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Dialogue within professional learning communities and its impact on the professional growth of teachers in the elementary school setting

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2008

ABSTRACT

Dialogue Within Professional Learning Communities and its Impact on
the Professional Growth of Teachers in the Elementary School Setting

by

Melanie Spradley

M.A., Armstrong Atlantic State University, 1997
B.S., Armstrong State College, 1993

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

Walden University
December 2008

ABSTRACT

The implementation of professional learning communities is a professional development practice that uses collaborative interactions within a constructivist framework to increase teacher and student learning. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the question of how the dialogue of grade level meetings within professional learning communities impacts the professional development of teachers using the constructivist theory of learning as the conceptual framework. The researcher gathered data through hour-long interviews over a 4-week period with 6 learning community participants, one from each of the 6 grade levels at the elementary school research site. A thematic analysis of the dialogical interactions revealed the following: (a) Professional growth is contingent upon the presence of focused dialogue, (b) Dialogue creates a feeling of acceptance that results in professional growth, (c) Dialogue results in learning opportunities that are prescriptive to the needs of the participants, and (d) Dialogue increases the content knowledge of teachers while providing them opportunities for the acquisition of instructional strategies. These dialogues offered opportunities for teacher examination of school data and focused efforts to improve weaknesses for greater student academic achievement. The results also revealed the qualities necessary for productive interactions to occur within professional learning communities that lead to professional growth and student success. Implications for positive social change include fostering the growth of teachers by revealing how conversing with others facilitates the acquisition of effective teaching practices and providing research based strategies and guidelines that promote the facilitation of productive collaborative and dialogical interactions within learning teams that result in improvements for the entire school community.

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my wonderful husband Paul, whose love and support made this long and difficult journey possible. Your frequent reminder of, “If it was easy, every one would have a doctorate degree” gave me the strength and determination I needed to endure and make my dream possible.

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SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

Introduction

To ensure the success of recent educational reform efforts, there is a need to discontinue the use of traditional professional development practices (Guskey, 2000; Speck & Knipe, 2005). Historically, the professional development of teachers involved participation in workshops that required the implementation of new practices in isolation with little feedback, support, or follow-up (DuFour, 1997). All teachers within the school received the same training, regardless of their professional needs or the needs of their students. Over the years, this one-size-fits-all model of providing teachers the same training, regardless of their professional needs or the needs of their students, has been found to be ineffective (Lieberman & Miller, 2002). Providing teachers with externally-driven professional development fails to increase the professional knowledge of teachers and equip them with the skills necessary to address the challenges of their learning environment (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006).

For teachers to grow professionally in the current knowledge society, learning by sharing with others and using collective intelligence to solve problems is a necessity (Hargreaves, 2003). Research characterized effective professional development as continuous teacher learning in a collaborative environment where the goal is to help all students achieve higher standards of learning (Speck & Knipe, 2005; Valli & Hawley, 2002). In addition, it was results-driven and evaluated for its effectiveness (Center for Comprehensive School-Reform and Improvement, 2006; Guskey, 2000; Speck & Knipe). With the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002 schools are

accountable for the academic achievement of students and for providing teachers with high quality professional development that results in improved academic performance. As schools seek to make improvements in this age of accountability, there is a need to implement collaborative professional development practices that address the professional needs of the teachers to better equip them to meet the unique needs of their students.

One professional development practice that enables teachers to learn and achieve their goals through collaboration is the use of professional learning communities (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Schools implementing this practice become learning organizations where groups of dedicated teachers work in learning teams to improve student achievement (Cibulka & Nakayama, 2000). Teachers no longer participate in short-term workshops or listen to presentations from outside experts to acquire new ideas and strategies (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Teacher learning becomes a collective effort where individuals share their practices and investigate solutions through research to address the unique learning needs of their school (DuFour & Eaker). Within these collaborative communities, teachers have opportunities to construct professional knowledge as they interact with each other to offer advice, assistance, encouragement, explanations, and reflections on their thoughts and experiences (Cibulka & Nakayama). Professional learning communities engage educators in continuous learning and inquiry, enabling them to meet the demands of society while increasing their professional knowledge and student achievement (Speck & Knipe, 2005).

The current study focused on the dialogue that occurs among members of the professional learning communities. The findings of this study are relevant to educational

leaders within the K-12 context and the greater professional education community, because they extend the current research on professional learning communities as a professional development practice. In addition, this project explored the impact of this practice on the professional growth of teachers, and therefore, attended to Walden's mission for social justice and change by providing teacher leaders with a better understanding of how collaborative dialogue within learning communities impacts teacher knowledge for improved student learning.

Background

The research site for the study was an elementary school in southeast Georgia. In addition to meeting the federal mandates of NCLB legislation, Georgia schools have the task of implementing a newly created standards based curriculum. The Georgia Performance Standards (GPS) were created to provide teachers, students, and test makers with a usable framework for instruction and assessment (Georgia Department of Education, 2006). With this implementation process arose a need for professional learning to assist teachers in developing an understanding of the standards based curriculum and to guide them in providing the Georgia Department of Education with teacher input on student work samples (Georgia Department of Education).

The research site uses professional learning communities, also called learning teams, as its method for providing teachers with on-going professional learning opportunities and support for implementing the new Georgia curriculum. Each learning team is comprised of all grade level members for grades kindergarten through fifth. Teams meet weekly to share and learn strategies that address the academic needs of the

school based upon data collected from Georgia's Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) in the areas of reading, mathematics, and writing. These meetings also provide staff members with opportunities to become more familiar with the GPS through evaluation of the standards and the examination of student work.

Collaborative study teams enable teachers to review research, provide feedback on instructional practices, and discover solutions for problems faced by the school (Elliott, 2004). The grade level meetings of the professional learning communities at the research site provide opportunities for teachers to facilitate professional dialogue and learning. Establishing teams that participate in collaborative dialogue for professional growth, however, is a challenge for professional learning community schools because of teacher reluctance towards the sharing of practices and a lack of productive dialogical interactions (Britton, 2004; Capers, 2004; Grom, 2005; Planche, 2004). Investigating the exchange of dialogue that occurred during the grade level meetings of professional learning communities brought about social change at the research site in two ways. First, it revealed how teachers perceived benefits of this professional development practice as a tool for increasing teacher knowledge. Second, it increased the awareness of how well the dialogue of professional learning communities facilitates the implementation of a standards based curriculum for school leaders.

Problem Statement

Georgia schools face the challenge of selecting a professional development model that increases the academic achievement of students and supports the implementation of the recently developed standards-based curriculum (NCLB, 2002; Georgia Department of

Education, 2006). The use of professional learning communities is a contemporary school improvement effort that changes the culture of the school from one of isolation to one of collaboration, where the primary focus is on learning rather than teaching (Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002). Some researchers provided detailed descriptions of professional learning communities and their collaborative learning teams (Cibulka & Nakayama, 2000; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 1997; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Kruse & Louis, 1993), while others noted the use of this practice in school improvement studies (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004; Feldman, Tung, & Ouimette, 2003; Strahan, 2003). What is not known, however, is how teachers perceive the impact of dialogue within professional learning communities on their own professional learning.

In theory, it is through the reflective conversations of professional learning communities that teachers learn new knowledge, skills, and strategies by becoming both students and teachers (DuFour, 2004; Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Kruse & Louis, 1993). Researchers cautioned however, that simply establishing collaborative teams does not ensure school improvements if staff members do not actively participate in the dialogical interactions of their learning communities (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006a; Grom, 2005; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). To address this gap, the current study explored the phenomenon of teacher dialogue as a professional development tool within professional learning communities.

There are two implications for positive social change from this investigation of professional learning communities. First, the study provides the professional education community with a better understanding of how collaborative dialogue within learning

communities affects teacher knowledge for improved student learning. Secondly, it expands the current research related to this practice for teacher leaders and administrators attempting to justify the use of learning communities as a professional learning tool.

Nature of the Study

This study used a qualitative method of inquiry. In these studies, the researcher, “builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting” (Creswell, 1998, p. 15). The qualitative paradigm was appropriate for this study, because the researcher described and explored teacher dialogue that occurred during the grade level meetings of professional learning communities. The focus of this study was to describe how participation in the collaborative dialogue of professional learning communities influences the professional growth of teachers.

Researchers described numerous designs for qualitative studies that include case study, grounded theory, ethnography, phenomenology and biography (Creswell, 1998; Hatch, 2002; Merriam, 2002b). The qualitative tradition for the current study was phenomenology. Studies of this nature seek to, “describe the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon” (Creswell, p. 51). This study was characteristic of the phenomenological approach, because its purpose was to describe and explore the phenomenon of teacher dialogue within professional learning communities. The researcher examined qualitative data collected from lengthy interviews with learning community participants to explore the dialogical experiences that occurred among members of professional learning communities. Presented in section

3 is a more detailed discussion of phenomenological studies in general and the methodology for the current study.

Research Question

The study investigated how participation in the dialogue of professional learning communities impacts the professional growth of teachers. It answers the following question: How does the dialogue of grade level meetings within professional learning communities impact the professional development of teachers?

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to describe the phenomenon of teacher dialogue during the grade level meetings of professional learning communities and its impact on the professional development of teachers. Effective professional development is results-driven and occurs in a collaborative environment where the primary goal is to help students achieve higher standards of learning through continuous teacher learning (Center for Comprehensive School-Reform and Improvement, 2006; Guskey, 2000; Speck & Knipe, 2005; Valli & Hawley, 2002). While the literature revealed the academic effects of this practice for students (DuFour et al., 2004; Feldman et al., 2003; Strahan, 2003), few studies focused on how participation in the conversations of professional learning community meetings results in greater or little professional growth for teachers (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). In addition, NCLB legislation holds all public schools accountable for helping all students succeed, and Georgia state guidelines require the implementation of a new standards-based curriculum (Georgia Department of Education, 2006). This investigation not only contributed to the limited amount of research focusing

exclusively on the dialogical experiences of professional learning community participants, it also explored and revealed the viability or impracticality of professional learning communities as a professional development tool for increasing teacher knowledge.

Conceptual Framework

The constructivist theory of learning served as the conceptual framework for this study. According to Vygotsky (1978), all knowledge is constructed from our social interactions with others. Our social encounters with peers influence the development of knowledge and understanding. Professional learning communities provide teachers opportunities to construct and increase professional knowledge through collaborative conversations with their peers (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006).

Constructivist theory also asserted that collaborative interactions enable learners to use their collective knowledge to solve problems, develop understandings through dialogue, and use communications to transform one another (Driscoll, 2000). Within the school setting, these social interactions support standards based school reform efforts as teachers converse to increase their understanding of the curricula, instruction and assessment specifically for their school site (Gaddy, Dean, & Kendall, 2002). The collaborative teams of professional learning communities provide teachers frequent opportunities to interact with their colleagues to investigate practices that lead to greater teacher and student learning (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Hord, 1997).

Constructivists prescribe three functions of collaboration: collective knowledge, sharing and listening to others, and communication through dialogue (Driscoll, 2000). These collaborative practices lead to greater professional growth for teachers (Speck & Knipe, 2005). The processes of professional learning communities include (a) studying teaching and learning, (b) sharing new knowledge while comparing it with current knowledge, and (c) providing opportunities for teachers to discuss and implement new teaching strategies (Cibulka & Nakayama, 2000; Kruse & Louis, 1993). Participation in these inquiry processes provides for the construction of professional knowledge within the school community (Lambert et al., 2002). Learning transpires when teachers participate in collaborative interactions that explore school data and student work for the purpose of school improvement. Section 2 presents a more detailed explanation of constructivist learning within professional learning communities.

Definitions

Collaboration: DuFour (2004) characterized collaboration within professional learning communities as, “a systematic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practices” (p. 8).

Communities: According to Sergiovanni (2005), communities, “spring from common understandings that provide members with a sense of identity and involvement that results in the creation of a web of meaningful relationships with moral overtones” (p 32). In the school setting, DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2006a) defined community as, “a group linked by common interest. Whereas the term ‘organization’ tends to

emphasize structure and efficiency, ‘community’ suggests shared purpose, mutual cooperation, and supportive relationships” (p. 214).

Constructivist theory: Lambert et al. (2002) defined constructivist theory within the school setting as, “learners constructing meaning based upon their previous knowledge, beliefs and experiences- and their application to schools” (p. 1).

Dialogue: Isaacs (1999) stated, “Dialogue is a living experience of inquiry within and between people” (p. 9). Its purpose is to, “reach new understanding and, in doing so, to form a totally new basis from which to think and act” (p. 19).

Phenomenology: Sokolowski (2000) identified phenomenology as, “the study of human experience and of the ways things present themselves to us in and through such experience” (p. 2). Studies with a phenomenological design seek to, “describe the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon” (Creswell, p. 51).

Professional development: Professional development is defined as a, “sustained collaborative learning process that systematically nourishes the growth of educators (individuals and teams) through adult learner-centered, job-embedded processes. It focuses on educators’ attaining the skills, abilities, and deep understandings needed to improve student achievement” (Speck & Knipe, 2005, p. 3-4). Guskey (2000) asserted it is, “a process that is (a) intentional, (b) ongoing, and (c) systemic” (p. 16). At the research site, the primary means for providing teachers with professional development opportunities have been professional learning communities or learning teams. Professional development has been ongoing throughout the school as teachers met

weekly to participate in professional dialogue that increased teacher knowledge of effective instructional strategies and results in greater student learning.

Professional learning communities : DuFour et al. (2006) described a professional learning community as, “Educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (p. 217). Hord (2004) described five dimensions of successful professional learning communities, which included supportive and shared leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application of learning, supportive conditions, and shared practice (p. 7). Professional development occurs as professional learning communities, “operate under the assumption that key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators” (DuFour et al., 2006a, p. 217).

Teams: Friend and Cook (1996) defined a team as, “a relatively small set of interdependent individuals who work and interact directly in a coordinated manner to achieve a common goal” (p. 31). Key to their success are, “an awareness of team membership, regulation of interactions by shared norms, and interdependence of team members” (p. 31). In the context of professional learning communities, DuFour et al. (2006) identified teams as, “a group of people working interdependently to achieve a common goal for which members are held mutually accountable” (p. 219).

Qualitative research: Merriam (2002b) described this research paradigm as, “an umbrella concept covering several forms of inquiry that help us understand and explain

the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible” (p. 5).

Assumptions

It is assumed that the collaborative teams involved in this study were professional learning communities as described in the literature. Second, while the researcher’s work site was being used to gather data for this study, it was assumed that the participants were open and honest about their experiences within professional learning communities during interviews with the researcher.

Limitations

This study was limited by its phenomenological nature to a small sample of participants. The study was also limited to the staff members of one southeast Georgia elementary school who had participated in the dialogue of professional learning communities. The results of the study cannot be generalized to any other school setting, because they were limited to the dialogical experiences described by the kindergarten through fifth grade level representatives at one school. In addition, the qualitative nature of this phenomenological study placed limitations on the study, because the results of these studies are derived from the interpretations of data by the researcher (Creswell, 2003)

The role of the researcher within the research setting also bounded the current study. The researcher was a coworker of the study participants, and it was possible that the researcher made inferences during the interviews because of her familiarity with the interviewees and the activities of professional learning communities. Researcher bias,

which can result in biased data reporting and inappropriate data collection behaviors, was another limitation of the current phenomenological study. To address these researcher-related limitations, the researcher used Epoche, bracketing, member-checking, rich, thick description, and the reporting of discrepant information (Creswell, 1996). Included within Section 3 is a detailed explanation of each of these strategies.

Delimitations

This qualitative study began in July 2008 and concluded when sufficient interview data was collected from an elementary school in southeast Georgia. The researcher interviewed 6 teachers who participated in weekly professional learning community meetings.

Significance of the Study

Professional learning communities create a collaborative school culture that fosters teacher learning and school improvements (Eaker et al., 2002). Research describes the characteristics of this practice (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 1997; Huffman & Hipp, 2003) and its use in school improvement efforts (DuFour et al., 2004; Feldman et al., 2003; Murphy & Lick, 2005; Strahan, 2003). Studying the impact of the collaborative dialogue that occurs within professional learning communities was significant for several reasons. First, it extends the professional literature related to this relatively new practice, and it contributes to the limited amount of studies that focus exclusively on the dialogue of these collaborative communities. Secondly, this study is significant for teacher leaders who, according to Ackerman and Mackenzie (2006), “lead informally by revealing their

classroom practice, sharing their expertise, asking questions of colleagues, mentoring new teachers, and modeling how teachers collaborate on issues of practice” (p. 66).

Investigating the phenomenon of dialogue within professional learning communities provides teacher leaders with a better understanding of how to lead their colleagues in productive conversations that lead to the sharing of effective professional development practices for increased teacher and student learning. It also provides Georgia school leaders with a better understanding of how well professional learning communities as a professional development practice support school improvement efforts and the implementation of GPS and its assessment pieces.

Investigating the collaborative dialogue of professional learning communities had social change implications. According to Hargreaves (2003):

Teamwork, learning from people who are different, sharing information openly—all of these essential ingredients of the knowledge society involve vulnerability, risk, and willingness to trust that the processes of teamwork and partnership ultimately will work for the good of all, including oneself. (p. 28)

This study fosters the growth of teachers by providing them with a better understanding of how conversing with others as a team has the potential to increase their knowledge base of effective teaching practices. Results from three studies indicated members of professional learning communities lack the collaborative skills necessary to lead and promote productive interactions during team meetings (Britton, 2004; Grom, 2005; Planche, 2004). In addition to fostering the growth of teachers, this study brings about social change for administrators and teacher leaders by revealing research based strategies and guidelines that promote the facilitation of productive collaborative dialogue

and interactions within learning teams that result in improvements for the entire school community.

Summary

Georgia schools face the challenge of selecting a professional development model that aids in the implementation of newly created performance standards and results in school improvements. A school improvement practice that enables teachers to learn through collaboration is the implementation of professional learning communities. While current research described the characteristics of this practice and notes its use in school improvement studies, there is a need for further research that describes how the dialogue of professional learning communities impacts teachers professionally. The purpose of this investigation was to describe the phenomenon of dialogue within professional learning communities to provide schools and teacher leaders with guidelines that facilitate productive collaborative interactions. Included in the remaining sections of this report are a review of the literature in section 2, a discussion of the research methods used for this phenomenological study in section 3, and presentation of the findings in section 4, and an interpretation of the results and recommendations for further research in section 5.

SECTION 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This review summarized the literature related to professional learning communities as a professional development practice and their use in school improvement efforts. The organization of the review includes an exploration of broad topics related to professional development and professional learning communities followed by a narrowed focus on specific issues related to the purpose of the study.

The literature review begins with a discussion of effective professional development practices that support reform efforts of today and presents how professional learning communities follow these guidelines and promote teacher learning using a constructivist framework. Also included is a discussion of dialogue and its important role in the effectiveness of professional learning communities. This section concludes with a review of the underlying practices learning communities and a review of studies that present the benefits of their use as a school improvement practice. Throughout the review is a critical analysis of the literature related to professional learning communities and the gaps within the research necessitating a need for further study.

To search for literature related to the topic, the researcher conducted keyword searches using several of Walden University's electronic databases including Academic Search Premier, ERIC, Primary Search, and Proquest Dissertations and Theses. These searches resulted in the discovery of several informative articles, ERIC documents, dissertations, and Websites with literature related to the topic of investigation. The researcher used books from her doctoral study classes and purchased numerous others

online. Some references made were from video presentations from experts in their field provided by Walden University. Keywords included: *professional development, collaboration, dialogue, professional learning communities, communities of practice, learning teams, study groups, constructivist learning theory, teacher learning, and standards-based curriculum.*

Effective Professional Development

According to Speck and Knipe (2005), high quality professional development is defined as, “those processes that improve the job-related knowledge, skills, or attitudes of school employees” (pp. 3-4). This development traditionally included workshops that provided training on knowledge outside experts viewed as important with little support or follow-up after delivery (Speck & Knipe). Participation in externally driven professional development programs did not adequately equip teachers with the knowledge and skills required to confront the challenges faced within the learning environments of the school (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Training models of professional development increased the instructional skills of teachers; however, they did not equip educators with the knowledge and understanding of how to implement reform efforts of modern society (Little, 1993).

NCLB is a current reform effort that holds schools accountable for the academic achievement of their students. This legislation also called for providing teachers with high quality professional development that results in improved academic performance. Several states, including Georgia, recently implemented performance standards to provide teachers, students, and test makers with a usable framework for instruction and

assessment (Georgia Department of Education, 2006). In this age of accountability, there is a need to continue investigating professional development practices that provide teachers with the skills and knowledge necessary to meet the unique needs of their students for school improvements to occur (Little, 1993).

To ensure the effective implementation of current reform efforts, several researchers indicated a need to restructure traditional training models of professional development (Guskey, 2000; Lieberman & Miller, 2002; Speck & Knipe, 2005). This change involves teachers working collaboratively to construct knowledge that enables them to address the needs of their learners and their school community (Center for Comprehensive School-Reform and Improvement, 2006). Similarly, Valli and Hawley (2002) described the need for teachers to participate in professional development that includes collaborative problem solving to increase teacher and administrator knowledge. Collaboration enables teachers to grow professionally through the sharing of accomplishments and challenges and the learning of new strategies to implement within their own classrooms (Lieberman, 2005). The practice of collaboration is also supported by the constructivist approach to learning which employs the sharing of ideas and the process of thinking together to increase knowledge and understandings (Lambert et al., 2002).

In addition to occurring within a collaborative environment, researchers recommend professional development be job-embedded, results-driven, and include an evaluation component (Guskey, 2000; National Staff Development Council, 2006b; Speck & Knipe, 2005). Job-embedded professional learning focuses on increasing teacher

knowledge of current research related to teaching and learning to help all students achieve higher standards of learning (Center for Comprehensive School-Reform and Improvement; National Staff Development Council; Speck & Knipe). Results-driven staff development relies on data collected from within the school to determine areas in need of improvement (Center for Comprehensive School-Reform and Improvement, 2006). Evaluation of new practices occurs periodically to measure their influence on teacher effectiveness and student learning and for guidance when making future decisions (Speck & Knipe). This new vision of professional development requires the formation of structures within the school that provide teachers collaborative opportunities to increase knowledge of skills and practices needed to produce results in student achievement (Hirsh, 2005). One such practice that meets the requirements as described above is the establishment of professional learning communities.

Professional Learning Communities

Before defining professional learning communities and presenting the learning theory incorporated into the practice, it is necessary to define the concept of community and its importance in the professional growth of educators. Communities, “spring from common understandings that provide members with a sense of identity and involvement that results in the creation of a web of meaningful relationships with moral overtones” (Sergiovanni, 2005, p. 32). Individuals naturally become members of an assortment of communities, which include their home, work, support groups, leisure activities, and even school settings (Speck & Knipe, 2005). It is through our participation in communities that we gain knowledge (Driscoll, 2000).

Within educational settings, communities develop as schools change from organizations that stress, “structure and efficiency” to communities that value, “shared purpose, mutual cooperation, and supportive relationships” (DuFour et al., 2006a, p. 214). Sergiovanni (2005) described numerous reasons for the importance of community within schools:

1. Community helps satisfy the need that teachers, students, and parents have to be connected to each other and to the school.
2. Community helps everyone in the school to focus on the common good.
3. Community provides students with a safe harbor in a stormy sea- a place where they are accepted unconditionally.
4. Community supports learning.
5. Community builds relationships and responsibility.
6. Community connects people to their work for moral reasons that obligate them to respond. (p. 56)

Viewing the school as a community of learners changes the role of teachers from being dispensers of knowledge for students to learners who engage in collaborative interactions for the growth of the entire school community (Lambert et al., 2002).

Professional Learning Communities Defined

DuFour et al. (2006) defined professional learning community as, “educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (p. 217). Huffman (2000) defined these groups as, “a community of learners working together within a

school to determine common vision, set goals and objectives, provide support, monitor progress, and adjust practices based on student and school needs” (p. 84). The underlying practices of these organizations include a dedication to helping all students learn, an emphasis on teacher learning, and the use of collaboration to improve the school (Cibulka & Nakayama, 2000; DuFour, 2004). Terms that share similar definitions include study groups, learning teams, and communities of shared practice; these terms are used interchangeably within this review.

Constructing Knowledge within Professional Learning Communities

The idea of using one’s own personal knowledge, experiences, and observations to construct knowledge comes from the constructivist theory of learning (Driscoll, 2000). This theory’s epistemological foundations (Lambert et al., 2002) stressed the importance of an individual’s social experiences in the construction of knowledge (Costa & Kallick, 2004). Individuals give meanings to their experiences in tandem with building knowledge from their experiences (Lambert et al.). Constructivist theory is defined as, “learners constructing meaning based upon their previous knowledge, beliefs and experiences- and their application to schools” (Lambert, et al., p. 1). “Humans don’t get ideas; they make ideas” (Costa & Kallick, p. 78). The principles of constructivism include:

1. Knowledge and beliefs are formed within the learner.
2. Learners personally imbue experiences with meaning.
3. Learning activities should cause learners to gain access to their experiences, knowledge, and beliefs.
4. Culture, race, and economic status affect student learning individually and

collectively.

5. Learning is a social activity that is enhanced by shared inquiry.

6. Reflection and metacognition are essential aspects of constructing knowledge and meaning.

7. Learners play a critical role in assessing their own learning.

8. The outcomes of the learning process are varied and often unpredictable.

(Lambert et al., pp. 26-28)

Learning occurs as individuals create learning structures from their social interactions or from new experiences that conflict with previously established ideas and understandings (Driscoll). As we interact with others, the sharing of ideas and the process of thinking together increases our knowledge and understandings of the world around us (Lambert et al.).

The constructivist theory of learning noted the importance of collaboration. Working together, learners use their collective knowledge to solve problems, develop understandings through dialogue, and use communication to transform one another (Driscoll, 2000). The idea of social interactions playing a key role in the acquisition of knowledge is rooted in the works of Vygotsky (1978), who hypothesized that all knowledge comes from our social relations with other people. He also used the term “zone of proximal development” (p. 86) to explain how social interactions influence the individual’s prospective mental development. It is through social encounters with our peers one may reach their fullest potential.

Communities, which promote the formation of relationships through social interactions, become a critical factor in the learning process within school settings (Lambert et al., 2002). Collaborative school cultures develop as community members use their diverse knowledge and experiences to promote the professional growth and development of the entire school (Wald & Castleberry, 2000). Constructivist theory asserted greater learning occurs when individuals share and think with others to understand the world around them (Lambert et al.). Incorporating the idea of community in the school setting therefore enables teachers to construct knowledge as they collaborate with their peers to assess their professional needs and the needs of their students. Working as members of learning community, teachers use their collective efforts to improve instructional practices and increase student success (Speck & Knipe, 2005).

Professional learning communities create an environment where teachers increase their professional learning and knowledge of effective instructional practices by participating in collaborative groups that focus on helping all students be successful learners (Eaker et al., 2002). Teachers discontinue their practice of working in seclusion to increase student achievement. Within their learning teams, teachers socialize as they review school data and collaborate to discover research-based teaching strategies, which lead to increased student achievement. Teachers also take responsibility for their own learning by talking about what they know from their experiences and observations (Lieberman & Miller, 2002). Kruse and Louis (1993) refer to this process as “deprivatization of practice” (p. 12). This process creates a community that encourages

classroom observations, reflections on practices used, and discussions on how to improve student learning (Hord, 1997; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Kruse & Louis).

Researchers described key components for the development of professional learning communities and their collaborative culture (Cibulka & Nakayama, 2000; Eaker et al., 2002; Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Hord, 1997; Kruse & Louis, 1993). The terminology used within the literature varied, but the critical elements are essentially the same. These components included having a supportive and shared leadership, supportive conditions, shared vision and values, collaborative teams, and shared practices (Cibulka & Nakayama; Eaker et al.; Hipp & Huffman; Hord; Kruse & Louis). With these components in place, the school becomes a community where teachers share in the instructional decisions and the primary goal throughout the school is on student learning. Collaborative teams and supportive structures enable teachers to share their practices, investigate and implement new strategies, and reflect on results. The following paragraphs describe each of the critical elements of professional learning communities and the teacher learning that occurs within their constructivist framework.

Professional learning communities create a collaborative culture within the school, therefore a supportive administration and shared leadership is necessary for their development and continuance (Eaker et al., 2002; Hord, 1997; Kruse & Louis, 1993; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Using data collected from student achievement scores, principals guide teachers within the school into discovering areas in need of improvement that become the focus of collaborative team meetings (McLaughlin & Talbert). Principals of communities are leaders who also share the responsibilities for school decisions,

professional growth, and the achievement of school goals with the faculty of the school (Lambert et al., 2002). They take an active role in creating an environment which encourages collective learning and shared decision making (Eaker et al.; Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Huffman, Hipp, Pankake, & Moller, 2001). School leaders of learning communities therefore ensure the school remains focused on the values of student and teacher learning by becoming monitors for the school instead of managers.

Research suggested the importance of supportive conditions, which include physical structures and human or social resources, to support and sustain teacher learning in professional learning communities (Eaker et al., 2002; Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Kruse & Louis, 1993). Structural conditions involve close proximity meeting facilities, scheduled times for collaboration and collegiality, systems for communication, and teacher empowerment for choosing best practices (Hipp & Huffman; Kruse & Louis). The human or social resources described by these researchers included a supportive environment that sustains trust and respect among community members, shared teacher knowledge, socialization processes that support a sense of community, and support from the school district and parents. School leaders who facilitate the development of these conditions ensure the successful implementation of professional learning communities within the school (Kruse & Louis).

The shared visions and values held by members of professional learning communities focus on student learning (Cibulka & Nakayama, 2000; Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Hord, 1997; Kruse & Louis, 1993). These visions and values do not come from an outside source. They are a product of the social interactions among school personnel as

they discuss the needs of the students within their school. School members use their collective energies to develop these visions and values for the community (Huffman & Hipp, 2003).

Learning team members use collaborative dialogue to develop their shared visions and values that focus on student learning (Eaker et al., 2002). Constructivist theory views conversations within a community as the primary means for members to construct meanings toward a shared purpose about teaching and learning (Lambert et al., 2002). Staff members refer to their shared visions and values to guide decisions for their school community which include school improvements, budgeting, and professional development (Eaker et al.; Hord, 1997). The shared visions and values of the entire school also create expectations for staff behavior and for classroom environments that maximize the learning abilities of all students (Cibulka & Nakayama, 2000).

Establishing collaborative teams is essential for the successful implementation of professional learning communities (DuFour et al., 2006a; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Hord, 1997) as they serve as the primary “building blocks” (DuFour et al., p. 219) for this school improvement practice. Friend and Cook (1992) defined a team as, “a relatively small set of interdependent individuals who work and interact directly in a coordinated manner to achieve a common goal” (p. 31). There are seven qualities necessary for effective collaborative teams within the work setting. These included the following:

1. Collaboration is voluntary.
2. Collaborative participants value all contributions made to the group equally.

3. Collaboration requires a goal shared by the entire team.
4. It involves participants sharing responsibilities and decision-making.
5. Members of the team share their resources such as time, knowledge of specific practices, and access to additional resources.
6. Collaborators share responsibility for the outcomes of their decisions.
7. Collaboration is an emergent process, with the team eventually becoming a community of learners dedicated to accomplishing goals as a team. (Friend & Cook, pp. 7-11).

Within the context professional learning communities DuFour et al. (2006) identified a team as, “a group of people working interdependently to achieve a common goal for which members are held mutually accountable” (p. 219). The qualities as described by Friend and Cook (1992) characterize the collaborative teams of professional learning communities. They provide all staff members within the school opportunities to use their collective knowledge and expertise as group to explore, experiment, and reflect upon goals for making school-wide improvements (Wald & Castleberry, 2000). The collaborative teams of professional learning communities consist of members grouped by grade level or subject, by teachers with shared students, by school wide task forces or by professional development needs to accomplish school improvement goals (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

The constructivist theory of learning outlined three purposes for collaboration (Driscoll, 2000). These included enabling individuals to use their collective knowledge, providing opportunities to share and listen to others, and promoting communication

through dialogue (Driscoll). These operations are an integral part of professional learning communities as they focus on (a) studying teaching and learning, (b) sharing new knowledge while comparing it with current knowledge, and (c) providing opportunities for teachers to discuss and implement new teaching strategies (Cibulka & Nakayama, 2000; Kruse & Louis, 1993). The practice of gaining knowledge through community interactions is also related to Vygotsky's (1978) contention that working with peers influences the development of knowledge and understandings. Collaboration becomes, "embedded into the daily life of the school, because it is through this practice that teachers learn how to improve classroom instruction" (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 118).

The collaborative teams of professional learning communities seek to increase teacher knowledge and improve instructional practices by not only sharing knowledge, but also by community investigations into research based practices (Eaker et al., 2002). Teachers investigate research based ideas to ensure best practices are implemented as they work to improve the school (Eaker et al.). Data gained from student work and classroom observations aids teachers in assessing their teaching strategies and in determining effective ways to improve student learning (Cibulka & Nakayama, 2000). Reflecting upon one's own learning is a constructivist characteristic (Lambert et al., 2002). These personal evaluations help teachers construct knowledge and understandings about the learning process.

While collaborative teams are key to the success of professional learning communities, researchers acknowledged soliciting active participation from all staff

members within the school setting presents challenges for school leaders (DuFour et al., 2006a; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Many schools incorporate collaborative learning teams as the primary plan for professional development (Wald & Castleberry, 2000), while others present participation in these teams as an option (McLaughlin & Talbert). Conflicts result for school leaders in these voluntary school settings as willing participants grow through their involvement in team collaboration whereas non-willing participants fail to receive the same professional growth benefits (McLaughlin & Talbert).

The act of dialogue itself can cause an additional barrier for school leaders choosing to implement learning teams school wide. Difficulties in dialogue occur, because the roles individuals perceive for themselves can vary from being passive to dominant (Bohm, 1996). Resistance to dialogue may arise from teacher preference to isolation rather than collaboration (DuFour et al., 2006a). The current study aids school leaders in addressing these challenges by investigating how teachers perceive the phenomenon of participation in professional learning communities in relation to professional learning.

Teachers within professional learning communities share their classroom practices with each other to improve their own classroom instruction (Cibulka & Nakayama, 2000; Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Hord, 1997; Kruse & Louis, 1993) and examine student work evaluate to assess student learning (Eaker et al., 2002; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). The sharing of practices is a strategy that enables teachers to, “review and give feedback to one another on instructional practice in order to increase individual and

organizational capacity” (Huffman et al., 2001, p. 453). Teachers observe classrooms, make notes about the instruction, and then participate in reflective conversations to improve student learning (Hipp & Huffman; Hord). They encourage one another to experiment with different teaching strategies and challenge assumptions about learning (Cibulka & Nakayama; Kruse & Louis). This de-privatization of practice encourages teachers to publicly share within their community. Social interactions aid in the internalization of knowledge as individuals learn within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Sharing practices therefore provides additional learning opportunities for teachers.

In summary, professional development research revealed the importance of collaborative interactions for teachers to increase professional knowledge and student achievement. Professional learning communities promote the growth of the entire school community by providing teachers collaborative opportunities that allow teachers to be learners rather than simply presenters of knowledge for students. Learning communities consist of small groups of teachers who work collaboratively to increase student achievement by learning new ideas, implementing them in the classroom, and then reflecting on the results. The literature presented five key components of professional learning communities: supportive and shared leadership, supportive conditions, shared vision and values, collaborative teams, supportive structures, and shared practices. With these elements in place, professional learning occurs as teachers construct knowledge through their social interactions with their peers. There is a need for further research

however, that investigates the effects of participation in learning communities on the professional learning of teachers, which was addressed with the current study.

Dialogue and Professional Learning Communities

Isaacs (1999) defined dialogue as, “a living experience of inquiry within and between people” (p. 9). Its purpose is to, “reach new understanding and, in doing so, to form a totally new basis from which to think and act” (p. 19). Dialogue is not a tool intended to be used for persuading others; it is a means to provide individuals opportunities to listen only to the varying ideas of others and develop shared understandings of experiences (Bohm, 1996). As schools implement new reform efforts, dialogical interactions provide teachers opportunities to gain a better understanding of new ideas and gain insight into the challenges faced by the school (Speck & Knipe, 2005, p. 117).

Effective dialogical interactions involve four types of activities: listening, respecting, suspending, and voicing (Isaacs, 1999). The act of listening is not simply hearing the words of others. It is a group process that requires withholding one’s own personal thoughts and beliefs to become more aware of the experiences and ideas of the whole group (Wald & Castleberry, 2000). The construction of knowledge occurs through this form of listening, because individuals discover new ideas, make connections, or discover inconsistencies within their own knowledge (Lambert et al., 2002, p. 89).

While actively listening, participants also show respect for members of the group during effective dialogue. This practice requires members to honor the uniqueness of one another despite their individual differences (Isaacs, 1999). Varying opinions or points of

view are unimportant, because the dialogue shared results in greater understanding of collective problems (Bohm, 1996) The concept of respect relates to the characteristics of effective collaborative teams. Key to their success is the practice of parity, or valuing all members of the team (Friend & Cook, 1992). In terms of dialogue, showing respect for oneself, for others, for differences, and for individuals with opposing opinions is a necessity (Isaacs).

In addition to actively listening and showing respect, productive dialogue requires the suspension of personal thoughts during the sharing with others (Bohm, 1996). Personal observations or assumptions are not acted upon; they are suspended or held in place so participants understand the meanings of shared experiences. Isaacs (1999) described two types of suspension. Suspension I involves thinking aloud or revealing one's inner thoughts to oneself and others so they are more easily understood. Suspension II, which results from Suspension I, entails being aware of where thoughts originate in terms of our personal experiences. In the spirit of dialogue, when conflicts arise, individuals focus on understanding the conflict and refrain from reacting or making assumptions. Suspension has an important role within the school setting as it allows educators to refrain from reacting immediately to solve their problems until they explore and understand the challenge as a group with the intention of eventually developing an action plan (Lambert et al., 2002).

The fourth and final activity of dialogue is voicing. Speaking one's voice involves self-trust and requires individual to

1. Understand when it is appropriate to listen and when it is necessary to speak.

2. Know that silence it is acceptable when what to do or say is unknown.
3. Demonstrate a willingness to explore what one does not understand.
4. Choose the right words to express thoughts and ideas. (Isaacs, 1999)

Effective dialogue therefore involves listening actively, respecting differences, suspending judgment, and giving voice to one's thoughts and experiences. Bohm (1996) states true dialogue occurs when, "each person is participating, is partaking of the whole meaning of the groups and also taking part in it" (p. 40). These dialogical processes have an important role in effective professional development which requires teachers to share their personal thoughts and experiences within a collaborative setting to build knowledge and understandings for school improvements (Speck & Knipe, 2005).

Within professional learning communities, dialogue occurs as teachers collaborate with one another in teams to acquire knowledge, skills, and strategies (Hipp & Huffman, 2003). The conversations of professional learning communities are reflective in nature, allowing members to be students and teachers (Kruse & Louis, 1993). The reflective dialogue of professional learning communities improves the school by creating shared understandings about the community's values in relation to the students, learning, and teacher practices (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). This dialogue attempts to, "make conscious that which is unconscious" (DuFour & Eaker, p. 135). Constructivists view reflective conversations that center on teacher investigations of school data and student work as inquiry conversations (Lambert et al., 2002). It is through these inquiry conversations and reflective dialogue that learning transpires within the collaborative teams of learning communities (Hord, 2004).

Ensuring the collaborative teams of professional learning communities are participating in true dialogue is a necessity for teacher learning to occur (Chapman & Watson, 2004; Speck & Knipe, 2005). Chapman and Watson noted that members of learning communities must understand dialogue and discussion as two different processes. In his comparison of the two, Isaacs (1999) stated that discussions entail finalizing decisions from set choices whereas dialogue involves exploring choices and choosing from those shared. As teachers collaborate, they must realize dialogue serves to expose participants to other realities rather than forcing opinions or ideas upon others (Speck & Knipe).

Providing teachers opportunities to participate in dialogue by establishing collaborative teams does not necessarily lead to school improvements (DuFour et al., 2006a; Grom, 2005). Reflective dialogue lays the foundation for the collaborative work of professional learning communities as teams engage in inquiry cycles to examine instructional practices, listen and reflect upon the ideas of others, plan courses of action, and share the results (Hord, 2004). If the conversations of the team are not focused on discovering strategies to improve teacher and student learning, the dialogical interactions of the team will fail to result in school improvement (DuFour, et al.). Grom cautioned, “To simply restructure for collaboration in teams and name it such does not mean the tenor of conversations will yield collective inquiry into the improvement of practice” (p. 272). Hence, the current study explored the collaborative teams of professional learning communities to discover team practices that promote the facilitation of productive collaborative dialogue and interactions.

In her multiple case study of three middle schools, Grom (2005) investigated the phenomenon of teachers' grade level meetings. The purpose of the study was to determine how these meetings influenced teacher knowledge and application of standards driven practice. Qualitative data collected from the social interactions and peer group discussions among the 16 study participants indicated the team conversations focused primarily on scheduling and managing instructional resources rather than curriculum and professional discourse. Because this study occurred in a middle school setting using qualitative research strategies, Grom recommended investigating the interactions of learning teams further in different settings or school levels using alternative research methods to investigate further the relationship between grade level conversations and teacher learning.

Similar to Grom's (2005) study purpose, the current study sought to determine how the dialogue of grade level meetings within professional learning communities impacted the professional development of teachers as they implemented a new standards based curriculum. Each grade level team at the research site represented a professional learning community that met weekly to share practices and engage in collaborative dialogue. This researcher expanded the research generated by Grom by conducting a phenomenological study within an elementary school setting. Collecting qualitative data through interviews revealed whether the dialogical interactions of the grade level meetings within the researcher's elementary school influenced teacher learning and professional growth.

Dialogue is a complex activity that involves listening, respecting, suspending, and voicing to gain meaning and understanding. The collaborative teams of professional learning communities provide teachers opportunities to participate in dialogue for professional growth and school improvements. For results to occur, however, the conversations of learning teams must qualify as dialogue, which leads to shared understandings rather than discussions, which involve decision-making. There was a need for additional research to investigate the dialogical interactions of learning communities to discover how these conversations relate to professional growth, which was the focus of the current study.

The Underlying Principles of Professional Learning Communities

Participation in professional learning communities enables teachers to provide their students with opportunities for higher standards of learning that prepare them for the demands of today's society while facilitating the acquisition of new instructional practices that result in enhanced student learning (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). The three functions of school-based professional learning communities include improving instructional practices by building and managing knowledge, creating a common language, vision, and standards for practice within the school, and sustaining a school culture of learning and teacher growth (McLaughlin & Talbert). According to DuFour (2004), three big ideas represent the underlying principles of this effective professional development practice. These principles include ensuring students learn, collective learning through a culture of collaboration, and a focus on results. Following is a

discussion of how the interactions among members of learning communities support school improvement efforts.

Ensuring Students Learn

In schools with professional learning communities, the focus of the school shifts from providing students knowledge to ensuring students are learning through the collective efforts of the school (DuFour, 2004). Increasing student achievement becomes the responsibility of the entire school rather than each individual teacher (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). As they work to ensure students are learning, three questions drive the work of educators within professional learning communities: “What do we want our students to learn?; How will we know when students have learned it?; and How will we respond when students experience difficulties learning?” (DuFour, p. 3). Also charged with answering these questions are Georgia teachers as they strive to become familiar with the new standards, design performance tasks, and assess student learning (Georgia Department of Education, 2006). The supportive conditions of learning communities such as scheduled times for sharing, systems for communication, and teacher empowerment for choosing best practices (Eaker et al., 2002; Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Hord, 2004) enable teachers to address these GPS components. The structures of learning communities support a continuous process of collective learning as teachers have opportunities to participate in reflective conversations that enable them to determine how well they are meeting the needs of their students and the school (McLaughlin & Talbert).

In addition to creating a supportive environment with structures for collective learning, professional learning communities set high expectations for success to ensure

all students learn. NCLB required states to define adequate yearly progress (AYP) for student achievement and holds schools accountable for meeting those guidelines (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Professional learning communities envision all students as capable of success, and they create a learning environment that enables students to reach their academic potential (Hord, 2004). Through an ongoing learning cycle, teachers (a) review school data to determine the skills and strategies needed to improve their efforts in helping students succeed, (b) learn those necessary skills and strategies, (c) apply those skills and strategies, and (d) monitor the results of their efforts (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). This cycle ensures the academic achievement of students.

Learning through Collaboration

To acquire the knowledge and skills needed to implement a standards-based curriculum, educators require professional development training that provides opportunities for teacher learning, collaboration, and mentoring (Gaddy et al., 2002). Teacher learning and understanding of the standards and their expected learning outcomes is necessary for students to receive quality instruction (Darling-Hammond, 1997). Collaboration aids in this professional development endeavor, as teachers work in groups to increase understandings of student needs, to share professional knowledge, and to learn effective instructional strategies (Valli & Hawley, 2002). When teachers work as a team, they discover the strategies needed to incorporate research-based practices into their standards-based classroom instruction (Gaddy et al.). The collaborative and collegial interactions of learning communities make them a practical choice as a professional

development strategy that provides educators opportunities for continuous teacher learning and ensures the successful implementation of school improvement efforts.

One researcher cautioned; however, teacher collaboration that involves sharing personal practices is a challenging community component for many schools to implement (Capers, 2004). The results of this study come from a review of qualitative data collected from 22 schools across the country during a three-year period for the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. Teacher reluctance to sharing and a lack of other supportive conditions such as training, time, a collaborative culture, and leadership attributed to the challenge of establishing this feature within the schools' professional learning communities (Capers). The implementation of GPS requires teacher sharing of knowledge. The results of Capers' study therefore supported the need for further research of the dialogical experiences of learning community participants to reveal how teachers perceive their experiences and the impact those experiences have on the acquisition of professional knowledge.

Focusing on Results

Within professional learning communities, the shared visions and values held by staff members focus on increasing student achievement (Cibulka & Nakayama, 2000; Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Hord, 2004; Kruse & Louis, 1993). This strong instructional focus results in a dedication to helping all students reach their full potential, without attempting to make excuses for student failure (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). NCLB holds schools accountable for the academic of achievement of all students within the schools regardless of race, socioeconomic status, or their differing learning needs . The shared

vision and values held by professional learning communities create expectations for staff behavior and for classroom environments that maximize the learning opportunities for all students (DuFour & Eaker; Hipp & Huffman). These shared visions and values also support Georgia's primary purpose of developing a standards-based curriculum, which was to provide teachers with clear expectations of student learning (Georgia Department of Education, 2006).

To achieve results in improving student achievement, teachers within professional learning communities gather data from student work and from classroom observations to assess their teaching strategies and to learn effective ways to improve their instructional practices (Cibulka & Nakayama, 2000). Teachers share their classrooms, makes notes about instruction, and participate in reflective conversations to assess and improve student learning (Eaker et al., 2002; Hipp & Huffman, 2003). Learning communities use student work within their collaborative teams to gain valuable knowledge about the effects of their practices on student learning and strategies to improve instruction when students fail to meet the expected standards of learning (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Teachers participate in conversations that enable them to reflect upon problems and exchange or investigate strategies to discover their solutions. It is important to note, however, research indicated a need for further studies of learning team conversations to discover the impact of those experiences on teacher growth and student achievement (Planche, 2004).

Teachers receive multiple benefits when they share their professional expertise within a group setting (Speck & Knipe, 2005). Members of professional learning

communities collaborate to discover and share instructional strategies based on the needs of the school, implement new techniques in their classrooms, and reflect on the results of their practices and student work to guide future actions. The underlying practices of these communities include ensuring students learn, collective learning through collaboration, and a focus on results. These strategies facilitate teacher learning of effective instructional practices for greater school improvements. In addition, they provide Georgia teachers with the professional development opportunities needed to increase teacher knowledge of the GPS. There was a need for further research; however, that investigated teacher perceptions towards the dialogical experiences of learning communities and the impact of those experiences on teacher growth and student achievement.

Professional Learning Communities as a School Improvement Practice

In addition to meeting the accountability demands of NCLB, Georgia teachers must also familiarize themselves with a new standards-based curriculum and its assessment pieces. There is a critical need therefore for schools to implement school improvement plans that provide teachers with high quality professional development (Guskey, 2000). Effective school improvement plans result in greater teacher and student learning (Little, 1993). While several studies cited the use of professional learning communities as a school improvement practice and reported results in increased student achievement, others noted the challenges to reculturing schools into professional learning communities. A discussion of these studies and barriers to overcome for the successful implementation of learning communities follows.

In their investigation of professional learning communities as a school improvement practice, McLaughlin and Talbert (1993) found that traditional staff development models are ineffective in increasing teacher knowledge and providing teachers with the skills necessary to implement national educational goals. This 5-year comparative study included secondary schools from California and Michigan. McLaughlin and Talbert also found that teachers who experienced the greatest success in helping students learn for understanding were members of an active professional learning community. Teachers in these communities increased their knowledge of teaching practices and engaged students in accomplishing the nation's educational goals. Because this study used data collected from secondary schools, there is a need for further research to determine if teachers within the elementary school setting report similar results.

Britton (2004) conducted a multicase study with a group of 49 teachers from 10 elementary grade level teams to investigate the relationship between teacher collaboration within professional learning communities and student achievement. In addition to gathering data through a survey, the researcher conducted individual interviews with principals from five participating schools and group interviews with teams from each school. Britton found that team leaders of professional learning communities lacked leadership training and recommended further research that investigates the behaviors of effectively functioning grade level teams. While this study examined the impact of collaboration on student achievement, it did not however address the impact of collaboration on teacher learning and professional growth.

Multiple researchers (DuFour et al., 2004; Feldman et al., 2003; Strahan, 2003) reported increases in student achievement with the implementation of professional learning communities. Each study reported the importance of teacher dialogue in diagnosing the academic needs of students, developing action plans to meet those needs, and adjusting professional practices to help students be successful. Not addressed; however was the impact of teacher perceptions towards participation in learning communities, which may influence the effectiveness of this practice as a professional development tool for teachers. There was a need, therefore, to continue analyzing the collaborative activities of professional learning communities to provide support for professional learning communities as a school improvement practice for increasing teacher and student learning (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006).

The literature presented how the underlying practices of professional learning communities create a collaborative school culture that supports teacher learning, but there are challenges to re-culturing schools into communities of learners (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005b; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Three challenges faced by schools included developing and applying shared knowledge; sustaining the hard work of change; and transforming school culture (DuFour et al.). In addition, McLaughlin and Talbert described three features of the school culture that influence the teacher and student learning that occurs. The first of these, the technical culture of a school, involves the teacher perceptions towards students, subject matter, instructional practices, and the use of classroom assessments (McLaughlin & Talbert). Transforming this culture within a school to support learning communities requires teacher understanding of the

professional learning community concepts and opportunities to apply them within their own school setting (DuFour et al.).

Two additional features of the school culture that influence teacher and student learning are professional norms and organizational policies (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). The professional norms of the school include “collegial relations, views of professional expertise, and conceptions of career” (McLaughlin & Talbert, p. 18). Organizational policies include the assignment courses and the allocation of resources. Using the collective efforts of the school to establish a collaborative school culture and support for structural changes and procedures requires dedication and determination from the staff and administration (DuFour et al., 2005b). The current study contributes to the literature related to the challenges of professional learning communities by describing and exploring teacher perceptions of their collegial interactions within learning communities and their use as a tool for professional learning.

Summary of the Literature Reviewed

Georgia schools face the challenge of selecting a professional development model that results in school improvements. Effective professional development is job-embedded, results-driven, and standards-based. The model of effective professional development requires that teachers become active participants in their learning as they collaborate with their peers to share practices and discover strategies that increase student achievement. Professional learning communities enable schools to meet this requirement by providing teachers opportunities for collaborative and collegial interactions within the workplace.

As a relatively new professional development practice, professional learning communities create a collaborative school culture that fosters teacher learning and school improvements. Constructivist theory supported the practice of teacher learning within a community setting. It is through social interactions and experiences within this environment that one may acquire knowledge and develop solutions to problems faced by the community. As constructivist learners, team members collaborate and share collective knowledge through dialogue to address and resolve challenges within the school. Components of these communities included a supportive and shared leadership, supportive structures, shared vision and values, collaborative teams and shared practices.

Communities of practice provide regular collaborative planning sessions, focused efforts to improve the school, and increased exposure to research-based teaching strategies. The collaborative culture of the school centers on improving student and teacher learning. The underlying practices of these communities included ensuring students learn, collective learning through collaboration, and a focus on results. These components are beneficial to educators as they provide teachers with the professional development opportunities needed to support teacher learning and school improvement efforts such as Georgia's standards based curriculum.

Because professional learning communities are a relatively new practice, the research on school improvement efforts associated with their use is limited. Several studies presented the use of professional learning communities as a school improvement effort with successful results for students in middle and high school settings. Lacking however, are studies that investigate the how teacher participation in the collaborative

dialogue of the professional learning communities impacts professional learning within elementary school setting. Another issue the literature failed to address was the impact of teacher perceptions towards participation in learning communities, which may influence the effectiveness of this practice as a professional development tool for teachers. These gaps within the literature warranted further investigations into the collaborative dialogue that occurs among members of professional learning communities within the elementary school setting to determine how those experiences impact the professional growth of teachers. Section 3 includes a description of the methodology employed to investigate the dialogical experiences of 6 learning community participants while sections 4 and 5 present the findings and an interpretation of those findings respectively.

SECTION 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate how participation in the dialogue of professional learning communities affects the professional growth of teachers. The current knowledge society emphasizes the importance of teamwork and the sharing of practices for teachers in the construction of professional knowledge (Hargreaves, 2003). While the collaborative teams of professional learning communities address this need, schools using this professional development practice have found establishing teams that participate in collaborative dialogue for teacher growth to be a challenging task (Britton, 2004; Capers, 2004; Grom, 2005; Planche, 2004). To gain a better understanding of the dialogical experiences that occur within professional learning communities, there was a need for further qualitative research which had the purpose of seeking to understand this social phenomena (Merriam, 1998).

This chapter presents the methodology used for this qualitative study of teacher experiences with dialogue during their grade level meetings within professional learning communities. It begins with a discussion of why qualitative methodology was the appropriate choice for this study and the role of the researcher in conducting the research. Following is an account of the data collection and data analysis procedures employed and a description of the setting and participants included in the study. This section concludes with an explanation of the measures taken to protect the rights of the participants.

Research Design

To complete this investigation of professional learning communities and describe the impact of the dialogue that occurred on the growth of teachers, this researcher chose a qualitative research design. Merriam (1998) described the qualitative research paradigm as “an umbrella concept covering several forms of inquiry that help us understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible” (p. 5). Whereas quantitative studies observe and measure information numerically to generate statistical data (Creswell, 2003), qualitative studies search for meaning and understanding of everyday lives as researchers collect data within a natural setting and use inductive analysis to produce narratives filled with thick, rich descriptions (Hatch, 2002; Merriam, 2002b). The quantitative design was unsuitable for the current study, because its purpose was to explore the experiences of teachers within professional learning communities, which cannot be measured numerically. The qualitative paradigm was appropriate for this study, because the researcher used the natural setting of an elementary school to explore the phenomena of dialogue within professional learning communities to gain an understanding of how participants perceived their experiences in relation to their professional development.

The qualitative tradition for this study was phenomenology. The purpose of a phenomenological study is to, “describe the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon” (Creswell, p. 51). Researchers select this approach when their goal is to understand the essence of human experiences (Hatch, 2002; Merriam, 2002b). The current study was characteristic of the phenomenological

approach, because the purpose was to understand the essence of the experiences that occurred during the grade level meetings of professional learning communities and the meanings of those experiences for teachers in terms of their professional development.

Before selecting phenomenology as the qualitative tradition for the proposed study, the researcher reviewed several other designs and found them to be inappropriate. One option was the case study. The goal of the current study was to describe and understand the meanings learning community participants give to their dialogical experiences through interviews rather than describing a case within a bounded system over a long period of time using assorted data collection techniques (Creswell, 1998, p. 61). The researcher therefore chose not to select case study as the qualitative tradition for the study.

Two additional options considered were ethnography and narrative research. Ethnographies investigate a cultural or social group within a natural setting over a prolonged period of time to identify cultural themes and patterns using socio-cultural data analysis (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2002b). The current study occurred during a shorter period and sought to describe the meanings of dialogical experiences and not cultural patterns, thus making ethnography inappropriate for this study. The researcher gathered data from the study participants that related specifically to their professional learning community experiences and their professional development and not details about their life stories, therefore, narrative research was not chosen as the design for the study (Creswell, 2003; Hatch, 2002; Merriam).

Research Question

A defining characteristic of phenomenological studies is that they focus on a question that seeks to (a) reveal the essence of human experiences, (b) discover the qualitative aspects of experiences, and (c) provide detailed descriptions of experiences rather than numerical data (Moustakas, 1994). The research question for the proposed study met these criteria and was as follows: How does the dialogue of grade level meetings within professional learning communities impact the professional development of teachers? This question served as the guiding focus throughout the study with the generation of additional questions during the interview phase of data collection. These probing questions served to solicit specific instances, stories, or events that revealed the essence of teacher experiences with dialogue during professional learning community meetings.

Setting

Selecting an appropriate research site involves choosing a setting that is familiar and accessible to the researcher and one that will aid in accomplishing the overall purpose of the study (Hatch, 2002). The research site for the study was an elementary school in a semi-rural community of southeast Georgia. On average, 650 students attend this school that serves grades kindergarten through fifth. Included within the staff of 94 members are two administrators, 49 certified teachers, 12 office and support personnel, 20 paraprofessionals, and 11 lunchroom and custodial staff. This site was appropriate for the proposed study, because it was familiar and accessible to this researcher as it has been her work site for the last 16 years. The researcher and potential participants had an

established relationship, because they were coworkers. Unlike the other elementary schools within the researcher's school district, the proposed research site used professional learning communities, or learning teams, as its method for providing teachers with on-going professional learning opportunities. The research site therefore supported the goal of this study, which was to describe the impact of teacher dialogue during the grade level meetings of professional learning communities on the professional learning of teachers.

Because of its proximity to a military installation, the community surrounding the research site is growing with the continuous influx of soldiers and their families. The installation has two large housing areas and two elementary schools; however, these are not large enough to support the large number of military families living in the area. This forces most of those families to live off the post and send their children to one of the 13 public schools in the county. The county school system assigns students to a school based on their address. After learning of this policy, many military families with elementary-aged children moving to the area choose to reside in the research site's school district because of recommendations made by other military families familiar with the school.

The research site is one of eight elementary schools in the county and was built 16 years ago to serve grades kindergarten through fifth. Military dependents comprise 50% of the student body. Transience associated with recurring deployments and orders to transfer to other military bases and transience associated with poverty result in a constant fluctuation in the number of students enrolled in the school. The number of students enrolled varies from 630 to as many as 680 throughout the school year. The large military

dependent population also results in a high turnover rate of returning students with only 50% to 60% of the students returning each school year. An example of how the student body constantly changes is illustrated by the fact that of the 120 fifth graders typically enrolled, only about 15 of them complete their entire elementary schooling at the research site.

The research site is a Title I school with more than half of the student population at risk of experiencing school failure. An average of 62% of the students enrolled at the school live in poverty. In addition, approximately 57% of the students are on a free/reduced-price lunch status. Many of the students live in single parent homes. It is not unusual for students to have a house key and the responsibility of caring for a younger sibling after school because the parent has to work beyond the hours of the school day and daycare is unaffordable.

Despite the challenges of being a Title I school and having a high student transience rate, the research site thrives as a school of excellence and has been recognized as a Title 1 Distinguished School for eight consecutive years. The school's visionary leader has inspired the entire staff to adopt a *no excuses* policy towards student learning and to believe every student is capable of achieving higher standards of learning. The staff uses data collected from within the school to determine the needs of their students and works aggressively as a team to discover how to address those needs.

There is a welcoming atmosphere as one walks through the doors of the school where the vision statement is, "We're changing the world one child at a time!" Visitors receive a warm greeting and an invitation to observe all the wonderful learning going on

throughout the building. The teachers are happy to be there. While about one-fourth of the teachers leave the school each year because of military transfers or the deployment of a spouse to another country, their connection to the staff at the research site is evidenced by the yearly Christmas cards and letters stating how much the school is missed and how it is like no other.

Participants

To select participants for the study, the researcher used criterion sampling. This sampling strategy involves selecting participants who represent predetermined criteria (Creswell, 1998; Hatch, 2002). For the proposed study, one criterion was that individuals must have participated in the dialogue of professional learning communities, which related to the purpose of the current study. Moustakas (1994) recommended additional criteria to consider when selecting participants for a phenomenological study. These criteria include the following: (a) participant interest in understanding the phenomenon, (b) a willingness to participate in lengthy interviews, (c) being agreeable to having conversations audio taped, and (d) a willingness to share the data collected in a dissertation (p. 107). The individuals invited to participate in the study met these criteria as well.

The recommended number of participants for a phenomenological study ranges from 5 to as many 10 participants (Creswell, 1998). This number is small, because the participants serve as the primary data source as they engage in lengthy interviews and dialogue with the researcher. The interview process is extensive because the goal is not to understand the “subjective experiences” of a participant; it is to understand the “human

experience” (p. 62) of the phenomenon being studied (van Manen, 1990). The researcher invited 6 teachers, one from each of the six grade levels at the research site, to participate in the study whose experiences within learning communities added depth to the study and who met the criteria described above. This invitation (Appendix A) to participate in the study was in the form of a scripted telephone call, which included an explanation of the study’s purpose, measures for ensuring participant anonymity, and procedures for disseminating the results. All 6 participants agreed verbally to participate in the study and signed a Participant Consent Form delivered electronically via email. When referring to the participants of the study, the researcher used pseudonyms to protect their identity and to ensure confidentiality.

The teachers who agreed to participate in the study were all Caucasian women between the ages of 27 and 54. Annette, Betty, Francis, Katherine, and Maggie (pseudonyms) were from the local community, and Alice was a resident of the area because of her husband’s assignment to the neighboring military installation. Annette and Katherine had always taught at the research site while the others had worked at other elementary schools in the surrounding area. All of the participants were certified at the elementary school level. Alice had a bachelor’s degree in early elementary education, while Betty, Francis, Katherine, and Maggie each had a master’s degree in early elementary education. Annette had continued her schooling after receiving her teaching degree and held an education specialist degree in curriculum.

As a group, the total years of experience as classroom teachers ranged from 5 to 32 years with these experiences varying in terms of the grade levels taught. Alice had

experiences with teaching one elementary grade level and five years of experience as an instructor at the university level. Betty, Katherine, Maggie had taught two different elementary grades, while Alice had taught three. Francis had taught all grades from kindergarten through sixth grade in both the private and public school setting. The participants also differed in their years of experience as a member of a professional learning community ranging from 3 to 11 years. None of the women had served as a leader for a grade level team; therefore, they were able to share a plethora of dialogical experiences from a participant's point of view rather than from a leader's perspective.

The phenomenological nature of the study required the inclusion of participants with vast experiences with professional learning communities and a willingness to share those experiences openly and honestly. Prior to inviting the women to participate, the researcher presented the list of the potential participants to the building principal to gain her insight. The principal agreed with the researcher's choices and felt they would provide valuable data because of their learning community experiences and their willingness to help the school improve as a whole. All of the teachers quickly agreed to be interviewed, with Alice, Francis, and Maggie perceiving the invitation to participate as an honor. The teachers were very prompt in returning their consent forms, and they were quick to provide convenient times during which they could be interviewed.

The researcher scheduled the interviews over a four-week period. Because the interviews took place during the summer months, the interviews were held in the conference room at the research site during a time chosen by each participant. This setting provided a comfortable and familiar atmosphere that was convenient for the

participants and ensured privacy and limited interruptions because school was not in session. All of the women arrived to their interviews in a timely manner.

They appeared to be both excited and nervous to share their experiences with dialogue. The researcher found that as each interview progressed, the participant became more relaxed and eager to share her dialogical experiences. Alice, Francis, Katherine, and Maggie even asked the researcher during their interview if they were rambling too much about their experiences, which indicated their comfort level during the interview process. A general comment made by Alice and Francis at the conclusion of their interviews was how easy it was to talk during the interviews, because it was more like a conversation than a formal interview. The others shared a feeling of disbelief at how easily their thoughts flowed in describing their experiences with dialogue during their learning team meetings. The sincere and candid conversations with the women of the study provided the researcher with a vivid picture of their experiences with dialogue in their professional learning community meetings. Included in section 4 are numerous stories and quotes by the participants that revealed the true essence of those experiences.

Protection of Participants' Rights

Researchers recommended strategies to ensure the protection of participant rights in qualitative studies (Creswell, 2003; Hatch, 2002; Moustakas, 1994). Prior to beginning the study, the researcher requested permission from the gatekeepers of the research site to conduct the study, which included the research site's building principal and superintendent (Creswell). In the Letter of Cooperation sent to these individuals via email, the researcher explained the nature and purpose of the study and how the data

collected from the study would be used and disseminated. Participants could decline to participate in the study if they so wished. The participants of the study were also notified of the nature and purpose of the study and the plans for disseminating the results during the initial scripted telephone invitation and with the Participant Consent Form (Hatch; Moustakas). Details such as participant names, places, and activities were masked to ensure confidentiality in the study (Creswell; Moustakas).

Role of the Researcher

Phenomenological investigations are conducted by researchers who have a personal interest in understanding the focus of the study and who are “intimately connected” (p. 59) with the phenomenon being explored (Moustakas, 1998). This researcher was a fourth grade teacher at the research site where she had been a classroom teacher for 15 years. She had been a member of three different professional learning teams within the school and a team leader for two of the grade level teams for a total of ten years. Her varying experiences with dialogue during the grade level meetings of the school’s learning communities fueled this teacher leader’s passion for discovering how others perceive their experiences within their learning teams.

Collecting qualitative data requires the researcher to work closely with the study participants; therefore, the researcher took measures to protect the rights of the participants and to ensure the trustworthiness of the study (Creswell, 2003). Prior to conducting the study, the researcher gained permission to use the research site for her study through a written request to the gatekeepers of the research site, which included the principal and superintendent of the school system (Creswell, p. 184). In addition, the

researcher gained permission to conduct the study from the Institutional Review Board of Walden University on June 24, 2008 (IRB # 06-24-08-0307484).

To conduct this study, the researcher invited her own coworkers from her own school to participate in the study. This practice is what Glesne and Peshkin (1992, as cited in Creswell, 2003) call “backyard” (p. 184) research, which can result in problematic issues such as biased data reporting and compromised behaviors during data collection. To address these concerns, the researcher used numerous strategies to ensure the validity of the findings such as member-checking, rich, thick description, and a report of discrepant information during the data analysis phase of the study (Creswell, 1996). Later within this section is a more detailed explanation of how the researcher used these measures to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.

Data Collection

Implementing a phenomenological study requires a firm understanding of the philosophical underpinnings associated with this qualitative approach and the general procedures associated with its data collection procedures and interpretation (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1998; Van Manen, 1990). According to Moustakas, “phenomenology is concerned with wholeness, with examining entities from many issues, angles, and perspectives until a unified vision of the essences of a phenomenon or experiences is achieved” (p. 58). To understand the essence of experiences, data collection for these studies involves collecting data through long interviews and dialogue with individuals who have experienced the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell; Hatch, 2002; Moustakas; van Manen). From 5 to as many as 10 people who are willing to be share

their experiences openly with the researcher may participate in this kind of study (Creswell).

The primary data source for this study therefore was in-depth interviews with six teachers from the research site. In-depth interviews are designed to gather detailed explanations, examples, or descriptions of experiences using questions or probes that may change depending upon the experiences shared by the informants (Hatch, 2002; Moustakas, 1994; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). These interviews are conversational in nature, with the research question serving as a guide for topics explored (Moustakas; van Manen, 1990). Within a phenomenological study, in-depth interviewing involves asking the participant to share personal anecdotes, stories, experiences, and incidents to reveal the true essence of their lived experiences (van Manen).

For the current study, the researcher developed her own interview questions to collect data related to themes, ideas, and concepts describing the relationship between dialogue within professional learning communities and the professional growth of teachers. Designing interview questions requires that the researcher be aware of her own personal biases to avoid offending the interviewees and to avoid asking leading questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Hatch (2002) recommended that effective interview questions do the following:

1. Be open-ended.
2. Use language that is familiar to informants.
3. Be clear.
4. Be neutral.

5. Respect informants and presume they have valuable knowledge.

6. Generate answers related to the objectives of the research.

To ensure that the interview questions were unbiased and not leading, the researcher used the criteria recommended by Hatch and asked open-ended questions that enabled the participants to describe their experiences related to the variables within the research question. In addition, the researcher created an interview guide (Appendix B) to aid in gathering findings that provided a true picture of the phenomenon under investigation (Moustakas, 1994). Following the format recommended by Moustakas, the guide included broad, open-ended questions designed to solicit rich, thick descriptions that described the essence of the interviewees' dialogical experiences within professional learning communities.

Prior to conducting the interviews, the researcher contacted the six potential participants through a scripted telephone call. During this initial contact, the researcher used the same telephone script with each potential participant to explain the nature and purpose of the study. All of the teachers agreed to participate in the study and later signed a Participant Consent Form via electronic signature. After signing their consent forms, the participants shared a convenient date and time for their interview, which occurred in the conference room at the research site. These interviews were scattered over a four-week period beginning the first week of July 2008 and on average, lasted approximately one hour each.

While many qualitative methodology textbooks described data collection and analysis as two different phases, van Manen (1990) suggested the phenomenologist

combine these two processes during the initial data collection phase of the study. As the researcher collects data through conversational interviews, she also reflects upon the experiences shared and continues to engage the interviewee in continuous dialogue until she is able to obtain a solid understanding of an experience. This process involves asking probing questions that invite participants to share the etymological meanings of their words and phrases to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon (van Manen). Scattering the interviews for this study over a four-week period enabled the researcher to begin analyzing the data after the completion of each interview and use the information gathered to develop additional probing questions used to solicit rich, thick descriptions from the interviewees.

Immediately following each interview, the researcher made a duplicate copy of the digitally recorded discussions onto micro cassette tapes. With this task completed, the researcher began the process of transcribing the data to ensure the quality of the data collected (Hatch, 2002, p. 113). A transcriber with a foot pedal made it possible to transcribe the six interviews in a reasonable amount of time. During the transcribing process, the researcher developed a code for highlighting and color-coding statements within the transcripts related to the review of the literature presented in section 2 (Appendix C).

While investigating the experiences of others, it is important for the phenomenologist to take measures to avoid researcher bias in developing and asking questions (Hatch, 2002). To address this issue, the researcher established *Epoche* prior to each interview. *Epoche* involves suspending one's judgments about a phenomena

(Sokolowski, 2000) or “setting aside predilections, prejudices, predispositions, and allowing things, events, and people to enter anew into consciousness, as if for the first time” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). Establishing Epoche for the current study required the researcher to clear her mind as much as possible of her prior experiences with dialogue within professional learning communities before interviewing the participants. This measure ensured that the researcher listened to the dialogical experiences described by the participants with as little prejudice as possible and with an open mind about what the participants had experienced within their own professional learning communities. Being out of the school setting for a two-month summer break prior to conducting the interviews facilitated the establishment of Epoche for the researcher.

An additional strategy used to address the challenge of researcher bias is bracketing (Moustakas, 1994). This practice involves setting aside one’s own perceptions related to a phenomenon prior to beginning the interview process so the data collected reveals the phenomenon as it naturally occurs and is not a subjectively recorded interpretation (Giorgi, 1985; Moustakas; Sokolowski, 2000). Bracketing one’s own personal reactions and reflections as fieldnotes during interviews also enables the researcher to keep personal biases separate from the descriptive data being collected (Hatch, 2002). For this investigation, the researcher bracketed her own perceptions related to the dialogue of professional learning communities before beginning the interviews. In addition, she included a field note section on the interview guide used in the study to record her thoughts and possible interpretations during the data collection phase of the project.

Data Analysis

With data collection complete and the interviews transcribed, the researcher used a thematic analysis to discover how dialogue affects professional growth within professional learning communities. This kind of analysis involves searching for themes across all the data that represent or capture the meaning of lived experience descriptions (van Manen, 1990). The researcher reviewed the transcribed interviews and searched for experiential themes using a selective reading approach. Using this strategy, the researcher wanted to answer the question, “What statement(s) or phrases(s) seem particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon or experience being described?” (van Manen, p. 93).

Reading the transcripts of the learning community participants numerous times allowed the researcher to identify themes related to the phenomenon of dialogical experiences within professional learning communities. Statements and specific instances and events revealing the essence of those experiences were recorded along with their corresponding page number on an analysis worksheet created by the researcher (Appendix D). Using this worksheet, the researcher was able to sort the statements further, which later resulted in the generation of thematic statements that described the impact of dialogue on the professional development of teachers. The researcher also compared the findings with the literature reviewed on collaborative teams and dialogue to both distinguish the current study’s findings from and relate them to existing research (Moustakas, 1994).

To ensure the accuracy of the findings, the researcher implemented several strategies as recommended by the literature (Creswell, 2003; Hatch, 2002; Merriam, 2002a; Moustakas, 1994). One strategy was the triangulation of data. Triangulation of qualitative data involves “using multiple investigators, multiple sources of data, or multiple methods to confirm the emerging findings (Merriam, 1998, p. 204). During the final data analysis phase of the study, the researcher used the data collected from the six study participants as multiple data sources to generate the themes related to the phenomena of dialogue within professional learning communities. In addition, this dissertation reports negative or discrepant information that contradicts the themes revealed during the analysis phase of the study to ensure the reliability of the findings (Creswell).

Two final measures used to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings were the use of member checking and rich, thick description (Creswell, 2003; Hatch, 2002; Moustakas, 1994). Member checking, which involved asking the study participants to review the interpretations drawn from the data, ensured the trustworthiness of descriptions reported (Creswell; Merriam, 2002a). Section 4 presents the findings using rich, thick description that includes direct quotes and stories from the participants to reveal the essence of their dialogical experiences within professional learning communities.

Summary

This section described the methodology used for this phenomenological study of teacher dialogue during the grade level meetings of professional learning communities. The

setting and participants were described in detail, as was the role of the researcher in conducting the research. The section presented an account of the data collection and data analysis procedures employed and the measures taken to protect the rights of the participants. Following is Section 4, which presents how the data was collected and analyzed, the findings gathered from the interviews, and the measures used to ensure the quality of the study. The report concludes with an interpretation of the findings, implications for social change, recommendations for action and further study, and reflections of the researcher in section 5.

SECTION 4: RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand how dialogue during the grade level meetings of professional learning communities impacts the professional development of teachers. The following section provides a detailed explanation of the processes used to generate, gather, and record the data for the study. Additionally, it includes a presentation of the study's findings along with the themes related to the effects of dialogue within professional learning communities on teacher growth. This section concludes with a discussion of the procedures used to assure the accuracy of the data.

Data Gathering and Recording

Phenomenological investigations typically use lengthy interviews as the means for collecting data (Mousatakas, 1994). Six teachers from a southeast Georgia elementary school served as the participants for this study. Thoughtful consideration was given prior to inviting potential participants to ensure they met the criteria specific to this phenomenological study. These criteria included (a) having an interest in gaining a better understanding of dialogue with professional learning communities, (b) being willing to participate in lengthy interviews, (c) being agreeable to having the interview recorded, (d) being accepting of sharing the findings of the data (Mousatakas). The researcher invited the participants to take a part in the study through a scripted telephone call, which explained the nature and purpose of the study as well. All of the invited participants agreed both verbally and through electronic signature to participate in the study.

When conducting interviews, Hatch (2002) recommended the researcher choose a comfortable place that provides comfort and privacy. The researcher chose the conference room located at the research site as the setting for the interviews. This location was convenient for all of the participants, provided privacy, and ensured limited interruptions because it was summer and school was not in session. After each participant consented to participate in the study, the researcher contacted her to schedule a convenient date and time for the interview.

With each interview, the researcher arrived early to test the digital recorder used in the study and set up a comfortable seating arrangement (Hatch, 2002). When the interviewee arrived, the researcher initiated informal conversation to create a more relaxed atmosphere for the participant (Hatch; Mousatakas, 1994). Before beginning the formal interview, the researcher reviewed the study's purpose, shared procedures for ensuring anonymity in the study, and encouraged the interviewee to be open and honest. The researcher used an interview guide with questions designed to gather rich, thick descriptions of dialogical experiences within professional learning communities. Each interview lasted approximately 1 hour.

At the conclusion of each interview, the researcher thanked the participant for sharing her experiences with dialogue during her grade level meetings. The researcher also asked the participant if she would be willing to participate in a follow up interview if further explanations of her experiences were necessary. All 6 participants agreed. To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, the researcher shared the strategy of member checking with each participant (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 2002b). As a member of the

study, the researcher explained that each teacher would receive a copy of her interview transcript and have an opportunity to review the researcher's interpretations drawn from data collected after the data analysis.

After writing her initial interpretations of the findings, the researcher shared them with each of the study participants. The women were asked to review the findings to ensure the data collected was reported correctly. All of the women agreed with the findings of the study. They also agreed that the researcher had presented an accurate representation of their dialogical experiences within professional learning communities and its impact on them as professionals.

Systems for Tracking the Data

The researcher digitally recorded each interview and later copied them onto micro cassette. After transcribing each interview, the researcher locked a printed copy of the transcript, the audio cassettes, and digital recorder in her home office filing cabinet. The transcripts reviewed, dated, and signed by the participants were stored here as well. The digital copies of the transcripts were stored on the researcher's password protected home computer.

The researcher maintained a notebook to keep track of the paper data used in the study. In the notebook was a copy of the telephone script used in the initial contact with the participants and pages for recording the date and time of the interviews. Following each interview, the researcher placed the interview guide used for that interview in the notebook. The researcher used the interview guide to direct the interviews. The interview guide also included space for the researcher to use to bracket her thoughts, which is a

strategy recommended for qualitative researchers to limit researcher bias (Hatch, 2002). Few comments were written; however, as the researcher found herself focusing heavily on the stories and experiences shared by the participants (van Manen p. 67). To ensure confidentiality, the researcher stored the notebook in a locked cabinet drawer in her home office.

Data Analysis

With the interviews complete, the researcher began the process of analyzing the data. The researcher chose to transcribe the interviews herself, which is recommended by Hatch (2002), because it allows one to “add context, nonverbal information, and bracketed notations” (p. 113). The transcriber with foot pedal used required that the researcher transfer the digitally recorded interviews to micro cassette. This activity allowed the researcher an additional opportunity to listen to each interview and review the dialogue shared.

While transcribing the interviews, the researcher color-coded statements that related to the literature reviewed in section 2. In addition, notes were inserted during the typing of the transcripts when the comments or experiences shared by a participant were similar or very different from those shared by another. After the completion of each transcription, the researcher printed and reviewed each one. This provided the researcher a third opportunity to review the data.

The researcher used a selective reading approach to analyze the data collected from all six participants. This method involves listening to or reading a text numerous times to discover statements or phrases that reveal the essence of the experience being

described (van Manen, 1990). For each interview question, the researcher read all of the responses for that particular question and recorded the significant phrases, statements, interviewer reflections, and quotes along with their page numbers on an analysis grid developed by the researcher (Appendix E). With this task complete, the researcher reread each transcript searching for additional phrases and statements related to dialogue and the professional development experiences shared by the participants. Following that work, the researcher reviewed the grid and wrote her reflections of the experiential themes revealed in the interview data.

Findings

To gain an understanding of how dialogue during the grade level meetings of professional learning communities affects the professional development of teachers, the researcher engaged six teachers in lengthy interviews using open-ended questions designed to solicit rich, thick descriptions of their experiences. Mousatakas (1994) recommended beginning interviews with questions intended to create a “relaxed and trusting atmosphere” (p. 114). The interviews began with questions designed to accomplish this task as the participants answered the following: First, tell me a little about yourself. How long have you been teaching? What are your general teaching experiences? How long have you been a member of a professional learning community?

The classroom teaching experiences of the six participants ranged between 5 and 32 years. With the exception of Annette, all of the participants also had experience teaching at multiple grade levels. The participants were very similar in their years of

experience as professional learning community members with experience ranging from 3 to 11 years.

In addition to creating a comfortable atmosphere for conducting interviews, a phenomenological study requires that the researcher provide the participant time to focus on their experiences related to the study (Moustakas, 1994). Engaging participants in conversational interviews also enables the researcher to probe into the etymological meanings of the words and phrases used by the interviewees to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon being explored (van Manen, 1990). Interview questions 2, 3, and 4 included the following:

2. What comes to mind when I say, “professional growth”?
3. How do you define dialogue?
4. How would you describe a professional learning community?

These questions were designed to provide the participants an opportunity to begin reflecting on their experiences related to the concepts of professional growth, dialogue, and professional learning community and the meanings given those concepts in relation to the overall research question, “How does the dialogue of the grade level meetings within professional learning communities impact the professional development of teachers?” Asking these questions also gave the researcher an opportunity to explore how the participants defined and perceived these concepts in relation to their experiences with the overall research question. The following paragraphs present a summary of how the participants defined the concepts of professional growth, dialogue, and professional learning community.

Participant Understandings of Professional Development, Dialogue, and Professional Learning Community

Overall, the teachers described professional growth and development as improving one's skills as a teacher to increase student achievement. Katherine explained the process of professional development as, "basically, to teach you how to teach better." The teachers noted the importance of evaluating teacher strengths and weaknesses and using data from the school in determining the professional needs of the teachers and in planning professional growth activities. Alice and Betty cited improved student performance as a tool by which they measured their growth as teachers. Maggie explained professional development as, "An opportunity to learn and grow from experiences and from others to promote student learning. You can measure your growth by how well your students achieve."

According to the teachers, the most common examples of activities that led to professional growth and development included experience within the classroom, sharing through dialogue, and school based classes or sessions with outside experts. The participants expressed that participation in what Annette called "generic" professional development that presents information unrelated to teacher needs as an activity that does not help one grow professionally. An additional strategy mentioned by Francis was reading research; however, for her, observation was important for her professional development.

Observing other teachers is another important way to grow professionally, because I'm the kind of person who is show me and I'll remember it. When I'm reading something, sometimes I have a difficult time applying

[it]. When I go in and see what others are doing, to me, that's the way I grow the most.

Alice, Betty, Francis, and Maggie also mentioned the usefulness of observing their peers' classrooms. Alice shared, "Being able to see other teachers' ideas and other teachers' implementation of technology gives us a better idea of what we can do more in our classrooms." To summarize, the teachers perceived professional growth and development as the practice of examining one's needs as a professional and participating in activities that address or develop those needs to increase student achievement.

The participants defined dialogue as a conversation between two or more people. They also perceived the purpose of dialogue as helping teachers grow professionally through the sharing of ideas and experiences with others. Annette and Francis differentiated talk from dialogue with talk being random and unfocused and dialogue being a focused exchange of ideas that involves everyone in the group. Within the school setting, all felt that dialogue occurs among professional learning community members throughout the school with the administration, with the students, and with parents.

According to Betty and Katherine, the act of dialogue involves "bouncing ideas back and forth." Betty elaborated further,

It is like stating a problem and then giving some solutions to that problem. Saying, "I've tried that. Try this." A trial and error kind of thing so there is a lot of reflecting and getting suggestions for a new way to approach a problem.

As the participants described the nature of dialogue, they painted a picture of all members of the group taking an active part in listening and speaking. Annette gave the following picture of dialogue.

During dialogue you would see people carrying on conversation. You'll probably see only one person speaking at a time. The others are listening to the person that's speaking. Maybe if someone is telling a story, people might be laughing or sharing ideas. If people are trying to make a decision on something in a dialogue, you might see people throwing out ideas. Its sharing ideas. I keep coming back to the word sharing, because dialogue is a lot of sharing with each other. Sharing ideas, sharing questions, sharing concerns. Just basically talking with each other and listening.

Maggie described dialogue as follows:

Dialogue is two or more people discussing and helping each other. Everyone is sharing and listening to get feedback on their thoughts. Everyone participates by bringing something to the table. Everyone has an open mind to learning from the others in the group.

Annette and Maggie mentioned that one might observe note taking as well. While Francis and Annette mentioned the presence of a leader in dialogue, they added that this leader serves not as a dictator of the conversation but as a guide to keep the conversations on topic. Francis shared,

Dialogue is a conversation between two or more people on a particular subject where there's no one person leading the discussion. Everybody has a part in a situation. You do need a leader and somebody that's kind of keeping things on track. But at any given time, that leadership role could change in dialogue. Basically, dialogue is a focused conversation between two or more people.

Therefore, for the participants in the current study, dialogue involves the sharing of ideas and experiences between two or more people to help individuals grow as professionals.

All of the teachers described a professional learning community as a group that shares a commonality and meets regularly to discuss concerns. The participants noted their grade level as the common element for their professional learning community. The most frequent topics discussed with their grade level members included housekeeping

items, which were noninstructional concerns related to teaching, lesson plans, instructional strategies, and student concerns. Betty, Francis, and Katherine mentioned additional examples of learning communities at the research site such as those that shared a common subject area, students, or similar instructional concerns.

Five of the participants admitted to having experiences with at least one grade level team that failed to meet the expectations of what she perceived to be a true professional learning community. The presence or absence of dialogue that related to their professional needs as teachers in the classroom was the characteristic that distinguished their learning community experiences from one another. According to Betty,

There have been years where everyone was being an active participant and those were good years. You learned a lot from each other. When the learning team changed, different people came in. They wanted to be an individual. They didn't really want to be a team. I felt like they didn't offer anything. They were just there because they had to be.

In her story of an ineffective learning community, Maggie shared,

It was, "What's mine is mine" and there wasn't much sharing. The dialogue was not the sharing of ideas to promote student learning, because there was a competitive spirit among some of the team members. This was different for me after having the feeling of family that I had shared with another team. There was a lot of taking, taking, taking and complaining and not a lot of sharing to help one another.

Several of the teachers noted the importance of the team leader in creating or discouraging an open environment for dialogue focused on teacher learning. Francis shared,

You know there's an old saying, "There's not I in team." And in order for there to be true dialogue that's going to meaningful and take place, you've got to have a leader that's going to encourage the team to participate in the

focused dialogue or its only going to be talk, and then when you leave the room, its going to be, “What did we talk about?”

In summary, the participants perceived a professional learning community as a group of teachers that meets regularly to share dialogue and address concerns related to their needs within the classroom.

After the participants described their experiences related to the terms in the research question, “How does the dialogue of grade level meetings within professional learning communities impact the professional development of teachers?,” the researcher used the remaining interview questions to further her understanding of the phenomenon of dialogical experiences within learning communities. When conducting a phenomenological study, one seeks to “explore the whole experience to the fullest” (van Manen, 1990, p. 67). The researcher therefore used questions that were similar in their focus to provide the participants many opportunities to reflect upon and share their grade level experiences with dialogue and its impact on their professional growth and development. During the interviews, the researcher also asked the participants to think of specific events, stories, or instances of each question to add details to the study and to reveal further the essence of their dialogical experiences (van Manen, 1990).

The previous section was shorter as it focused on how the participants defined professional development, dialogue, and professional learning community, which were the key concepts included within the overall research question. The following section is lengthier and provides the bulk of the findings, because it details the dialogical experiences described by the participants and specific events, stories and instances of the impact of those experiences on their professional growth.

Dialogue within Professional Learning Communities

The purpose of questions 5, 6, and 7 on the interview guide was to gain a clear picture of the grade level meetings experienced by the participants within their professional learning communities and the dialogue that occurred. These questions included the following:

5. What is the role of dialogue within a professional learning community?
6. Can you walk me through a typical meeting of your professional learning community and describe the dialogue that occurs?
7. Thinking about the dialogue that occurs during a typical learning team meeting, what thoughts stand out for you about the dialogue that occurs?

All of the participants viewed their grade level meetings and their professional learning community as one in the same. During their typical grade level meetings, the participants mentioned the use of an agenda, which provided a focus for the dialogue shared. Katherine explained that, “it’s used to kind of keep ourselves on topic, because we have so much dialogue in our professional learning community that we tend to get off topic.” Betty noted that the absence of an agenda in her experiences with one learning community resulted in little productive dialogue or opportunities for her professional growth. She shared this story:

With one team, we were not handed an agenda. The meeting was kind of open for any kind of thing that needs to be discussed. Usually it was, “Well what are you doing for math? What are you doing for workshop?” Whoever wanted to chime in did and that was pretty much it. It wasn’t very effective. It was a waste of time because nothing was accomplished.

To assert the importance of dialogue, Maggie stated the overall purpose of having focused dialogue in grade level meetings was to promote the professional growth of teachers for their students. Having an agenda helped to maintain focused dialogue that related to the needs of the teachers and their students.

During their grade level meetings, all of the teachers perceived the presence of dialogue as a necessity for professional growth. According to Betty, a meeting without dialogue is “dead time” because as she explained, “everything about teaching comes from dialogue with each other.” In their descriptions of the role of dialogue, Francis and Katherine viewed it as providing them continuous learning opportunities in the workplace that led to success and professional growth. Annette described dialogue’s presence in a meeting as “imperative with learning and growing and becoming better teachers, because you can learn by just sitting and listening.” In describing their varying experiences, the six teachers continued to stipulate the need for the dialogue to have a focus on their needs as a professional. Grade level teams that failed to include focused collaboration and the sharing of dialogue as an integral part of their meetings resulted in little or no professional development for all of the teachers. In her description of unfocused dialogue, Francis said, “Talk is cheap. Whereas when there’s dialogue, you’re learning; people are listening; and people are respecting each other.”

Annette and Katherine described dialogue and learning communities as being relative to one another, with the existence of a learning community being dependent upon the presence of dialogue. Francis made a similar assertion with the contention that dialogue gives purpose to the professional learning community, which results in the

promotion of professional growth. Betty used the phrase “good years” when recalling her experiences when dialogue was an integral part of the grade level meetings. She went on to say, “You learned a lot from each other,” because the team worked as a group to offer solutions to the problems faced by the teachers.

The teachers made a distinction between learning community meetings perceived as productive and those that were not when describing the role of dialogue in a typical grade level meeting. In productive meetings, the participants agreed that dialogue provides every member of the team an opportunity to grow professionally through the sharing of ideas and experiences. Annette shared that in productive meetings, “You’re going to get new ideas. You’re going to expand on an idea that you already have or you’re going to get a whole new idea and that can’t help but help you.” Alice gave the following account of how productive meetings provided all of her team members opportunities to share their strengths for the benefit of the whole team:

In our grade level team, every one of our teachers works closely together but yet we all have different strengths. For example, I worked on technology making word sorts, and I would share those with the group. We had another teacher who worked on our math standards and linking those to the essential questions, and she would share those with the group. We have another teacher that would come with science ideas and how to work on building our science instruction and she would bring those to the group. We just each take our own strengths, and we bring those into the professional learning community and that way we can learn from each other. We can learn from each other’s strengths. We are doing our planning; we’re doing our own projects; we’re doing our own lessons. But when you meet with the professional learning community you learn more about what other teachers are doing and that helps strengthen your class lessons.

The participants also described the role of the grade level leader in their productive encounters with dialogue. This leader is someone who provides the topics for

discussion and maintains the focus for the dialogue enabling everyone to learn through their participation in the meeting. Katherine stated, “She keeps us on topic, but that’s really her only role. She certainly doesn’t lead anything or do most of the talking. We all sit and share.” In her productive meetings, Annette shared, “Everyone is involved. Its not just the leader dictating what needs to be done.” Similarly, it is not what Francis described as a “dictatorship”, because everyone takes a part in contributing to the dialogue. She shared,

I feel that everybody is given an equal chance to have dialogue. I mean I don’t think that anyone runs the meeting. Everybody is putting in equally. Everybody is taking from the meeting equally. Of course, sometimes you might not have as much to say about a certain topic. But everybody has the opportunity to discuss freely.

According to the teachers, participation in meetings that included little or no focused dialogue resulted in no professional benefits. A lack of dialogue with one grade level team left Betty with no memorable learning experiences and a failure to grow professionally from those meetings. She explained that in that team, “two or three would talk but the others were just bystanders.” Maggie perceived her meetings with unfocused dialogue as “boring and nonproductive,” because teachers spent their time complaining rather than discussing how to help one another with challenges faced in the classroom.

Similarly, Katherine felt no professional growth occurred from her participation in grade level meetings where the dialogue with that team was irrelevant to her professional needs. She explained, “Absolutely no professional learning was going on at those meetings, because it was all personal issues. People were talking about husbands, children, and homes and stuff like that. We never discussed lesson plans or how to teach

things.” Francis depicted herself as one that requires interaction and conversation to learn, therefore her experiences in learning communities that lacked professional dialogue resulted in no professional growth. She explained, “In that team, there was a lot of talk but no dialogue. It was a struggle for the entire year. There was never dialogue that I felt like was beneficial for me as a professional.”

The participants described how focused dialogue created an accepting environment conducive to discussing professional challenges and allowed them to discover solutions to those challenges with their peers. For Maggie, this environment enabled her to “not be afraid to share my weaknesses as a professional.” Betty described it as, “You feel like everybody is a part of the solution instead of being divided. When there is a problem, it is solved as a team.” A sense of equality exists in this environment, as the teachers noted team members contribute to the dialogue by expressing their professional concerns or offering suggestions because there is not a fear of being judged.

Annette gave the following description of her team’s environment:

I’ve been fortunate enough to be with a group that I was so very close to that we could all share and not feel like we’re judged. Not feel like we were judged and that we were looked down upon for discussing an opinion or idea. I was with some people who were very strong. They had very strong opinions, but it was the type of environment where you felt safe to speak your mind.

Five of the teachers acknowledged there is an understanding during grade level meetings that it is acceptable to disagree with another during the dialogue shared and to adapt the solutions offered to meet one’s instructional needs. Alice told the following story of an experience with learning to teach area and perimeter.

Although each one of us did something different, we all talked about, “Okay, this is what I’m going to do. And this is what I’m going to do.” That really helped me see that it’s okay to be different, but we’re all on the same page. It helped me professionally, getting ideas from others and using those ideas to enhance my own.

Annette felt “blessed” because of the feeling of acceptance in her team.

I’m very blessed that there’s really been not negativity. There’s really been no hurt feelings for me personally. Now as for everyone else in the group, I don’t really know. But for me, I never felt like I couldn’t be honest and open and share. And then take what the other people said and bring it into my classroom and try it. And if it didn’t work, I felt very able to come in and say, “Hey, that does not work. I need some more ideas.”

According to Francis, however, when that feeling of acceptance is lacking and there is an unwillingness to listen to the ideas of others, the learning community meeting was ineffective. She described an instance with a team member who was unaccepted by some of the members of the team.

I was trying to listen to her, but every time she opened her mouth, one or two others shot everything she said down. “That won’t work. That won’t work. That won’t work.” She finally hushed. And later, I talked with her. And I even incorporated some of the things she did. I brought it back to the group, and it was accepted. It made me feel bad for her because coming from me, they accepted it. But coming from her, they wouldn’t even listen to it. They didn’t give value to anything she said. They already had this idea that what she had to say was not worth anything. When we had to post our standards, the administration saw how she did it and really liked it. It was more accepted. So coming from her, it was unaccepted, but if somebody else had the same idea, it was accepted and included in the dialogue. So maybe what I’m saying is so many times dialogue depends on who’s delivering it or who’s participating the conversation.

In addition to creating an accepting environment for sharing, the dialogue of team meetings instilled a greater acceptance of differing ideas and opinions within several of the participants. Francis described this as a “warm fuzzy” where every member feels her ideas are welcomed and accepted. Betty portrayed her meetings as having a receptive

environment for the ideas of others, “not that everyone is doing the same thing, but everybody has suggestions of how to implement something. They’re very open about it and don’t take offense that you’re saying to do it this way.” Maggie and Francis noted how the accepting dialogue of their teams helped them learn the importance of respecting the differences of others, which made them stronger and more mature teachers. Francis revealed,

Sometimes I run my mouth too much. I have to be very careful for myself that I can get off on a tangent and staying focused for me is a challenge. But I’m learning through these communities to talk about it. If I have a concern or an idea, put it out there and then it will be okay. You just have to be willing to open up, talk, and accept what other people have to say, because we’re all different.

According to Maggie, learning communities helped her grow in “accepting that everyone is different. We focus on helping in our meetings, but if someone doesn’t want to use an idea, its okay. I’ve become more accepting of other people’s differences and more mature about those things.” Noted by all of the teachers was how the dialogue of their team enabled them to become better listeners.

The teachers revealed how the dialogue of the grade level meetings facilitated the development of positive peer relationships. Annette and Francis perceived their learning community as a family, with the members supporting each other and showing respect for individual differences through dialogue. Alice shared her experiences enabled her to grow professionally because of the strong bond she shared with her team members. Katherine stated, “I am friends with my teammates.” Maggie likened her community to a family car. For a car to run productively, all of the tires need to be inflated. When a member of a learning community struggles, or in the case of the car, a tire becomes

deflated, the members fill that teacher up so the car can keep going and overcome challenges as a team.

Annette attributed her remaining in the teacher profession to the supportive dialogue and accepting atmosphere experienced in her professional learning community. As a new teacher, she was overwhelmed because her college experiences did not adequately prepare her for daily challenges of teaching. The dialogue of her learning team however provided her with support and guidance to overcome those challenges. She explained,

I feel like if I had not had a support group, to bounce ideas off of, I don't know that I would have continued teaching. I don't feel like it's just me on my ship doing my thing all by myself out in the middle of this big old ocean. I have all these other people with me to help me and to guide me and to teach me.

The teachers expressed the dialogue of their grade level meetings results in enthusiasm for trying the new ideas and strategies for the benefit of the students. Betty used the word "excited" in her account of dialogical interactions and she used phrases such as, "Oh yeah! I can't wait to try that!" or "Oh, I need to do that!" In her description of dialogue during grade level meetings, Annette used the words "positive experience," because she is able to "sit down and discuss and hash out all of these issues. [It's] a great way to learn from each other and get something accomplished." Francis related that her most beneficial dialogical experiences left her with a feeling of, "Oh, give me more!" because they gave her encouragement to try new instructional ideas to help her students succeed. Maggie, Alice, and Katherine expressed a greater feeling of satisfaction with the teaching profession from their experiences with their team members.

The accepting dialogue shared among the members of the grade level teams also created a sense of professional accountability for two of the teachers. Annette shared how the discussions with her peers enabled her to become a more honest and open teacher. She revealed further, “Being able to meet with each other and share ideas helps us not only be accountable to ourselves in our classrooms, but be accountable to each other.” With her team, Alice described a feeling of responsibility to help her team improve, because, “it drives you as a professional to do more for that grade level. It drives me to want to do my part.”

The purpose of questions 8, 9, and 10 was to provide the participants additional opportunities to describe and reflect upon specific instances and events with dialogue to reveal their impact on professional development. These questions included:

8. How do you feel the dialogue of your team meetings impacts you as a professional?

9. What changes to your professional growth do you associate with your participation in the dialogue of your professional learning community meetings?

10. What feelings or thoughts are generated through your involvement in the dialogue of your learning team meetings?

In their reflections, an impact shared by all was how the dialogue resulted in professional growth, because it was prescriptive to their needs as they grew and changed as professionals. Katherine remarked,

There are lots of ways to grow professionally. You can grow in exactly how you teach (and) what you teach. You can grow in how you manage your students. You can grow in how you motivate students....at certain times in your professional career, you need to grow in certain ways. The

people that you dialogue with at that certain point in time... you may help them grow in one way, and they're actually going to help you grow in another way.

Both Katherine and Alice revealed that during their early years of teaching, they needed help increasing their knowledge of the required curriculum and planning lessons.

Professional growth occurred for both as they listened to and processed the dialogue shared by the other team members. Later in their careers, as instructional planning became less difficult, the teachers told how they initiated dialogue with their team to discover behavior management strategies to handle discipline problems within their classrooms. Katherine shared,

So back then, I would say that my professional growth was more in the area of how to teach what I needed to teach. They specifically told me this is how you need to teach this or this is what you should do here. These are the activities or the projects that should go with it.

As she became a more seasoned teacher however, Katherine stated, "My focus now is more on behavior management and motivation and so the dialogue has changed to meet my needs at that specific time."

Annette also shared how the dialogue of her professional learning community enabled her to grow more as a professional than training provided in a large group setting. One specific incident involved an outside expert sharing math strategies with the entire school faculty.

She talked with us and we did (those activities) and that was all well and good, and I enjoyed seeing how manipulatives could be used in the classroom and how to create centers and things like that. I took a little bit with me, but it would have been much more useful had she been able to come to each grade level and do it, because a lot of the stuff she used, couldn't relate to first grade. The kindergarten and first grade teachers are

doodling on their papers when she's talking about things that don't relate to them.

According to the participant, professional development of this nature was unsuccessful in helping her grow. Within the smaller setting of grade level meetings however, dialogue allowed her to meet the needs specific to her classroom. She remarked that it "help(ed) [her] develop as professional," because she used the dialogue to evaluate and guide instruction to meet the needs of the students.

Several mentioned instances of how the focused dialogue of their team meetings enabled them to evaluate their own strengths and weaknesses as teachers to determine their professional needs. By sharing dialogue with her team members, Maggie gained ideas to help her students struggling with reading by reviewing sight words and practicing comprehension strategies. According to Alice, dialogue made it possible for the teachers to "either make those strengths stronger or figure out what the weaknesses were and try to improve those" using the collective efforts of the team. Specifically shared was how she encountered difficulties with teaching writing, because she perceived herself as a poor writer. By sharing that weakness with her team, Alice learned of several strategies to implement that proved effective for increasing her understanding of how to teach writing and later resulted in improved writing performances by her students. She explained with this story.

I had a real hard time teaching writing, because I'm not a good writer myself. I have a hard time in my writing. I don't really know what my weaknesses are, but it's hard for me to teach the students how to write a good solid paragraph. That's basically what we're trying to help [the students] do is to write a good solid link paragraph with a topic sentence, detail sentences, and a conclusion sentence. I had a student who was really struggling with staying on topic and would get off on a tangent. The

teachers gave me the suggestions that I mentioned earlier, having the students read it aloud, talk about their topic, and tell me what they're wanting to accomplish in their writing. From then on, in my teacher led instruction, I would use that suggestion at the beginning of my lesson. I would have those students talk out loud about what they wanted to write about and share out loud their ideas. Then we would use that as a brainstorming activity. Once they wrote their rough draft, they would each get into a group and they would read through their rough drafts out loud within their group. Students are very critical of each other so within those small groups, I would sit and I would listen. It really helped the students to understand about staying on topic. A lot of times they drew blanks and they have a hard time just getting those ideas on paper. So by talking out loud and using those small groups and using that in the beginning of my writing instruction instead of after they've already written it, [that strategy] really helped.

Similarly, Katherine and Betty revealed how sharing their strengths and weaknesses as professionals enabled them to develop as educators. Katherine shared that she struggled as a new teacher in the content area of mathematics. By consulting with her grade level team during their weekly meetings however, she learned specific strategies that increased her understanding of the math concepts and what the students needed to accomplish.

I would take the time to talk to them. "How are you going to teach this particular lesson? If the kids don't understand it that way, how are you going to reteach or enrich it?" I would take that time to discuss, because [math] was hard for me to teach.

"Beneficial" was the word Betty used to characterize how evaluating her practices through dialogue helped her as a professional. Participating in dialogue with team members provided insight into what she needed to change to become a more effective teacher with her instructional practices in the classroom. She stated, "Its very beneficial. It just helps you evaluate what's going on in your classroom own what can be changed for the better."

In addition to helping them improve their instructional weaknesses, three participants reported how dialogue increased their awareness of behavior management strategies. Betty and Katherine detailed how consulting with their team about behavior issues with particular students provided a different perspective on how to address those concerns. It also made Betty more aware of when she was expecting too much or too little in terms of behavior from her students, which led to what she perceived as a better learning environment for her students. When her behavior management plan no longer worked for her students, Annette asked for suggestions from her team, which led to positive outcomes within her classroom. After “bouncing ideas” with her team, Katherine learned effective motivational strategies for her students with learning difficulties, which resulted in improved teacher/student relationships.

That was a really great experience for dialogue, because we all got a chance to speak about how those [motivational] strategies had helped us. In particular, there was something called wait time, which is where if you ask a child a question, you give them the time they need to answer it. If you see the clock is running out, you don't say, “Okay, we've got to move on.” You actually give them however much time they need to answer that question. Then they see that their answer is valid and that's important in the classroom. We were sitting around the table and we all were discussing how that strategy in particular really helped to bring a lot of these students out of their shells.

She revealed further the impact of this dialogue by sharing, “I've been teaching the same subject for so long, and I think I've grown over the years in that. But I want to focus now on student motivation and student management and those sort of strategies.”

Listening to her team discuss the struggles of a particular student influenced Francis to “dig deep” and conduct an internet investigation to increase her knowledge of speech disorders to help a struggling student. From research, the teacher and her team

discovered the student had an expressive/receptive language disorder. This discovery led to Francis to further investigations into the practice of visualization and the use of graphic organizers to improve instruction. In her description of the incident, she detailed,

It just impacted me to realize that you need to dig deeper. Listening to those teachers and the dialogue with the parents, it helped me to grow in the respect that I need to listen to everybody. We need to listen to each other about any children so that [we] can grow and identify situations. And I became very sensitive of that after that meeting.

The teachers attributed the acquisition of new instructional strategies to meet their professional needs and the needs of their students to dialogical experiences during grade level meetings. During productive grade level meetings, the teachers perceived dialogue as helpful in their instructional planning, in discovering available resources, and in developing appropriate student assessments. Annette gave this instance with dialogue to illustrate how her math instruction improved.

We brought all of our files on money and we said, “How are we going to teach this?” In the past, we just used the worksheets and the math book and we had a few teacher made worksheets we used. This year we sat down in one of our learning community meetings, and we decided that we were going to do all hands-on math. Then the problem came up, “Well, how are we going to do this?” Everyone had to give their ideas. Everyone had to be able to share. “Well maybe we should use this. Maybe we should get stamps and the children could stamp the money out. Maybe all the children should have a manipulative box. They need to use those coins and those bills.” Had we not had the opportunity to sit down and discuss that, we would probably still be teaching math the same way we always taught math, and it would not be meeting the needs of our students.

Betty described how dialogue made learning new strategies and creating assessments easier.

I think you learn so much when you have a good community. You learn so much every time you go. The performance task was a time when we had to work together [and] when we came up with assessments or grade level

assessments or report cards tests. Any kind of little activity where you have to work together to get [those activities] accomplished, its better whenever it's a team effort. When everyone is actively participating, it's much easier and you just have the feeling of togetherness.

The six participants also discussed how the dialogue provided a variety of perspectives for instructional planning within the classroom. When the teachers left Francis's meetings, they did so "with the cogs turning" as they continued to discuss the ideas shared and the benefits received. According to Katherine, the dialogue of her team "opened" her mind to things she had not thought of before and shared the example of a Social Studies activity entitled "Market Day."

We've done [Market Day] for two or three years and when we started to do it this year, we discussed what we'd done last year. The good and the bad things and what worked and what had not worked from last year. We discussed, "How could we improve on things? How could we make things better? How could we do away with certain things that just did not work last year?" We did a lot of talking. We did a lot of dialogue about how to improve and make it more efficient for this year.

During the dialogue shard with her team, Annette described how she learned more about a small group instructional practice called "workshop time." At one time, the participant perceived this practice as, "not for me" because of the logistics involved. Participation in the dialogue of her team meetings however, enabled Annette to approach this practice from a new viewpoint as she learned organizational strategies and student activities to use. The teacher was able to implement workshop time in her classroom and was successful in providing her students enrichment and remediation.

Similarly, the data driven dialogue of Alice's professional learning community enabled her to learn from the strengths of others on her team while developing and enhancing her own instructional practices. Teachers within her grade level use their

strengths to develop lessons and activities related to the curriculum and share with the group. Alice used her strengths in technology to create interactive white board lessons and word sorts to share. During the dialogue shared with her team members, the teacher gained additional insight into strategies for teaching math and science. She shared her participation in the dialogue “has helped me professionally... getting ideas from others and using those ideas to enhance my own. Whatever I had in mind, it might even make it better.”

From the dialogue shared with their grade level teams, Betty, Maggie, and Alice learned instructional strategies. Betty learned a strategy for teaching sentence writing to her students, which also led to greater student motivation for writing. Maggie learned the benefits of modeling writing for her students and observed improvements in their writing. Alice also shared how the dialogue of her team provided her with a better understanding of the state mandated writing test and how to help her students be successful.

According to the six teachers, their knowledge of the state’s newly implemented standards based curriculum and its assessment pieces increased because of their participation in the dialogue of their grade level meetings. Dialogue with their team members provided Betty and Alice with a greater understanding of the language used in the standards and expectations for student performance. For Betty, dialogue made learning the language of the standards easier.

It was made easier, because everybody shared. ‘What do you think this is saying? What do you need to do for this?’ It was much easier working and getting ideas from everyone rather than one person trying to decipher what [the standard] meant.

For Annette, she was better able to manage her instructional pacing as her team determined the essential concepts that needed to be included in their instruction and those that could be omitted. For several of the teachers, their experiences with dialogue exposed them to an assortment of instructional standards based activities to meet the needs of the diverse learners within their classrooms.

The teachers revealed the impact of the dialogical experiences on their planning of standards-based lessons as well. Annette along with Maggie and Alice discovered how to provide their students with hands-on activities in area of mathematics. These teachers along with Francis and Katherine gained knowledge of effective approaches for teaching reading fluency and comprehension. Sharing dialogue with her team resulted in a “good experience” for Betty, because it facilitated her understanding of the new standards and it helped her to implement effectively performance tasks in the area of reading. The dialogue of Katherine’s grade level team also resulted in more productive performance tasks in areas of mathematics and social studies within their grade level and led to greater student motivation within their classrooms.

Being aware and better prepared for upcoming events and non-instructional responsibilities within the school was an additional impact shared by the teachers. The participants described these topics of conversation as “housekeeping” items. Dialogue of this nature keeps the teachers informed of deadlines and scheduling changes such as grade level programs, field trips, or mandated testing. Alice perceived these experiences with dialogue as “important”, because they keep everyone informed and “on the same

page” with happenings within the school. Francis described these dialogical experiences as “crucial” because they ensure “all the little pieces of our day to day life go together.”

Questions 11 and 12 provided the participants a final opportunity to reflect on the benefits and challenges to participating in the dialogue of grade level meetings within professional learning communities. These questions included:

11. What benefits do you received from participating in the grade level meetings of a professional learning community? Are there any challenges to being a learning community member?

12. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experiences with dialogue during your professional learning community meetings?

Shared by all of the participants at the conclusion of their interviews was the importance of dialogue to their professional growth as a teacher. Betty reflected, “Everything about teaching comes from dialogue with each other. If you didn’t have someone to talk with, how would you know what you’re doing is the right thing?” When asked to share her perceptions of how dialogue impacted her, Annette stated, “It makes me a better teacher. It gives me ideas and strategies that I probably would have never thought of on my own.”

Because “six heads are better than two,” Maggie looks forward to her team meetings, because she is able to learn from the varying thoughts and experiences of the others on her team. Francis and Katherine asserted the importance of dialogue to their professional growth as a necessity. Francis stated, “Oh, I’ve got have it. I think

everybody does. I don't think you can close the door and grow. I think you're going to become very stale."

Overall, the participants perceived differing personalities and unfocused dialogue as the primary challenges to being a member of a professional learning community. From their experiences, four of the teachers found the dialogue of their grade level meetings made little impact on their growth as professionals when the team members perceived themselves as individuals and not as a team. Explaining further, Betty depicted unproductive meetings as ones in which the team members were not open to sharing while Maggie described hers as "gripe sessions" where the majority of the meeting focused on complaining about challenges rather than listening to solutions offered by the group. According to Francis, there must be respect for and an acceptance of individual differences otherwise productive dialogue does not occur. Annette and Alice perceived maintaining dialogue that focused on the professional topics related to the needs of the teachers within their classrooms as a struggle.

Evidence of Quality

Six teachers from a southeastern elementary school served as the data sources for the study. Following the recommendations of Hatch (2002), the researcher asked questions that were unbiased and not leading during the lengthy interviews with the participants. In addition, the researcher used an interview guide with open-ended questions to maintain the focus of the interview and ensure the collection of data related to the phenomenon of dialogue during learning community meetings (Moustakas, 1994).

Prior to beginning each interview, the researcher established Epoche and set aside her thoughts and experiences with dialogue, professional learning communities, and professional development (Moustakas, 1994; Sokolowski, 2000). The researcher also bracketed her perceptions related to dialogue within professional learning communities, which is another recommendation for limiting research bias in a phenomenological study (Giorgi, 1985; Moustakas; Sokolowski). The interview guide used included space for recording the bracketed thoughts of the researcher. Because the interviewees were very descriptive in their recount of their experiences, the researcher made very few comments on the interview guides.

During the final data analysis phase of the study, the researcher used the transcribed interviews as multiple data sources to develop the thematic statements describing the impact of dialogue on the professional development of teachers. Care was taken to include numerous quotes and stories in presenting the findings to provide rich, thick descriptions of the dialogical experiences shared by the participants. To ensure further the trustworthiness of the findings, the researcher used member checking and allowed the participants to review their transcribed interview and the interpretations drawn from the data. All of the participants agreed with the findings and none recommended further additions or revisions.

Summary

This section provided a presentation of the results for this phenomenological investigation of the dialogue that occurs during the grade level meetings within professional learning communities. Included were the data collection techniques and the

systems for tracking the data. The findings presented the dialogical experiences of the six participants and included discrepant cases related to the research question. This section concluded with a discussion of the measures taken to ensure the quality of the data.

The dialogical interactions that occurred during the grade level meetings of professional learning communities provided the teachers with meaningful learning opportunities that related specifically to their needs and the needs of their students. The results of this investigation are significant for the greater education community, because they reveal the structures necessary for the successful implementation of professional learning communities as a professional development practice and the usefulness of dialogue that occurs for increasing teacher knowledge and improving instructional practices for greater student achievement. Included in section 5 is a more detailed discussion of the significance and social change implications that result from the findings of the current study.

SECTION 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview

The implementation of professional learning communities is a new professional development practice that uses collaborative interactions to increase teacher knowledge and further student achievement. A review of the research in section 2 revealed the characteristics of this practice and its use in school improvement studies. Lacking within the professional literature; however, was how the dialogue shared during the team meetings of professional learning communities impacts of the professional development of teachers. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate the phenomenon of teacher dialogue within learning communities to provide teacher leaders with a better understanding of how collaborative dialogue affects teacher knowledge for improved student learning and to reveal the viability of learning communities as a professional development practice.

The research question explored in the study was as follows: “How does the dialogue of grade level meetings within professional learning communities impact the professional development of teachers?” Because of the exploratory nature of the study, the researcher chose a qualitative research design. Using phenomenology as the qualitative tradition, the researcher used the natural setting of an elementary school to explore the essence of the dialogical experiences that occurred among six members of professional learning communities. This research design allowed the researcher to gain an understanding of the meanings given to those experiences by the teachers in terms of their professional growth and development.

Data collection for the study involved lengthy interviews with the 6 participants of the study in the conference room at the research site. To solicit rich, thick descriptions from the teachers, the researcher used an interview guide that included broad, open-ended questions. In addition, the researcher probed the participants to share specific stories, events, and instances with dialogue to reveal the essence of their dialogical experiences within their learning communities. With the completion of each interview, the researcher transcribed the data and began the initial data analysis phase of the study by searching for common themes related to dialogue and professional learning.

The researcher used theme analysis to analyze the data. This process involved reading each transcript numerous times, recording statements and specific instances on an analysis grid, and sorting those statements into groups. An initial analysis of the data revealed the participants' definitions of professional development, dialogue, and professional learning communities were similar to those provided by the literature. Theme analysis also revealed four thematic statements that described the impact of dialogue during the grade level meetings of professional learning communities on the professional development of the participants.

1. Professional growth for members of professional learning communities is contingent upon the presence of focused dialogue during grade level meetings.

2. The dialogue of team meetings creates a feeling of acceptance that results in professional growth.

3. Dialogue during the grade level meetings of professional learning communities results in learning opportunities that are prescriptive to the professional development needs of the participants.

4. Dialogue increases the content knowledge of teachers while providing them with opportunities for the acquisition of instructional strategies.

The participants perceived professional growth as being dependent upon the presence of focused dialogue that related to their needs as a professional. In addition, the teachers shared how they grew as professionals from their participation in the dialogue of their learning teams, because the dialogue created a feeling of acceptance that enabled them to feel comfortable to share ideas and challenges and learn from the experiences of others. The participants described the prescriptive nature of the dialogue shared during their team meetings, which resulted in learning opportunities that related to their specific professional development needs. Finally, the dialogue of team meetings provided the participants opportunities to increase their knowledge of the curriculum and exposed them to a variety of innovative instructional strategies.

Interpretation of the Findings

The guiding question for this phenomenological study was, “How does the dialogue of grade level meetings within professional learning communities impact the professional development of teachers?” Data collection for this investigation involved hour-long interviews with 6 teachers from one southeast Georgia elementary school. Each interview began as a conversation with the participants to glean their etymological meanings for the terms professional development, dialogue, and professional learning

communities. Overall, teacher experiences with these concepts resulted in common notions of what these words denote. The following paragraphs provide an interpretation of those findings. Also included is how those findings compare with the literature reviewed in section 2.

Professional Development Defined

Professional development promotes teacher growth through learner-centered and job-embedded processes that lead to the acquisition of skills, abilities, and understandings necessary for the improvement of student achievement (Speck & Knipe, 2005). Research indicated a need for these practices to be collaborative, job-embedded, results-driven, and evaluative (Center for Comprehensive School-Reform and Improvement, 2006; Guskey, 2000; National Staff Development Council, 2006a; Speck & Knipe). Similarly, the participants reported professional development as improving one's skills as a teacher to increase student achievement. Inherent to this process for the teachers was evaluating their professional strengths and weaknesses to guide and plan professional development activities.

To help teachers grow professionally, research indicated a need to implement collaborative professional development practices that enable teachers to construct knowledge through the sharing of ideas (Center for Comprehensive School-Reform and Improvement, 2006; Lambert et al., 2002; Valli & Hawley, 2002). Traditional professional development programs such as workshops and training sessions fail to provide teachers with the knowledge skills necessary to meet the challenges of today's classrooms ((McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Speck & Knipe, 2005). While the teachers

noted traditional examples in their explanations of professional development, they also included the collaborative practice of sharing dialogue and experiences within the classroom and observing their peers as means to grow professionally. Further probing revealed the most beneficial experiences as those that involved dialogue related to their needs as a classroom teacher. The current study therefore supported the effectiveness of using the sharing of knowledge through dialogue as a professional development practice.

Dialogue Defined

Isaacs stated, “Dialogue ...is about shared inquiry, a way of thinking and reflecting together. It is not something you do to another person. It is something you do with people” (Isaacs, 1999, p. 9). It is through dialogue that individuals are given opportunities to hear innovative ideas and develop shared understandings of experiences (Bohm, 1996). The definitions for dialogue provided by the participants were very simplistic initially. They portrayed dialogue as a conversation between two or more people for sharing ideas and experiences with others.

As presented in section 2, the act of dialogue involves four activities: listening, respecting, suspending, and voicing (Isaacs, 1999). While the teachers did not use this exact terminology in their initial definitions, the experiences shared as the interviews progressed revealed the presence of these practices in their grade level team conversations. The teachers depicted dialogue as a group process with every member participating equally through active listening and speaking rather than one person dictating the focus of the talk. Included in the stories of how dialogue impacted the teachers professionally were the processes of respecting and suspending. These processes

involve respecting the uniqueness of each group member and suspending one's thoughts to explore the meanings of experiences shared. Betty revealed the importance of these dialogical processes for her professional growth:

I think to be able to grow, you need to share your feelings and be able to get feedback. You evaluate your own teaching through talking with others. You can realize, "Oh, I need to do that" to help you be a better teacher. When you hear other people talk about things going on in their classroom, you think, "Oh, I haven't thought of that before" or "Oh, that would be so much easier." So I think it helps you to be a better teacher. The more ideas you can hear about, the more strategies, it just makes your job easier and it helps you grow and be able to use those in your classroom and makes it a better learning environment.

Professional Learning Community Defined

A professional learning community is defined as a group of teachers who share a commonality and work collaboratively to improve the school by investigating and sharing strategies, implementing them in the classroom, and reflecting on the results to increase student achievement. (Cibulka & Nakayama, 2000; DuFour et al., 2006a; Huffman, 2000). As discussed in the Findings of section 4, the participants perceived their grade level teams as a professional learning community with their grade level serving as the commonality shared. The interview data revealed the participants had a firm understanding of learning communities and their practices. The teachers described a professional learning community as a group that shares a commonality and meets regularly to discuss concerns.

Five of the participants acknowledged being a member of a team that was not a true professional learning community. While these ineffective teams met weekly, they failed to include dialogue related to the professional needs of the teachers. Little or no

professional learning occurred for the teachers when they were members of those teams.

As Francis related:

When you have a meeting where nobody is talking about anything important then it just is not a productive meeting. I mean the reason you get together in groups is to discuss and to talk about things and maybe you have an idea that somebody else doesn't have or maybe somebody has had an experience with a child that you didn't. It's not a professional learning community without dialogue.

Eaker, et al. (2002) described this type of gathering as “a collection of independent contractors united by a common parking lot” (p. 10). Simply meeting as a group does not lead to school improvements; the activities of the group are important (Murphy, 1999). These results indicated the effectiveness of professional learning communities as a professional development tool is dependent upon the presence of dialogue that relates to the professional needs of the participants.

The researcher asked the participants to describe specific instances of the issues and topics discussed in their team meetings. According to researchers, learning community members meet to discuss data gained from student work and classroom observations to assess their instructional strategies and discover effective ways to help students improve (Cibulka & Nakayama, 2000). At the research site, productive learning team discussions related to developing lesson plans, instructional strategies, student issues, and important non-instructional issues such as scheduling changes or paperwork. These conversations shared in their learning communities addressed issues that related specifically to their needs as a classroom teacher to help their students succeed.

Capers (2004) found leadership as a challenge to establishing professional learning communities within school while Britton (2004) recommended further research

investigating the behaviors of effectively functioning grade level teams. Noted by the six participants in this study was the importance of their team leader in facilitating dialogue that focused on teacher and student learning. The teachers of the current study revealed their effective learning team leaders did not establish what Francis described as a “dictatorship”. They created an open environment for sharing and served as a guide for the community of learners by providing an agenda for the meetings’ topic of discussion that related to teacher and student learning. Alice, Francis, and Katherine revealed the importance of the team leader in ensuring the dialogue remained focused. These findings provided further insight into the importance of team leaders for the grade level meetings of professional learning communities. In addition, they revealed the qualities and practices teachers perceive as necessary for leaders professional learning team meetings.

Interesting to the researcher was the assertion made by Annette and Katherine in their descriptions of learning community. According to those teachers, dialogue and learning communities are relative to one another, with the presence of dialogue being a condition for the existence of a learning community. Annette stated simply, “You can’t have a learning community without dialogue.” Katherine explained further, “Dialogue is everything in a professional learning community meeting. If we didn’t have dialogue, if we couldn’t talk to each other and bounce ideas off and get ideas, we wouldn’t have a professional learning community.” Because the purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of dialogue within professional learning communities on the professional development of teachers, these perceptions provided a unique picture of the importance of dialogue within professional learning communities.

Dialogue and its Impact on Professional Development

After providing the participants an opportunity to share their interpretations of professional development, dialogue, and professional learning community, the researcher began the process of probing further to uncover the essence of dialogical experiences during the grade level meetings of learning communities. The participants varied in their years as a classroom teacher and in their general teaching experiences. In addition, they had experiences with different learning teams within their own and different grade levels. These varying experiences resulted in a plethora of dialogical experiences shared during the interviews.

Theme analysis of the data discussed in section 4 revealed four thematic statements that represent the impact of dialogue during grade level meetings within professional learning communities on the professional development of teachers:

1. Professional growth for members of professional learning communities is contingent upon the presence of focused dialogue during grade level meetings.
2. The dialogue of team meetings creates a feeling of acceptance that results in professional growth.
3. Dialogue during the grade level meetings of professional learning communities results in learning opportunities that are prescriptive to the professional development needs of the participants.
4. Dialogue increases the content knowledge of teachers while providing them with opportunities for the acquisition of instructional strategies.

The remainder of this section presents a description of these themes. Also included is a discussion of how the themes relate to the larger body of literature describing professional growth, dialogue, and professional learning communities.

The first thematic statement revealed by the participants was the following: Professional growth for members of professional learning communities is contingent upon the presence of focused dialogue during grade level meetings. The primary distinction made between learning community experiences that promoted professional growth and those that did not was the presence of focused dialogue. In theory, professional learning communities provide teachers opportunities to participate in dialogue to acquire knowledge, skills, and strategies (Hipp & Huffman, 2003). This was also true for the participants as they perceived dialogue as a necessity for professional growth during their team meetings, because it was through these social interactions that the teachers learned by sharing ideas and listening to the experiences of others. One teacher described the importance of dialogue in her team meetings as, “It’s for professional growth. And the more dialogue, the better, because when teachers or any professionals sit around and talk, so many things start to evolve.”

The constructivist theory of learning provides support for this theme of professional learning being dependent upon the presence of dialogue. As explained in section 2, this theory asserts the importance of social interactions in the construction of knowledge as individuals share and think with one another to understand the world around them (Lambert et al., 2002). Dialogue is a social interaction that results in what Bohm (1996) called a “win-win” (p. 7) situation. When individuals participate in

dialogue, they “are not playing a game against each other, but with each other. In a dialogue, everybody wins” (p. 7).

In this study, the participants viewed themselves as winners of professional development when their team meetings involved dialogical interactions with their peers. These social interactions provided them opportunities to learn from the experiences shared by others. Francis alluded to the construction of knowledge through dialogue with the following statement, “If there’s no dialogue going on, I’m not progressing, because I’m the type of person that likes to learn from others.” The presence of dialogue during team meetings is necessary therefore for the construction of teacher knowledge with the use of learning communities as a professional development practice.

Further support for the theme of teacher learning being contingent upon the presence of dialogue resulted as the participants detailed their experiences in team meetings that lacked focused dialogue. Meetings void of dialogue were described as “a waste of time”, “dead time”, and “boring and nonproductive.” “Ineffective” was another descriptor used by Betty whose learning team experiences that lacked dialogue failed to provide memorable professional growth experiences. Some described meeting experiences that included dialogue, but not true focused dialogue. The dialogue of these meetings did not include all members of the team nor did it focus on the professional needs of the participants. As Katherine explained,

My very first year in (that) grade was not a very good year. Our meetings, I thought, were supposed to be very instruction based. I thought we would get together in our communities and talk about how to do our lesson plans, how to organize our lesson plans, how to teach certain things, and that is not what happened. We never discussed lesson plans. We never discussed how to teach things. Nobody was very open to sharing how they did it

either. There was plenty of dialogue happening. I mean people were talking. But they weren't talking about professional learning or professional growth or professional development.

The data from the study provided further affirmation for a quote made by Grom (2005) in her study of grade level meetings in a case study of three middle schools. In describing the importance of dialogue in team meetings she stated, "To simply restructure for collaboration in teams and name it such does not mean the tenor of conversations will yield collective inquiry into the improvement of practice" (p. 272). This was true for the participants as they perceived unfocused dialogue as a challenge to being a learning community member. Meetings with little or no focused dialogue failed to provide the teachers professional growth benefits. This revelation lead the researcher to question if there are structures necessary in addition to a team leader to ensure focused dialogue occurs during the team meetings of professional learning communities.

In addition to unfocused dialogue, the participants perceived teacher personalities as an additional challenge to being a member of professional learning communities. According to Bohm, (1996), difficulties in dialogue occur when the participants perceive themselves as passive or dominant rather than equals. DuFour et al. (2006) contend resistance to dialogue from teachers who prefer to work in isolation rather than collaborate also impact the effectiveness of learning communities. The data from this study provide similar findings and support the need for further investigations into the role of teacher perceptions towards collaboration in the success of professional learning communities.

The second theme revealed by the participants was the following: The dialogue of team meetings creates a feeling of acceptance that results in professional growth. According to literature, dialogue within professional learning communities enables teachers to collaborate with their team members to acquire knowledge, skills, and strategies (Hipp & Huffman, 2003). For effective collaboration to occur however, team members must place an equal value on all of the contributions made to the group (Friend and Cook, 1992). Necessary for the construction of knowledge is “engagement with others in order to gain a growing understanding of the world and one’s relationship to it” (Lambert et al., 2002, p. 27). The data revealed that the participants felt accepted within their teams as their contributions to the dialogue were valued and respected by their peers. The accepting environment created by the dialogue of Annette’s team meetings gave her a feeling of “comfort” because, “you can help others and they can gain insight from you. Everybody can come and leave with something and learn and grow from it.”

This theme of acceptance provides evidence that true dialogue existed in the learning team meetings at the research site. Effective dialogue involves the following: (a) listening actively to become aware of the group’s experiences, (b) respecting the various opinions and ideas of the group, (c) suspending one’s judgments to gain a better understanding of the group’s experiences, and (d) voicing one’s concerns and expressing one’s ideas appropriately (Bohm, 1996; Isaacs, 1999). Necessary for the construction of knowledge is “engagement with others in order to gain a growing understanding of the world and one’s relationship to it” (Lambert et al., 2002, p. 27). For teachers to grow professionally, there must be a willingness to share accomplishments, discuss challenges,

and learn innovative strategies (Center for Comprehensive School-Reform and Improvement, 2006; Lieberman & Miller, 2002). The feeling of acceptance expressed by the participants facilitated positive peer relationships with their teammates. Professional growth resulted, because they felt comfortable sharing their concerns and asking for assistance to solve their dilemmas with the members of their team. These results indicate the importance of ensuring teachers understand the purpose of dialogue within the school setting for school leaders as they consider using learning teams as a professional development practice.

Isaacs (1999) describes dialogue as a social interaction with individuals joining forces to think. He explained, “Thinking together implies that you no longer take your own position as final. You relax your grip on certainty and listen to the possibilities that result from being in a relationship with others-- possibilities that might not otherwise have occurred” (p. 19). Five of the participants supported this contention as they described how they grew as professionals when they learned to “relax their grip” during their team meetings. For those teachers, dialogue made it acceptable to disagree and to adapt the ideas and suggestions shared by their peers to meet their unique professional needs. The following story provides a vivid example of how the accepting nature of dialogue helped Francis grow as a professional.

I would not be where I am today if I had not been involved in the dialogue of professional learning communities. For me, that was probably the best thing that ever happened, because I’m probably one that hated to ask for fear of someone thinking I was stupid or crazy. But by being involved in meetings, and when I got comfortable there, I felt like I could throw out situations or ask questions or share be accepted. And I think that’s one of the biggest things for me. I’ve grown by listening to others and having that feeling of acceptance that I could move on.

Within the school setting, “community builds relationships and responsibility” (Sergiovanni, 2005, p. 56). Interactions within the school community promote the formation of relationships, which is critical in the learning process (Lambert et al., 2002). Feeling accepted as a member of their grade level community facilitated positive peer relationships, instilled an enthusiasm for sharing and trying new ideas, and resulted in a greater satisfaction with the teaching profession. To stress the importance of feeling accepted and supported, one teacher attributed her remaining in the teaching profession to the dialogue shared with her grade level team.

Sergiovanni (2005) stated, “Community connects people to their work for moral reasons that obligate them to respond” (p. 56). The dialogue of the team meetings at the research site resulted in a community connection for Annette and Alice. These participants explained how the accepting environment of their team meetings led to dialogue that instilled a feeling of responsibility to help their learning community be successful. This data provides further support for the importance of dialogue within professional learning communities, because it drives teachers to improve as professionals.

The participants provided a contrast for this theme of feeling accepted by describing their experiences in learning teams that failed to include productive dialogue. The participants described these experiences as ineffective because other members perceived the meetings as “gripe sessions” or they appeared to be intolerable of individual differences. This data supports the research that describes teacher reluctance to sharing as a challenge for the collaborative teams of professional learning communities (Capers, 2004). This finding leads to a need for further investigations into how teacher

perceptions contribute to or hinder participation in the dialogue of professional learning communities.

An additional theme revealed by the data was the following: Dialogue during the grade level meetings of professional learning communities results in learning opportunities that are prescriptive to the professional development needs of the participants. Research describes productive professional development as results-driven and evaluative, which requires the use of school data to determine its direction and its effectiveness (Center for Comprehensive School-Reform and Improvement, 2006; Guskey, 2000; Speck & Knipe, 2005). According to the participants, the dialogue of their team meetings enabled them to prescribe the professional development they needed by diagnosing their strengths and weaknesses as a group. A statement made by one participant illustrates this prescriptive nature, “dialogue increases your awareness of your strengths and weaknesses and helps determine what you need to target to grow professionally.” This theme exemplifies the constructivist theory of learning, which holds greater learning occurs when individuals share and think with others to reflect upon and assess their own knowledge and understandings (Lambert et al., 2002).

Members of professional learning communities use data collected from student work and classroom observations to evaluate their practices and determine their professional needs (Cibulka & Nakayama, 2000; Eaker et al., 2002). This was true for the participants at the research site as they provided numerous examples of how the dialogue of their team meetings enabled them to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses and the direction needed for their professional development to overcome their challenges. The

following is one story shared by Alice that illustrated how data collected from an assessment guided the direction and focus of the dialogue shared.

If we've all given a test or an assessment on the students and we notice that they're all not doing well, we talk together in the professional learning community to try to figure out what we can do more to help them learn that concept. Maybe we need to back up and slow down and revisit that concept a little more. And we talk about that in our learning community and that's a weakness. It could also be a teacher weakness. I think one of our weaknesses this year was the grading of writing...each teacher (had) her own ideas and so we collaborated and talked about that being a weakness and discussed, Where can we go from here to help these students be better writers?

Another story shared by Betty revealed how she used dialogue with her team to discover a greater variety of behavior management strategies.

I (had) the opportunity to sit down and look at four other people and say, "This is not working. What can I do?" Everybody threw out their ideas and said, "Well maybe you should try the notebook." Or "Maybe you should try changing your desks around." Being able to say, "Hey this doesn't work. Any ideas?" is a great way to learn and grow as a teacher.

Three other participants described similar instances when they shared professional struggles with their peers to learn how to address those challenges by listening to the experiences and suggestions of others. These findings support the usefulness of dialogue during the grade level meetings of professional learning communities to improve one's instructional and behavioral practices to ensure student success.

Research detailed how school improvements result with the use of professional learning communities, because the collaborative teams use data collected within the school to assess their professional needs and the learning needs of the students. As discussed in section 2, traditional professional development practices fail to meet the specific professional development needs of teachers, which is critical for growth to occur.

While the participants mentioned the use of traditional professional development practices at the research site, they perceived these practices as unrelated to their professional needs and ineffective in helping them grow professionally. One teacher shared the importance of professional development being specific to her needs with the following:

It's very critical for professional development to meet the needs of all the teachers. And that's hard, because everybody needs something different. If you just bring a book and say, 'Hey, read this book and we're going to discuss it every week for 12 weeks, that's not very helpful. It needs to be more personal for the actual needs for the teachers in the building.'

At the research site, the dialogue shared during team meetings of their professional learning communities served as an effective way to provide professional development opportunities that focused on meeting the needs of the teachers and their students. As presented in section 2, participants of learning communities learn through an ongoing cycle of (a) reviewing school data to determine areas in need of improvement to ensure student success, (b) learning skills and strategies to make those improvements possible, (c) applying those skills and strategies, and (d) monitoring the results of those efforts (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). The dialogue impacted the participants in the study, because it allowed them to participate in learning cycles as they reflected upon school data to determine their weaknesses and use their strengths as a group to improve their weaknesses. Betty depicted the dialogue as, "It helps you make your strengths stronger and your weaknesses better." This theme provides further support for professional learning communities as a school improvement practice, because the

dialogue shared resulted in results-driven and evaluative professional learning opportunities.

Included in this theme of dialogue being prescriptive to the professional development needs of the participants was how dialogue kept them aware of upcoming events and their non-instructional responsibilities within the school. This finding is significant because it provides a new perspective on the helpfulness of dialogue in the daily routines of learning community participants. Katherine described this dialogue as “crucial” as she described how her team helped her through a crisis of being unprepared for a field trip. The researcher questioned her as to how she perceived the impact of that dialogue as it differed from the learning experiences described earlier in the interview.

Katherine exclaimed while laughing,

Well it was a learning experience for me! To me at that point in time, it was crucial that I know that information, It certainly taught me a lesson. I would probably not put it in the same category as the kind of professional learning like instruction or student behaviors or student improvement, but at that time, it was crucial that I learn that.

The other participants described similar instances when the dialogue of their team meetings was helpful to them as well. This data reveals the usefulness of dialogue within professional learning communities as a tool for meeting the instructional and non-instructional needs of teachers on a daily basis.

The fourth theme revealed from the participants was the following: Dialogue during the grade level meetings of professional learning communities increases the content knowledge of teachers while providing them with opportunities for the acquisition of instructional strategies. Teachers require professional development training

that provides opportunities for teacher learning, collaboration, and mentoring to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to implement standards-based curriculums (Gaddy et al., 2002). The dialogical interactions that occurred during the grade level meetings at the research site enabled the participants to increase their knowledge of the state's newly implemented standards based curriculum. Working with her learning team, Betty shared how they created performance tasks to assess student learning, which were a requirement of the standards based curriculum.

One performance task focused on letter recognition and letter sounds. We did research, trying to figure out an easy way we could implement it. We worked as a team. Each person had an idea of how to make the plan better. We were better able to implement the performance task grade level wise, and it was good.

Other benefits of these interactions included a better understanding of (a) the standards language and the expectations for student learning, (b) how to manage instructional pacing with the new curriculum, and (c) how to design standards based activities that address the specific needs of the students. This theme supports the effectiveness of learning communities as a professional development practice for Georgia schools because it provides teachers opportunities to increase their understanding of the newly implemented standards-based curriculum and its assessment pieces.

Effective professional development requires providing teachers collaborative opportunities to increase their knowledge of skills and practices that result in greater student achievement (Hirsh, 2005). According to Vygotsky (1978), all knowledge comes from our interactions with other people and that those social encounters enabled us to reach our fullest potential. The participants reported numerous instances of how the

dialogical interactions of their grade level teams increased their knowledge of new instructional strategies and exposed them to a variety of perspectives for planning instruction that met the unique needs of their students. These findings were similar to those found in a study of secondary schools conducted by McLaughlin and Talbert (1993) where teachers reported the usefulness of learning communities in helping their students learn for understanding. This data provides further support for the use of professional learning communities for school leaders considering the use of this practice as a professional development practice.

Implications for Social Change

Presented in section 1 were the significant reasons for conducting this investigation of dialogue during the grade level meetings of professional learning communities. Section 4 included a presentation of the findings collected from the interview data, while section 5 offered an interpretation of those findings. The following paragraphs describe the social change implications of study's results for teachers and teacher leaders as participants of professional learning communities and the implications for administrators and other school leaders seeking to use professional learning communities as a school improvement practice.

The findings of this study are important for members of professional learning communities as they present how the dialogue shared during team meetings results in meaningful professional development opportunities. The participants of this study varied in their years of experience and in their learning community experiences. Despite these differences, all of the teachers were able to share specific instances of how they benefited

from their participation in the dialogue of their team meetings, which included keeping them aware of non-instructional responsibilities as well. This finding is significant, because it revealed how dialogue provides professional growth opportunities that change as teachers need them to, thus meeting the varying professional development needs of all teachers in the school setting.

Research indicated that part of growing and developing as a professional is evaluating one's needs and assessing one's growth as a professional. The results of the current study indicated the dialogical interactions of the team meetings created a comfortable environment that promoted teacher evaluation of instructional practices and encouraged meaningful conversations that focused on improving teacher weaknesses. The findings also supported the usefulness of dialogue in increasing teacher knowledge of the state's standards based curriculum, effective instructional practices, and strategies for maintaining classroom discipline. These results are significant, because they revealed how the dialogue of professional learning communities fosters the growth of teachers by increasing their knowledge base of effective instructional practices.

For teacher leaders charged with the task of engaging their peers in meaningful dialogue, the findings revealed team leader practices that facilitated teacher growth. According to the participants, team leaders encouraged participation in team meetings and ensured the dialogue remained focused on the important topics of discussion. In addition, the leaders used an agenda organize the conversations shared during the team meetings to meet the needs of the teachers. Greater teacher growth and development occurred in team meetings where these practices were evident which reveals the

importance of team leaders being aware of these practices for their learning teams to function effectively.

The results of this study are important for school administrators and policy makers as well. The findings of this study are significant, because they contribute to the limited amount of research that focuses on the dialogical interactions of learning community meetings. In selecting professional development practices that lead to greater teacher and student learning, the results of this study supported the usefulness of professional learning communities in this endeavor. For Georgia school leaders, the results revealed the usefulness of professional learning communities in helping teachers with the task of implementing the recently implemented standards based curriculum.

Recommendations for Action

In this age of accountability, the results of the study are important for school administrators and other members of the education community as they strive to provide teachers with high quality professional development that results in school improvements. The teachers portrayed their meaningful grade level experiences with dialogue as being data focused and results-driven. In addition to feeling accepted as a professional, the participants also felt their dialogical experiences resulted in prescriptive professional development that increased their content knowledge and their knowledge base of effective instructional strategies. School administrators and teacher leaders must heed the results of the current study, because they revealed the qualities necessary for productive dialogical interactions to occur with professional learning communities that lead to teacher growth and student success.

Dissemination of the results of this study to the larger education community is a necessity to reveal the viability of professional learning communities as a professional development tool. Because professional learning communities is a relatively new practice, the results of this study should be shared with teachers through traditional means such as informational sessions with experienced learning community teachers to increase teacher awareness of professional learning communities as a learning tool. School administrators and other school leaders should share the results of this study with their colleagues to increase awareness of professional learning communities as a school improvement practice and to gain support for this practice on a broader scale.

Recommendations for Further Study

The findings of this investigation revealed numerous ways teachers benefit professionally from their participation in the dialogue of professional learning community meetings. However, these results cannot be generalized to other school settings because the study was limited to a small sample of teachers from one southeast Georgia elementary school. The researcher therefore recommends replicating this study with a larger sample of participants that includes teachers from elementary, middle, and high school settings to discover explore the phenomenon of teacher dialogue in greater depth. In addition, including teachers from other school districts using professional learning communities would increase the generalizability of the findings to the greater education community.

Theoretically, the collaborative teams of professional learning communities increase teacher knowledge through the sharing of practices and community

investigations into best practices (Eaker et al., 2002). Teachers change their roles from being dispensers of knowledge to active learners who engage in collaborative interactions for the growth of the entire school community (Lambert et al., 2002). The team meetings at the research site revealed inconsistent learning experiences for the participants with some being described as being beneficial and others not. The participants attributed these differences to the presence or absence of focused dialogue and active participation in the dialogue from all members of the learning team. These findings reveal the need for further investigations into the nature of the dialogue that facilitates teacher participation in professional learning communities and the role of teacher perceptions towards collaboration in the successful implementation of professional learning communities.

Investigating teacher dialogue within professional learning communities using other types of research designs would provide additional insight into learning communities as a professional development practice and its usefulness in promoting the professional development of teachers. One recommendation is to conduct a case study. Studies of this nature involve an exploration of a case such as a “program, an event, an activity, or individuals” (Creswell, 1998, p. 61) using assorted data collection methods, within a bounded setting and time frame. Examining the case of dialogue within professional learning communities would enable the researcher to delve deeper into the nature of dialogue within professional learning communities using additional data collection methods such as focus group interviews and observations to describe the phenomenon of dialogical interactions among learning community members in more detail.

In addition to case study, a second type of research that would allow for a closer examination of the dialogue that occurs within professional learning communities and the usefulness of learning communities as a school improvement practice would be mixed methods research. This type of research seeks to unite and validate findings from different data sources (Creswell, 2003). Professional learning communities seek to improve the school through collaboration and use student achievement as the tool to measure the success of their efforts (Eaker, et al., 2002). Gathering quantitative data in the form of student test scores and qualitative data that explores teacher perceptions towards collaborative dialogue and student achievement would provide the education community with a better understanding of the relationship between teacher perceptions towards collaboration within professional learning communities and the academic progress of their students.

Reflections of the Researcher

A reflection of my experiences during this research project revealed the need for the sharing of several noteworthy statements. My involvement with professional learning communities at the research site began many years ago when the administrator introduced the theory supporting this practice and its usefulness in helping schools improve. My varying experiences as a member of professional learning fueled my passion to discover how others perceived their experiences within their learning teams and if they received benefits from their participation. The interview guide used in the study proved effective in gathering descriptive data from the participants describing their dialogical experiences

with professional learning communities and how those experiences impacted them professionally.

My coworker relationship with the participants of the study resulted in the taking of several measures to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study. These measures included establishing Epoche, member-checking, rich, thick description, bracketing, and the reporting of discrepant information. Despite these precautions, the researcher must acknowledge the possibility that the participants responded to the interview questions with responses they thought the interviewer wanted to hear. In addition, as with all qualitative studies, it is also possible that inferences were made from the data because of my familiarity with the participants and the activities of the learning communities at the research site.

With these personal biases shared, this research project proved an enjoyable, valuable, and informative learning experience. The results of this study reaffirm my belief in the value of collaboration for the professional growth of classroom teachers and success of their students. In addition, they strengthen my desire to continue investigating strategies that facilitate teacher interactions within professional learning communities that result in collective learning and improvements within my own school community and beyond.

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APPENDIX A:

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

PHONE SCRIPT for initial contact with teachers being invited to participate.
Hello, This is Melanie Spradley from school calling to ask if you would be willing to participate in a research project I am conducting in order to earn my doctorate degree.

I am researching teacher experiences with dialogue during the grade level meetings of professional learning communities and how those experiences impact the professional growth of teachers. This study seeks to not only contribute to the limited amount of research focusing exclusively on the dialogue that occurs within professional learning communities, but it will also explore and reveal the viability or impracticality of professional learning communities as a professional development tool for increasing teacher knowledge.

You are being invited to take a part in the study, because you participate in the conversations of weekly grade level meetings within a professional learning community, and you may have an interest in understanding the benefits of learning communities as a professional development tool.

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to answer some questions related to your experiences with dialogue during the grade level meetings of your professional learning community during a lengthy interview in the school's conference room.

All information shared will remain confidential during and after the completion of the study. Anything you say will be not be disclosed directly to the administration nor will I use your information for purposes outside of the research project. Neither your name nor any other identifying information will be included in the reports of the study.

Would you be willing to participate in the study?

For the purposes of the study, I will need to email you a consent form. If you decide not to participate, there will be no hard feelings. The research project is important however, participation is voluntary.

If you have any questions, please feel free to give me a call. Would you like my number?

Thank you for your time.

APPENDIX B:
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Questions

Introduction: Professional learning communities are the professional development practice used by your school to increase teacher and student learning. The purpose of my study is to discover how the dialogue of grade level meetings within professional learning communities impacts the professional development of teachers. Because you are a member of a professional learning community within your school, I would like to learn about your experiences with dialogue in your professional learning community meetings.

1. First, tell me a little about yourself. How long have you been teaching? What are your general teaching experiences? How long have you been a member of a professional learning community?
2. What comes to mind when I say “professional growth”?
3. How do you define dialogue?
4. How would you describe a professional learning community?
5. What is the role of dialogue within a professional learning community?
6. Can you walk me through a typical meeting of your professional learning community and describe the dialogue that occurs?
7. Thinking about the dialogue that occurs during a typical learning team meeting, what thoughts stand out for you about the dialogue that occurs?
8. How do you feel the dialogue of your team meetings impacts you as a professional?
9. What changes to your professional growth do you associate with your participation in the dialogue of your professional learning community meetings?
10. What feelings or thoughts are generated through your involvement in the dialogue of your learning team meetings?
11. What benefits do you receive from participating in the grade level meetings of a professional learning community? Are there any challenges to being a learning community member?
12. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experiences with dialogue during your professional learning community meetings?

APPENDIX C:
COLOR CODING

Comments (highlighted yellow)

Importance of dialogue to plc's (highlighted green)

Standards (highlighted pink)

Teacher generated/directed dialogue (highlighted gray)

Dialogue and Professional growth (highlighted turquoise)

Principals of dialogue: Listening, respecting, suspending, and voicing (highlighted brown)

Evidence of a Professional Learning Community: Community with Supportive and shared leadership, supportive conditions, shared vision and values, collaborative teams, and shared practices (pink text)

Challenges (blue text)

Professional Development/Professional Growth: Collaborative, Job-embedded, Results-driven, and Evaluated (brown text)

Construction of Knowledge through Sharing of Experiences (orange text)

APPENDIX D:

ANALYSIS WORKSHEET

Teacher	1. Yrs Exp/Yrs in PLC	2. Define Prof Growth	3. Define Dialogue	4. Describe a PLC
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				

Teacher	5. Role of Dialogue in PLC	6. GL Meetings and the Dialogue that Occurs	7./8 Outstanding Thoughts and Impacts	9. Changes to Prof Growth
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				

Teacher	10. Feelings/thoughts from involvement	11. Benefits/Challenges	12. Additional Comments
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			

APPENDIX E:

ANALYSIS GRID SAMPLE

Teacher	Yrs Exp/Yrs in PLC	2. Define Prof Growth	3. Define Dialogue	4. Describe a PLC
Betty	13/6	<p>PG= Reflecting on and improving st growth. ST Ach= growth as a prof p. 2 PD: Based on teacher needs =try to improve weaknesses PD= learning a new technique through sessions or experiences in classroom p. 16 PD involves evaluating your own teaching through talking with others</p>	<p>How we communicate, clarify, discuss issues and ideas p. 2 Purpose: Bounce Ideas and clarify what was learned/shared in PD</p>	<p>p. 3 gl team, Sh/be everyone taking an active part in sharing experiences of what's effective and what needs improved to help the t's and stud's improve. P. 3 bouncing ideas ...not a few saying what needs to be said and that's it differ exps helped her distinguish between true and not plc's p. 5 members supportive of each other p. 12 dialogue easy -open, risk free environment for sharing concerns and asking for help</p>
Annette	5/3	<p>PG=learning about t from experience and sharing d p. 3 PD= class, Generic but needs pd focused on personal needs Purpose: Strategies/techniques & ways to improve teaching and relship w/ st/peers p. 2,3 Exs of trad pd & unhelpful p. 1 PG comes from experiences (sane as 1)...You don't learn how to teach in a classroom</p>	<p>p. 4 conversation that's focused with everyone involved in the discussion p.4 notes of ideas to try p. 4 not random...specific topic p. 5 purpose: To learn in a structured setting</p>	<p>p. 1 PLC evolved from gl meeting p. 2 support group p. 5 a group w/ a commonality (GL) & meets to form ideas, answer questions, create new ways to improve instructional practices... p. 5 It has a central theme, a central focus and the group meets to discuss whatever that focus is. p. 6 agenda w/ purpose...w/ focused dialogue around needs of teachers to include lesson plans, test scores, etc...all participating by talking, jotting down comments, listening, and creating ideas</p>

CURRICULUM VITA

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Ed.D Teacher Leadership, Walden University, December 2008

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Dialogue within Professional Learning Communities and its Impact on the Professional Growth of Teachers in the Elementary School Setting: A qualitative study investigating the impact of teacher dialogue within professional learning communities on the professional development of teachers in the elementary school setting. Doctoral Committee: Dr. Casey Reason, Dr. Elizabeth St. Pierre

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Teacher, 1993 to present

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Staff Development / Mentoring for Achievement of Students through Teaching (MAST)
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MENTOR

Mentored new teachers or teachers in need of improvement at request of building principal

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

Professional Association of Georgia Educators