identifying themes, and drawing final conclusions. Findings from this study contribute to the body of research that exists about PLCs.

Key Finding 1

In this study, I mainly sought to learn how administrators and teachers felt about implementing PLCs as PD rather than traditional PD. All participants expressed support and a preference for PLCs as PD over traditional PD. Participants acknowledged that, although they preferred PLCs, most had not had much experience with PLCs. A review of past PD agendas supported these statements and revealed that most PD offerings were traditional PD, being led by one person (or a small team of co-presenters), with little to no follow-up or accountability.

Administrator and teacher support of PLCS is critical in the successful implementation of PLCs (Bahous et al., 2016). DuFour and Reeves (2015) discussed the

vital role that school leaders' support play in setting the stage for PLCs, especially as a "bottom-up" PD structure that will be driven by teachers and the issues they see in their classrooms (Macias, 2017). Participants in this study, administrators and teachers, all expressed support and eagerness to use PLCs as PD.

Key Finding 2

Participants overwhelmingly expressed favor of PLCs over traditional PD; however, they also identified barriers, such as time and mindsets, as hindrances to the implementation of PLCs. Some participants discussed a sense of being overscheduled or not having enough time to implement PLCs. On the other hand, some participants described improper time management as a major barrier to the implementation of PLCs. Time was a common thread in participant's responses about structures that might be barriers to the implementation of PLCs as PD. Another common thread was the worry about mindsets that might impede support for PLCs. For example, administrators and teachers pointed to a resistance to change as a barrier. They explained that a transition from traditional PD to PLCs requires changes in the ways professional learning is approached and planned, and that many people might resist change.

PLCs involve collaborative learning and reflection that takes place over time. Wolbers et al. (2017) discussed the reflection and reflexive practices that take places in PLCs, as a major component. As discussed in Chapter 2, these practices require time that is allocated and embedded in the school schedule for them to be useful (see Hardy, 2016). Otherwise, the work of PLCs might go unprioritized and unfinished. The seemingly lack of prioritization and continuation of professional work was expressed as a frustration,

especially from teacher participants. These practices also require (and build) a collaborative culture of shared learning and feedback, rather than siloed and isolated teaching practices (Johnson et al., 2018).

Key Finding 3

When asked to described elements of effective PD, participants described PD in a manner like the way PLCs are defined. Administrators and teachers described effective PD as relevant, collaborative, and iterative. These elements are closely related to the elements of PLCs: (a) a focus on student learning, (b) a culture of collaboration, and (c) a focus on results (DuFour, 2004). Participants expressed a desire to foster collegiality during the shared learning process. The data revealed that, though this was not necessarily the type of PD they regularly participated in, this was the type of PD participants preferred. Administrators and teachers said effective PD was PD that was driven by their needs and, while they were often provided choices in the types of PD to pursue, they were not often provided the time and space to use and reflect on new learning in their contexts or apply new learning to issues directly faced in their classrooms.

This finding is supported by the conceptual frameworks that underpinned this study and might provide insight into why participants in this study all expressed support for PLCS as replacements for traditional PD. Imel's (2000) contextual learning theory and adult learning theory (Knowles, 1985; Mezirow, 1997) explain why participants value PD that is relevant, collaborative, and iterative. These theories suggest that adults prefer to drive their own learning and engage in situation-based problem solving

collaboratively. Mezirow (2003) also described the process by which adults acquire and retain new knowledge, and use that new knowledge in their contexts, as a transformative experience. This experience involves considering new perspectives in relation to previously held perspectives (Mezirow, 2003), and is a process that may only happen when working with others over time.

Key Finding 4

PLCs require resources and support to make them happen in schools. Participants in this study ere clear about the resources and types of support they would need to implement PLCs as replacements for traditional PD. A thoughtfully planned schedule with time allotted for ongoing PLC meetings was top of mind for participants in this study. Administrators and teachers mentioned the busy nature of schools that allows important business to be left unfinished, and they worried that the same would be true for PLCs. Therefore, a school schedule with dedicated time to work in PLCs was identified as a much-needed resource. Another resource that administrators expressed they needed to support PLCs was training for them and teachers. This training, as some described, might include learning around how to set up PLCs and levels of embedded support, such as coaching and help with facilitation. Some participants described a lack of training and dedicated time as reasons some colleagues might be hesitant to buy-in.

This finding extends the current body of research by providing relevant information about a phenomenon already identified – the underutilization of PLCS in schools (see Macias, 2017). Administrators indicated that they were interested in more training about how to effectively implement PLCs. This training would build capacity in

them as school leaders to be able to provide the full support that is needed to sustain PLCs (Bahous et al., 2016).

Limitations of the Study

This qualitative case study, like all studies, has limitations. One of the limitations of this study is the case study design. Though this design was the most appropriate for this study, it does potentially limit the generalizability of the study to some settings. For instance, some educational settings, such as public schools and serve specific grade bands (elementary, middle, or high), might find the findings of this study difficult to apply to their nuanced cultures. Despite this, the findings of the study are transferable and provide valuable information to school administrators and teachers (see Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001)

A major limitation at the time of this study was the global pandemic that might have impacted participation. Though I achieved the minimum number of participants I desired, the pandemic might have limited the number the willing participants for this study. At the time of the study, my position as a middle school administrator at the site was a limitation because it prevented some teachers and administrators from being eligible to participate in the study. Teachers and administrators whose roles were based in the middle school were not asked to volunteer to participate to avoid any undue bias or influence.

The global pandemic also limited access to participants because the site was mainly shut down to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Participants, who would have, under normal circumstances, been accessible at school, were only accessible at their

homes. This was new for all participants, who had been used to operating in school-based positions. I mitigated this limitation by offering to schedule interviews at participants' convenience. Although interviews were conducted virtually, all participants still chose to show turn their cameras on to still allow a face-to-face experience. Considering these limitations, saturation was still achieved when data converged and no new codes or themes emerged (Saunders et al., 2018) and I am confident in the findings of this study, which are supported by the data. Therefore, this study maintained trustworthiness.

Recommendations

All schools should have systems in place to foster collaborative and ongoing learning to improve professional practice for teachers and outcomes for students. PLCs have been shown to improve schools in this way, yet they remain largely underutilized (Brown & Brown & Militello, 2016). Further research on administrators and teachers' perceptions of PLCs as replacements for traditional PD is needed. The recommendations below may add to the current body of research on the implementation of PLCs, with implications for school leadership to ensure their sustainability and success.

First, researchers should conduct further studies using diverse educational settings. This case study was conducted at an independent school. However, future studies might be conducted at public schools, alternative placements schools, etc. By conducting similar studies at a range of diverse sites, further analysis might reveal the extent to which participants at these sights hold similar perceptions or whether their perceptions are influenced by their location or some other factor. Doing this might also lead to more generalizability of this case study's findings.

Another recommendation is for additional studies centered around school schedules and their impact on teacher collaboration and the implementation of effective PD. During the interviews conducted in this study, participants expressed that time – its allocation and the management of it – was a major factor in the implementation of PLCs. Related studies could provide more insight into schedule structures that provide built-in time and space for doing the work administrators and teachers indicated they preferred.

Lastly, several participants mentioned mindsets or resistance from colleagues that might impede the implementation of PLCs. However, none of the participants self-reported that they held oppositional thoughts to PLCs as replacements for traditional PD. A more comprehensive review, including collecting data from those who prefer traditional PD over PLCs, might lead to strategies school leaders might utilize to meet all teachers' needs and encourage buy-in from those once reluctant. This review might include an exploration of contributing factors to educator support or opposition to PLCs, including teacher preparation programs, previous in-service training, etc.

Implications

Implementing PLCs as PD in schools can lead to positive social change because PLCs have been shown to positively influence student achievement and school culture (DuFour, 2004). School administrators should provide support and leadership for teachers to regularly engage in collaborative and reflective practice that is focused on improving outcomes for students. Because it is shown that many schools still do not implement PLCS, this study was conducted to learn more about administrators' and teachers' perceptions of PLCs as replacements for traditional means of PD. The findings in this

study support the need for more exploration into the barriers that prevent PLCs from being more widely used.

Positive Social Change at the Organizational Level

This study has implications for positive social change for teachers and students at the organizational level. The data collected during this study revealed administrators' and teachers' perceptions of PLCs as PD. PLCs have already been shown to positively influence teachers and students; however, the findings of this study suggest that more resources are needed to see them more widely used in schools. Participants indicated that they support PLCs, but time and mindsets often get in the way. Positive change at the organizational level can be realized if administrators work to create schedules that provide time and space for teachers to engage in collaborative learning in PLCs. This might also help to alleviate some of the fears teachers have about replacing traditional PD with PLCs because a thoughtful schedule could encourage accountability and consistency.

Methodological Implications

Due to the nature of a case study, similar studies may be conducted similar sites and results may be compared. By conducting further case studies about the research problem that drove this study, a larger data set may be compiled for deeper analysis, including the examination of responses by school level (elementary, middle, high) or some other means. Additionally, due to the on-going global pandemic, quantitative data collection methods, such as surveys, might aid in the compilation of a larger data set.

This may provide researchers with more information about administrators' and teachers perceptions of PLCs as replacements for traditional PD.

Theoretical Implications

There are two main theories that support the use of PLCs in schools – Adult Learning Theory and Contextual Learning Theory. Adult learning theory is largely attributed to the work of Knowles (1985) and Mezirow (1997). This theory has five main tenets that describe adult learning. They include that adults 1) prefer to be self-directed, 2) have life experiences which should be used to support learning, 3) are naturally primed for learning about new topics and new situations, 4) are interested in solving new problems, and 5) are intrinsically motivated to learn (Knowles and Associates, 1985). Mezirow's work on adult learning theory centered around ways adults engage in critical reflection and their old ideas and experiences are challenged and, ultimately, replaced by new experiences and understandings (Mezirow, 1997). Imel's (2000) contextual learning theory suggested that people learn best when collaboratively engaged in situation-based problem solving that is self-driven and regulated, and incorporates prior experience.

PLCs are driven by teachers and what they see in their classrooms. These theories support the effectiveness of PLCs for deep learning and meaningful and lasting positive change in schools. Participants in this study indicated that PLCs are the type of PD they would prefer to regularly engage in.

Recommendations for Practice

This study involved the collection of data from administrators and teachers to learn more about their perceptions of PLCs as replacements for traditional PD. The

archival data, past PD agendas, provided insight into the type of PD that had been offered at the school. Based on the finding of this study, there is an opportunity to put organizational structures in place to support the implementation of PLCs as PD that might drive the improvement of teaching practices and positively influence student outcomes.

A recommendation for practice related to key findings one and three is to build capacity in the administrators and teachers who are already willing and eager to implement PLCs as PD. Participants in this study indicated they recognize PD as effective when it is relevant, collaborative, and iterative. Therefore, it is recommended that administrators and teachers receive additional leadership support to begin regularly and systemically engaging in action research to help lay the foundation for participation in PLCs, which encourage relevant, collaborative, and iterative work. This may be done even before an organization-wide decision is made as to whether PLCs will replace traditional PD. Participants in this study indicated ways that plans to implement PLCs as PD may be halted by push-back by those not willing or ready to make a change. Therefore, administrators and teachers who are willing should be empowered and encouraged to make small changes within their domains, such as starting a PLC of their own and inviting others to join.

A recommendation for practice related to findings two and four is to create taskforces charged with identifying and removing structural barriers to PLC implementation and providing resources and structural supports that would lead to effective PLCs. One task force, for example, should be focused on the creation or

revision of the school schedule that would allow for school-wide participation in PLCs. Participants named school schedules or a lack of time as a barrier to PLCs. Therefore, a flexible schedule with built-in time for shared learning would greatly benefit teachers. Another taskforce should be focused on strategies for developing a growth mindset and culture of feedback so that people are more willing to participate in PLCs. A taskforce could look at ways to alter meeting structures or evaluation systems to determine whether they support administrators' and teachers' growth. For example, team meetings could be structured to move beyond the sharing of information to meaningful engagement and shared learning to improve schools.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore school administrators' and teachers' perceptions about PLCs as replacements for traditional means of PD. The data gathered during this study provided may lead to change to existing organizational structures within schools that support or impede the implementation of PLCs.

Initial research revealed an extensive body of knowledge around PLCs and their effectiveness in school reform efforts. An article written by Middlehurst, Cross, and Jeannin (2018) discussed job-embedded and collaborative PD as action learning, and an effective way to improve teacher practice and student outcomes. According to DuFour (2004), PLCs not only improve outcomes, but they also shift school culture to one of collaboration and shared learning. Additionally, Johnson, Reinhorn, & Simon (2018) stated that PLCs have been found to decrease teacher isolation and foster professional relationships.

The data collected in this study revealed that school administrators and teachers support and are willing to participate in PLCs, and that they view PLCs as effective PD. In fact, administrators and teachers said they valued PD that is collaborative, iterative, and relevant. However, they feel that barriers like time, and mindset often get in the way of ongoing PD. The findings of this study have implications for positive change at various levels, including the personal and organizational. By establishing systems that support collaborative school cultures, school administrators will also support teachers' desire to regularly participate in PLCs as PD, rather than traditional PD.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol for Administrators

Interview Protocol

Title of Study: Administrators' and Teachers' Perceptions of PLCs as Replacements for Traditional PD
Date:
Location:
Time of Interview:
Interviewer: Antwonette Woodlon
Interviewee:

Greeting:

"Hello and thank you so much for being here today. My name is Toni Woodlon. I work at the same school as the Middle School Assistant Principal. This is my second year at this school, but my 14th year in education. I really appreciate you taking the time and agreeing to participate in this study. I hope you find this process rewarding as your participation will help add to a gap in current research. I have received your *Informed Consent* form; however, I want to be sure that I, again, have your consent to proceed with this interview. Please remember that you may withdraw consent at any time during the process and I will, immediately, destroy all of your information and properly discard it. I want to remind you that all efforts will be made to maintain confidentiality and your name, the school's name, and all personal information will remain private. Do you have any questions for me about the study, including the process, or any of the information provided on the *Informed Consent* form?"

Checklist:

____Participant submitted signed *Informed Consent* form. (Have additional copies to review, if needed)

____Participant is interested in moving forward with study participation. (If not, stop here, thank participant, and follow procedures to destroy participant information.)

Interview Norms:

- Speak from the *I* perspective.
- Please refrain from disclosing others' personal information, including their names and roles at the school.
- Please ask clarification if a question does not make sense to you.
- Please remember you may cease participation in this study at any time.

"Do you have any questions before we proceed? Do you wish to proceed?"

Background/Purpose:

"This interview is designed to help me gain a better understanding of your thoughts, ideas, and perceptions about professional learning communities as replacements for traditional forms of professional development. I encourage you to share freely, providing as many details as you can. I will be taking notes and this interview will be recorded so I don't miss anything. You will notice that I will be looking at you and looking down at my notes, but please know I am paying attention and appreciate what you have to say. I will also be reading questions I prepared ahead of time. However, I might also ask follow-up questions if I need you to clarify a point or want more information."

"Do you have any questions? Do I have your permission to proceed with this interview and recording?"

Questions:

1. What, in your opinion, is the purpose of professional development?

2. Describe a professional development experience that is highly effective.

   Follow-up: How do you know when professional development is highly effective?
3. Describe a professional development experience that is ineffective.
4. What are some ways you increase your professional knowledge or improve your practice on your own?
5. What are some ways you increase your professional knowledge or improve your practice in collaboration with others?
6. What are some ways you support or promote teachers' professional development or growth?
7. What experience have you had with PLCs? (Read definition of PLCs.)

   Professional Learning Community: A collaborative group of educators who participate in ongoing, job-embedded shared learning and action research focused on improving student learning outcomes (DuFour, 2004).
8. Which structures at this school currently support PLCs?
9. Which structures might be barriers to PLCs?
10. How would you feel about implementing PLCs as PD, rather than traditional PD?
11. What might you need or need to do to support PLCs for all teachers?
12. What are some challenges you anticipate during a transition from a traditional PD model to PLCs?

Probing Question examples:

- *Please explain…*
- *Can you give me an example of…?*

- *Why do you say that?*
- *What did you mean by…?*

Closing:

"Thank you so much, again, for your time today. I appreciate you participating in this study and providing me with you open and honest feedback. I want to remind you that your responses will be kept confidential, and you may still withdraw participation at any time. I will follow up with you within a week to review my notes and transcription so you may review them for accuracy. Do I have your permission to contact you for a follow-up/debrief call? Thank you and have a wonderful day!"

Appendix B: Interview Protocol for Teachers

Interview Protocol

Title of Study: Administrators' and Teachers' Perceptions of PLCs as Replacements for Traditional PD
Date:
Location:
Time of Interview:
Interviewer: Antwonette Woodlon
Interviewee:

Greeting:

"Hello and thank you so much for being here today. My name is Toni Woodlon. I work at the same school as the Middle School Assistant Principal. This is my second year at this school, but my 14th year in education. I really appreciate you taking the time and agreeing to participate in this study. I hope you find this process rewarding as your participation will help add to a gap in current research. I have received your *Informed Consent* form; however, I want to be sure that I, again, have your consent to proceed with this interview. Please remember that you may withdraw consent at any time during the process and I will, immediately, destroy all of your information and properly discard it. I want to remind you that all efforts will be made to maintain confidentiality and your name, the school's name, and all personal information will remain private. Do you have any questions for me about the study, including the process, or any of the information provided on the *Informed Consent* form?"

Checklist:

____Participant submitted signed *Informed Consent* form. (Have additional copies to review, if needed)

____Participant is interested in moving forward with study participation. (If not, stop here, thank participant, and follow procedures to destroy participant information.)

Interview Norms:

- Speak from the *I* perspective.
- Please refrain from disclosing others' personal information, including their names and roles at the school.
- Please ask clarification if a question does not make sense to you.
- Please remember you may cease participation in this study at any time.

"Do you have any questions before we proceed? Do you wish to proceed?"

Background/Purpose:

"This interview is designed to help me gain a better understanding of your thoughts, ideas, and perceptions about professional learning communities as replacements for traditional forms of professional development. I encourage you to share freely, providing as many details as you can. I will be taking notes and this interview will be recorded so I don't miss anything. You will notice that I will be looking at you and looking down at my notes, but please know I am paying attention and appreciate what you have to say. I will also be reading questions I prepared ahead of time. However, I might also ask follow-up questions if I need you to clarify a point or want more information."

"Do you have any questions? Do I have your permission to proceed with this interview and recording?"

Questions:

1. Describe a professional development experience that is highly effective.

Follow-up: How do you know when professional development is highly effective?

2. Describe a professional development experience that is ineffective.
3. What are some ways you increase your professional knowledge or improve your practice on your own?
4. What are some ways you increase your professional knowledge or improve your practice in collaboration with others?
5. What experience have you had with PLCs? (Read definition of PLCs.)

   Professional Learning Community: A collaborative group of educators who participate in ongoing, job-embedded shared learning and action research focused on improving student learning outcomes (DuFour, 2004).
6. Which structures at this school currently support PLCs?
7. Which structures might be barriers to PLCs?
8. How would you feel about implementing PLCs as PD, rather than traditional PD?
9. What might you need to participate in a PLC?
10. What are some challenges you anticipate during a transition from a traditional PD model to PLCs?

Probing Question examples:

- *Please explain…*
- *Can you give me an example of…?*
- *Why do you say that?*
- *What did you mean by…?*

Closing:

“Thank you so much, again, for your time today. I appreciate you participating in this study and providing me with your open and honest feedback. I want to remind you that your responses will be kept confidential, and you may still withdraw participation at any time. I will follow up with you within a week to review my notes and transcription so you may review them for accuracy. Do I have your permission to contact you for a follow-up/debrief call? Thank you and have a wonderful day!”