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Secondary Teachers' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of a Professional Learning Community

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COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

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Abstract

The implementation of professional learning communities (PLCs) in schools has been shown to serve as a catalyst in transforming school culture and increasing the academic performance of students. Our school district mandated that PLCs were established at the research site, an urban Louisiana school, for the primary purpose of closing the achievement gap. Yet, recent data from the local district indicate that these PLCs have not resulted in capacity building for sustainable improvement. Ineffective implementation of the current PLCs may have contributed to the poor outcomes. One purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine teachers' perceptions of the implementation of PLCs. Another was to gauge teachers' views on PLCs as a means of promoting a positive school culture and increasing academic achievement among students. A social constructivist framework was used for this qualitative case study. Research questions centered on teachers' perceptions regarding refinement of the currently implemented PLCs. Purposeful sampling was used to select 13 seventh through ninth grade teachers as participants. Qualitative data were collected through questionnaires and telephone interviews and then analyzed for emergent themes. Findings revealed that the current PLCs were beneficial but needed refinement related to relevance, intent, and planning. The following four themes emerged: time, collaboration, shared responsibility, and a focus on learning for all students. Study findings provide insight about PLCs from the perspectives of the teachers who work within them. The implications for social change include enhanced knowledge and understanding that may help educators in better implementing PLCs with intent and transparency and by positively contributing to school improvement and student achievement.

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Acknowledgments

This experience has definitely been a journey, one that has tested my patience, faith, and commitment. During this experience, I evolved into a leader, a change agent, and an advocate for social change. First, I would like to thank God because through Him all things are possible. Second, I would like to thank my family, friends, and colleagues for their continuous support and encouragement. Last but not least, I would like to thank my doctoral committee for their support and encouragement over the years. It has been a long, arduous process, but I can finally see the finish line. I am elated that I have finally culminated this chapter of my educational journey. Again, thanks to all who have assisted in this journey. Your encouragement was definitely appreciated.

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Section 1: The Problem

Introduction

Many experts view education as key to the future of the southern U.S. state of Louisiana (Hill & Hannaway, 2006; Southern Education Foundation [SEF], 2006). The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina 2005 has been challenging for schools in the state with school takeovers and expansion of charter schools. As a result of the unexpected changes caused by Hurricane Katrina, a study conducted by Southern Education Foundation revealed that students had deficiencies that were impeding their progress academically, emotionally, and socially (SEF, 2007). These challenges, coupled with the requirements of No Child Left Behind of 2001 (NCLB), Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Act 2010, and Every Student Succeeds Act 2015, required states to revisit and modify their educational policies. Locally, Common Core standards and assessments, and Act 54 that directly links teacher performance to student achievement and growth (The Alliance for Education, 2010), forced many Louisiana school districts to seek strategies for improving student learning (Louisiana Department of Education, 2010, 2011, 2014).

In recent years, schools have expressed an increasing interest in professional learning communities (PLCs) nationally to address challenges with implementing school improvement strategies designed to improve teaching and learning (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman, 2011). Research suggests that PLCs positively impact school improvement when they are properly implemented, when teachers work collaboratively, and when schools prioritize student learning (DuFour, 2004; Eaker & Keating, 2008).

Additionally, PLCs provide a framework for transforming schools at all grade levels by assessing the school's needs and addressing these needs through professional training and modeling of effective strategies (DuFour, 2004, 2007).

Furthermore, numerous studies indicate that PLCs enrich school communities when there is total commitment by all stakeholders to student learning and effective implementation of guiding principles (Bennett, 2010). Two critical components that strengthen implementation and sustainability are teachers and school leaders (Ermeling & Gallimore, 2013; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Leclerc, Moreau, Dumouchel, & Sallafranque-St. Louis, 2012; Richmond & Manokore, 2011). Use of PLCs can increase teacher efficacy and initiate school-wide change when a culture of collaboration is established and mechanisms are in place to encourage effective discourse (Harris, 2011; Hawley & Rollie, 2007; Prytula & Weiman, 2012; Tidwell, Wymore, Garza, Estrada, & Smith, 2011; Van Lare & Brazer, 2013).

The success of PLCs is contingent upon effective collaboration and must be embedded in every facet of the school culture (Burnette, 2002; Carey, 2010; Clark & Clark, 1996; DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Eaker, DuFour, & Burnette, 2002; Fullan, 2005; Honnert, 2010; Hord, 1997; Louis & Marks, 1998; Owens, 2010; Wells & Feun, 2008). A powerful way of improving teaching and learning is through teacher collaboration and communication (Linder, Post, & Calabrese, 2012; Owens, 2010; Resnick, 2010; Sergiovanni, 2005). In contrast to the isolation experienced by many teachers in traditional school environments, PLCs offer opportunities for collaboration

and communication among faculty (Burke, Marx, & Berry, 2011; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Wells & Feun, 2008, 2013).

When school leaders prioritize student learning as the top priority, the school's culture resultantly fosters the development of learning environments beneficial to teachers and students. PLCs provide opportunities for schools to shift their focus from teaching to learning and for teachers to shift from working in isolation to collaborating with peers (Elbousty & Bratt, 2010; Wells & Feun, 2008; Williams, Brien, Spraque, & Sullivan, 2008). As Eaton and Keating (2008) noted, the shift for schools is from "inputs to outcomes and from intentions to results" (p. 15).

In order for schools in the United States to effectively place student learning at the forefront, they must engage in ongoing discourse and explore crucial questions about student learning (DuFour, 2004). They must also encourage high expectations and develop plans to accommodate the needs of students who may experience difficulties with learning within the classroom (DuFour, 2004). The culture of collaboration advocated within PLCs provides a means of enhancing student and teacher learning through a systematic process. This process involves teachers working in teams and forming committed partnerships to analyze data, improve classroom practices, improve and increase student learning, and, finally, ensure that student learning remains central (DuFour, 2004, 2007; Ferguson, 2013; Nelson, 2009; Nelson & Slavin, 2008; Nieto, 2009; Pella, 2011). Schools should strive to model and exhibit a culture a collaboration that encourages and appreciates open dialogue, risk taking, and sharing of ideas by all stakeholders.

The Local Problem

A school district in Louisiana has experienced state takeovers, expansion of charter schools, restructuring (Bring New Orleans Back Commission Education Committee, 2006; SEF, 2007), and challenges implementing educational mandates (SEF, 2007). A school in the district, where nearly 800 students attend class in Grades 7-12, has not closed the achievement gap between students who meet academic proficiency and those who do not. As a result of the school's failure to close the achievement gap, school leaders introduced PLCs in 2010 as a reform initiative to provide professional training and classroom strategies for teachers to implement.

Despite its use of PLC, the school has not seen an increase in students' achievement scores. An examination of the implementation of PLCs at the school conducted by a *High Schools That Works* facilitator in 2011 revealed that 46% of students were not prepared in reading; 45% were not prepared in writing; 53% were not prepare in mathematics; and, 69% were not prepared in science (Southern Regional Educational Board, 2011). The examination based on teachers' perceptions revealed that school leaders had not provided specific guidelines for establishing learning communities.

The examination did not reveal to what extent the PLCs actually affected teachers' instructional practices. The concerns outlined in the school's follow-up report initiated discourse during subsequent school meetings about the effectiveness of the PLCs in addressing the achievement gap. This problem affects not only the teachers who are PLC members, but also the students with whom those teachers teach because the

daily instructional practices of teachers have a direct impact on student achievement levels (Doolittle, Sudeck, & Rattigan, 2008). Additionally, the stakeholders' failure to embrace change has further perpetuated the problem at the school and led to ineffective implementation of the current PLCs (Doolittle, Sudeck, & Rattigan, 2008). Effective PLCs require collaboration of all involved as well as a focus on student learning.

Furthermore, Louisiana's adoption of Act 54, which "requires performance at every level of K-12 public education to be based on student growth" (p. 1) correlates teacher performance with student achievement and growth (The Alliance for Education, 2010). Act 54 has prompted many educators in the state to advocate for collaborative reform that encourages the sharing of knowledge, best practices, expertise, support, and training (Leonard & Leonard, 2003; Peterson, 2002). Thus, the importance of PLC implementation has increased due to recent accountability mandates in schools across the country (Craig, 2009). With student success being directly correlated with teacher performance, teacher training and professional learning became a key component. The effective implementation of PLCs can serve as a catalyst for transforming a school's culture and achievement by increasing involvement in practices that drive student achievement. This study examined the implementation of PLCs in an urban Louisiana school for the purpose of increasing student achievement.

Rationale

The rationale is based on data about school achievement and student preparedness for high school (Southern Regional Educational Board, 2011). These data particularly highlighted issues with ninth grade readiness and preparedness for high school. This lack

of readiness directly affected school achievement and retention (Southern Regional Educational Board, 2011). Existing structures were evaluated, and new school improvement initiatives were considered. Since the school has a middle school component, school leaders decided that changes should began with Grades 7-9 through improved teacher training (Craig, 2009).

Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level

An urban school in Louisiana has experienced difficulties with their attempts to increase student achievement and close the achievement gap. Louisiana's educational accountability system correlates teacher performance with student achievement and growth (The Alliance for Education, 2010). With an increase in teacher accountability, the need for teacher development became imperative. PLCs were introduced to address the need for more teacher trainings embedded into the school day. These professional development sessions were intended to improve teacher knowledge and practices and consequently increase student achievement. Recent data from the local district appear to indicate that these PLCs have not accomplished their intended task.

To provide training and assistance, the school facilitator at the research site implemented biweekly professional development and PLC meetings. Professional development sessions were embedded into the school's calendar as well as the district's academic calendar. PLCs were held biweekly during common planning periods. During PLCs, time was designated for teachers to collaborate and work as a team to provide support and guidance. Some sessions focused on assisting teachers with technology while others focused on using data to guide teaching and learning. The newly

implemented changes at the state level prompted school leaders to question the effectiveness of the current PLCs. The leadership team decided that changes were needed and that subsequent PLCs needed to focus on teachers' needs and teaching strategies.

The implementation of the PLCs in the school environment lacked a coherent plan or common understanding of the essential elements of a PLC (Southern Regional Educational Board, 2011). The problems caused by the lack of a common implementation plan have negatively affected the school environment both academically and professionally. Not only has student achievement been affected, but also personnel issues such as teacher turnover and frustration with lack of support. Confusion and resistance to change have contributed to inconsistencies in implementation by teachers at the school (Southern Regional Educational Board, 2011). In this study, I focused specifically on 7th through 9th grade teachers, but my intent was to provide information that would allow educators to implement PLCs consistently across all grades in the school.

Evidence of the Problem from the Professional Literature

The entire learning community benefits when PLCs move beyond implementation towards the sustainability phase (Hipp & Huffman, 2010). Unfortunately, lack of sustainability results from unresolved issues or inconsistencies during implementation. Effective PLCs require collaboration of all involved, a focus on student learning as the top priority, and a focus on results (DuFour, 2004). Many factors contribute to an inadequate understanding and development of PLCs in educational environments.

Factors that contribute to PLCs failure are inadequate training, confusion about fundamental concepts, ineffective implementation and sustainability, and resistance to change (DuFour, 2004). PLCs are grounded in reflective dialogue, and teacher collaboration is a key component instead of teacher isolation (Hord, 2004; Sargent & Hannum, 2009). Learning environments are fostered by job-embedded professional development and collegial relationships that thrive off collaboration and cultivation of new ideas (DuFour, 2004; Strahan, 2003). Research also shows that PLCs alleviate teacher concerns related to accountability through the development of academic interventions designated to address students' needs. Additionally, PLCs provide collaborative environments that focus on student learning and results instead of teaching (DuFour & Eaker, 2004, 2006). The problems revealed at the local level and from the professional literature are parallel and reflect a need for improved implementation with ongoing evaluations to gauge effectiveness of PLCs.

Definition of Terms

Achievement gap: Disparities in academic performance between or among subgroups based on ethnic and demographical information (Mapp, Thomas, & Clayton, 2006). Indicators such as test scores, suspension rates, course enrollment, grades, and graduation rates are used to gauge whether a gap exists (Mapp, Thomas, & Clayton, 2006).

Collaboration: Systematic and purposeful process with a focus on student learning, improved classroom practices, and teachers working in teams (DuFour, 2004).

Common Core: Rigorous academic standards that prepare students for college and professional careers (Louisiana Department of Education, 2014).

Compass: Component of Act 54 and the name of the evaluation model for teachers and administrators based on student growth (Louisiana Department of Education, 2010, 2011, 2014).

Hurricane Katrina: Category 5 storm that destroyed New Orleans and the Gulf Coast region on August 29, 2005, damaged more than eighty percent of New Orleans, and totally changed the way of life in the city (Southern Education Foundation, 2007).

Louisiana Bulletin 130 (Act 54 of 2010): Referred to as Act 54 and conceived to reform the educational system in Louisiana and improve ineffective policies, programs, and practices at every level of K-12 public education (Louisiana Department of Education, 2010, 2011, 2014).

Middle school: Describes seventh and eighth grade configuration at the researcher's secondary school (Yecke, 2005).

Post-Katrina: Refers to life and the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (Southern Education Foundation, 2007).

Professional learning community (PLC): Refers to group who promotes and values learning as an ongoing, active collaborative process with dynamic dialogue by teachers, students, staff, principal, parents, and the school community to improve the quality of learning and life within the school (Speck, 1999).

Reculturing: Process of developing new values, beliefs, and norms (Fullan, l996) focusing on (a) collaboration, (b) developing mission, vision, values, and goals, (c)

focusing on learning, (d) leadership, (e) focused school improvement plans, (f) celebration, and (g) persistence (Eaker, DuFour, & Burnette, 2002).

Social constructivism: Also referred to as Vygotskian constructivism (Abdal-Haqq, 1998). Cultural process that fosters collaboration and knowledge construction among peers within the learning environment (Schiermeyer, 2010).

Social constructivist learning theory: Refers to learning communities reflective of cooperation, collaboration, culture, communication, and collective knowledge that ultimately benefit individual knowledge experiences (Hirtle, 1996; Powell & Kalina, 2009; Schiermeyer, 2010).

Significance of the Study

As Louisiana implements new accountability standards, it is imperative for schools to continuously seek school improvement strategies to enhance teaching and learning (Hipp & Huffman, 2010). The problem with PLC implementation is significant because it directly affects student learning and teachers working collaboratively for school improvement. This topic is relevant and significant to the field of education because many schools espouse to effectively utilize PLCs yet fail to properly implement the necessary tenets to ensure overall success and sustainability. The urban school district in this study does not have any traditionally structured middle schools, only two 7th-12th secondary schools. Seventh-twelfth grade school programs tend to revolve around the high school students' needs, not around those of the young adolescent (Walker, 2005). The results of the *High Schools that Works* ninth grade survey highlighted the need for improvement related to preparing middle grade students for the

transition to high school at the research site (Southern Regional Educational Board, 2011). Taking into consideration the aforementioned statements coupled with the new set of challenges prevalent post-Katrina, innovative programs are needed and teacher leaders must become the voice of change. This study is also significant to teachers at the research site because a new accountability system has been introduced to evaluate teachers, and professional learning communities provide the support and training for collaborative discourse and collective involvement.

In this era of accountability and in accordance with the recommendations proposed by President Obama in the Blueprint for Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Act 2010 (also called No Child Left Behind Act of 2001), The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, and the newly mandated Act 54 by the State of Louisiana, this study becomes highly significant. In this study, a research-based strategy was explored. Professional learning communities are proven to reform schools, foster collaborative school environments, and facilitate school improvement, which are goals established by President Obama and the Department of Education. President Obama advocates for every child in America to be afforded a world-class education (United States Department of Education, 2002, 2010, 2016), and researching characteristics of effective professional learning communities would provide a foundation to initiate change based on highly advocated strategies. My professional learning community was the focus of this study, and the purpose was to examine teachers' perceptions concerning the implementation of professional learning community principles within their learning environment. Compass, the evaluation system for educators mandated by Act 54, and the creation of

collaborative, student-centered learning environments are both aligned with the initiatives set forth by the United States Department of Education.

The results of this study have the potential to positively impact social change by providing transparency, clarity, and a greater understanding about teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities as an effective school improvement initiative when effectively implemented and sustained. The results of this study may also influence other schools in the district to utilize the teachers' perceptions and experiences shared as a guide to implement PLCs to transform their schools into collaborative learning environments. The impact a professional learning community has on student and teacher learning positively represents social change through improved collaborative relationships and communication in our educational institutions. Additionally, the relationships established and knowledge acquired correlate with the goals of Walden's mission for social change and justice. When effectively implemented and sustained, professional learning communities have the potential to positively affect the students and teachers through the collective inquiry, collaboration, and positive relationships exhibited within the school (DuFour, 2003, 2004, 2007, 2008; DuFour & Eaker, 1998, 2006; Eaker, DuFour, & Burnette, 2002; Hord, 1997). More importantly, society benefits when schools cater to the development of whole child through improved instructional strategies and school cultures that model positive relationships.

Research Questions

I sought to answer the following questions as part of my investigation of educators' perceptions about the implementation of PLC principles within their learning environment:

RQ1. What are participants' perceptions about the efficacy of the current PLCs at their school?

RQ2. How would participants refine current PLCs to improve student achievement?

Review of the Literature

Several researchers have endorsed PLCs as a middle and high school reform strategy (DuFour, 2003, 2004, 2007, 2008; DuFour & Eaker, 1998, 2006; Eaker, DuFour, & Burnette, 2002; Hord, 1997). In this section, current literature on PLCs as a reform effort in education proven to reculture learning communities into collaborative environments with improved relationships was reviewed. In order to extensively research PLCs, I will briefly discuss the origin of PLCs, provide definitions of PLCs from multiple perspectives, examine current research on PLCs, discuss the correlation between constructivism and PLCs, address implementation and sustainability, and review related studies on PLCs and teacher perceptions. The usefulness of PLCs as a means of promoting learning as an ongoing, collaborative process was examined in this literature review. According to researchers, such an approach has the potential of positively affecting the culture of a school (Lippy & Zamora, 2012; Lunenburg, 2010; Roberts & Pruitt, 2003, 2009).

Because teachers of 7th through 9th grade students are the focus of this study, it was most appropriate to research literature on a proven middle and high school reform strategy such as professional learning communities. Walden University's library was utilized to access the following databases: Educational Resource Information Center (ERIC), ProQuest, EBSCO, EdResearch Online, and Sage. Southwest Educational Development Laboratory's website was used to research Hord's works.

This research relies upon literature from dissertations, theses, peer-reviewed journals, books, research briefs, and various publications on professional learning communities. Seminal works of DuFour (2003, 2004, 2007, 2008); DuFour and Eaker (1998, 2004, 2006); Hord (1997, 2007, 2008, 2009); and Senge (1990, 2000) are used to guide this review of literature, with the works of current researchers used as supporting research. Descriptors utilized to acquire this research are professional learning community, teacher collaboration, collaborative cultures of learning, constructivist learning theory, and learning communities.

Origin of Professional Learning Communities

Professional learning communities (PLCs) provide a proven conceptual framework for transforming schools on all levels (DuFour, 2007; DuFour & Eaker, 2006). DuFour and Eaker (1998) stated "the most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is developing the ability of school personnel to function as professional learning communities" (p. xi). Little (2002) stated that PLCs heighten teacher efficacy and strengthens the overall capacity of school change. Even though

PLCs are supported by research, planning and implementation can present complexities for principals (Speck, 1999).

At the very foundation of professional learning communities are principles of social constructivism, and many researchers have advocated for schools which strive to operate as learning communities which cater to the students' needs and foster positive school cultures (Bruner, 1996). Bruner also believed learning best occurs in environments that are participatory, communal, collaborative, and encourages the construction of meaning. PLCs originated in the business world with Senge advocating for learning organizations where workers strive for success as members of a collaborative team (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 1997, 2004; Morrisey, 2000; Senge, 1990). Utilizing Senge's research, educational researchers proclaim that learning organizations are synonymous with learning communities (Hord, 2004). The advent of learning communities has attracted many researchers who have expanded the body of research and explored the concept from multiple perspectives. DuFour (2004) stated, "the term PLC has been used so ubiquitously that it is in danger of losing all meaning" (p. 6). More importantly, implementation and sustainability are contingent upon remaining focused, ongoing reflections, and interventions to handle issues that may arise (DuFour, 2004).

Constructivism

This study is grounded in social constructivism, and the social constructivist learning theory is the guiding foundation for this study. Social constructivism originated after Piaget's theory of cognitive constructivism (Powell & Kalina, 2009), and Dewey's use of the term "social construction" in his *Pedagogic Creed* (Hirtle, 1996). Vygotsky

founded social constructivism on the premise that social interactions along with critical thinking were an integral part of the learning community (Powell & Kalina, 2009). According to Darling (2008), social constructivism advocates for the creation of learning communities that respect the individuality and uniqueness of one's views, as these perspectives caters to the formulation of knowledge and meaning. In teacher education, these views cultivate a community of learners committed to improving inclusion and equity in schools. Professional learning communities espouse the principles of social constructivism and the social constructivist learning theory (Hord, 2009; Lambert et al., 2002; Schiermeyer, 2010).

Bruner (1996) described PLCs as "mutual communities of learners, involved jointly in solving problems with all contributing to the process of educating one another" (pp. 81-82). Additionally, Bruner stated, "human learning is best when it is participatory, proactive, communal, collaborative, and given over to constructing meanings rather than receiving them" (p. 84). Dewey described education as a social process, and schools as communities in which knowledge is constructed socially (Bennett, 2010; Crosby, 2007; Hirtle, 1996).

Social constructivism also referred to as Vygotskian constructivism (Abdal-Haqq, 1998), views school as a cultural process that fosters collaboration and knowledge construction among peers. Members in the learning environment are co-constructors of knowledge who engage in shared problem solving and inquiry (Schiermeyer, 2010). These social interactions benefit the group and eventually the individual (Palincsar, 1998). Social constructivist learning theory advocates for learning communities

reflective of cooperation, collaboration, culture, communication, and collective knowledge which ultimately benefits individual knowledge experiences (Hirtle, 1996; Lambert et al., 2002; Powell & Kalina, 2009; Schiermeyer, 2010). Additionally, this type of learning is reciprocal and opposes instructional practices, which are teacher-directed and mainly consisted of students passively "receiving, memorizing, storing, and transmitting a fixed body of information" (Hirtle, 1996, p. 92). Professional learning communities are characterized by the tenets of social constructivism and the social constructivist learning theory, and the vast similarities between PLCs and social constructivism led to this theory of learning being chosen as the foundation for this study.

Professional Learning Communities Defined

For this section of the literature review, it is imperative to provide a definition of PLCs from multiple perspectives; address characteristics of a learning community; and, discuss how the learning community model affects students and teachers. Learning communities have been researched by many, but for this study the works of Senge (1990); Kruse, Louis, and Bryk (1995); Hord (1997, 2004); DuFour and Eaker (1998); and Eaker, DuFour, and Burnette (2002) will be reviewed. Additionally, the works of supporting researchers such as Little (2002); Louis and Marks (1998); and Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002a) were reviewed. The consensus amongst advocates of PLCs is that they are supportive, collaborative, a shared process, and focus on learning not teaching.

Senge (1990) advocated the importance of organizations addressing five disciplines. These disciplines were (a) systems thinking, (b) personal mastery, (c) mental

models, (d) shared vision, and (e) team learning. Senge's publication, *The Fifth Discipline*, sparked interest in schools as learning communities and led many in the education community to explore new ways of improving the daily operation of schools and professionalism of teachers and administrators (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003, 2009; Thomas & McKelvy, 2007). In learning organizations, Senge (2000) believed people learn from each other, and the collaboration of their thoughts and efforts create opportunities for continuous growth and reflection. His notion of *schools as formal organizations* definitely provided a new way of thinking about school (Senge, 2000). In his book, *Schools that Learn*, Senge (2000) provided a blueprint for school improvement utilizing the five disciplines. According to Senge (2000), PLCs, accompanied with meaningful professional development, are two components vital to the success of learning organizations. More importantly, Senge stressed systems thinking as the cornerstone of a learning organization because it integrates the other disciplines (Thomas & McKelvy, 2007). Senge's systems thinking is synonymous with shared values/beliefs/vision used by subsequent researchers (DuFour, 2004; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 1997, 2004; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1995).

Kruse, Louis, and Bryk (1995) identified professional learning communities by the following five elements. These elements were (a) reflective dialogue, (b) focus on student learning, (c) interaction between teacher and colleagues, (d) collaboration, and (e) shared values and norms. They believed every decision or action within the learning community should benefit the growth and development of all students. Additionally, Louis and Kruse (1995) addressed structural conditions and human/social resources

essential to the establishment of PLCs. Structural conditions address issues such as schools providing adequate time for teachers to collaborate and plan lessons. Teacher isolation is replaced by collaborative team teaching in PLCs. Teacher empowerment and conditions that facilitate sustainable relationships between students and teachers are vital to PLCs. Human/social resources such as respect and trust amongst members of the learning community, supportive leadership, opportunities for knowledge acquisition and self-reflection, and advocating a culture of socialization and relationship building are identified as vital to the success of PLCs. The cornerstones that provide the foundation for all other elements are shared values and norms (Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1995).

Hord's affiliation with the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) paved the way for her contribution to educational research. After working for over nine years as a researcher with SEDL, the advent of Senge's learning organizations that sparked interest amongst educational researchers, and the research of others such as Darling-Hammond (1996) and Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991), Hord (1997) began to refine her definition of professional learning communities. Accordingly, Hord (2008) presented five dimensions of PLCs in 1997 as,

- supportive and shared leadership,
- shared beliefs, values, and vision,
- collective intentional learning and its application,
- supportive conditions, and
- shared personal practice.

Hord (2004) believed all dimensions are intertwined and affect one another in some form or fashion.

To rationalize her definition, Hord (2004, 2008, 2009) asserted that the purpose of school is student learning, which is significantly affected by teacher quality, which is improved through continuous professional development, which is best supported through professional learning communities. After furthering her research, Hord (2009) emphasized that PLCs were closely connected to constructivism, which "recognizes learning as the process of making sense of information and experiences" (p. 1). More importantly, Hord (2009) realized that mechanisms for change are needed in schools to implement a new style of teaching and learning to the entire community.

To gain a better understanding of Hord's definition, it is necessary to discuss the six principles of the constructivist learning theory that provided the foundation for Hord's (2009) six dimensions. According to Hord (2009), learners individually and uniquely construct knowledge based on prior knowledge and experiences. These experiences are reflective and derived from an internal locus of control in which social interactions ultimately provide opportunities for collaboration and shared meaning from multiple perspectives. On the premise that PLCs are defined by what each word *professional learning communities* implies, and utilizing the aforementioned constructivist learning theory, Hord (2009) concluded that PLCs were most applicable to accommodate the setting and work relationships advocated by constructivist learning.

From this theoretical foundation, Hord (2009) added a sixth dimension to her previous research. This sixth dimension was *peer sharing their practice to gain*

feedback, and thus individual and organizational improvement. Hord (2009) believed that PLCs model constructivist learning, and the purpose of PLCs is the learning of the community's members. With this in mind, "peers learning and working collaboratively creates an ideal environment for a constructivist learning approach that benefits both teachers and students" (Hord, 2009, p. 3). More importantly, effective implementation is imperative, and elements such as leadership, community membership, time for learning, space for learning, data use support, and distributed leadership foster successful PLCs (Hord, 2009). Explicitly, Hord (2009) advocated for PLCs to become environments where "educators work together toward a shared purpose and improved student learning" (p. 3). The aforementioned description exemplifies the vision collaborative learning environments should reflect and espouse to.

DuFour and Eaker (1998) outlined six characteristics of PLCs, one year after Hord's publication. These characteristics were a) shared belief system (mission, vision, & values), b) collective inquiry, c) action orientation, d) continuous improvement, and e) results orientation, with shared belief being the foundation of a PLC and collective inquiry being the engine of improvement, growth, and renewal in a PLC (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). According to Eaker, DuFour, and Burnette (2002), PLCs are characterized by collaborative cultures in which teacher isolation is replaced with teachers collaborating on a daily basis as a norm. The overall goal is improved academic achievement of all students, and the collective efforts of all members of the PLCs contribute to the attainment of this goal.

The success of a collaborative culture of a PLC is totally dependent upon the efforts of members of the staff, or rather the team (Burnette, 2002; Carey, 2010; Clark & Clark, 1996; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006; DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Eaker, DuFour, & Burnette, 2002; Fullan, 2005; Honnert, 2010; Hord, 1997; Louis & Marks, 1998; Wells & Feun, 2008). DuFour (2007) stated "schools do not become PLCs simply by enrolling in a program or renaming existing practices. Instead, PLCs are established when educators align practices with PLC concepts" (p. 4). Members of the PLC must also embrace change and trust that their collective efforts will benefit and enhance the school's culture of high academic achievement for all.

Eaker, DuFour, and Burnette (2002) grouped the PLC conceptual framework into three themes: a) a solid foundation consisting of collaboratively developed and widely shared mission, vision, values, and goals, b) collaborative teams that work interdependently to achieve common goals, and c) a focus on results as evidenced by a commitment to continuous improvement (p. 3). There are four essential building blocks that provide a foundation for PLCs, and ultimately become the basis for all decisions within the school. These building blocks are a) mission, b) vision, c) values, and d) goals (Eaker, DuFour, & Burnette, 2002). A strong foundation is needed during the implementation process due to the substantive change encompassing the entire school environment. Change must be embraced, and the efforts of members of a PLC can negatively or positively affect implementation and sustainability (Attard, 2012; Jones & Thessin, 2015).

Current Research on Professional Learning Communities

Many researchers have focused on professional learning communities and their effect on school improvement efforts. Studies have focused on implementation (Berman, 2010; Crosby, 2007; Gentile, 2010; Guarino, 2009; Honnert, 2010; Lippy, 2011; Peraro, 2005); teacher perceptions (Abraham, 2011; Boone, 2010; Carey, 2010; Cox, 2011; Hannaford, 2010; Herrington, 2011; Peretti, 2009; Waters, 2009; Williamson, 2008); collaboration (Ackerman, 2011; Avila, 2011; Griffith, 2009); culture (Evans, 2012; Loffer, 2002); characteristics (Lindahl, 2011; Spiegel-Stroud, 2007); effectiveness (Dinardo, 2010; Schiermeyer, 2010; Tagaris, 2007; Wiseman, 2008); academic achievement (Carter, 2008; Croasmun, 2007; Lieberman & Miller, 2008; Senechal, 2011; Smith, 2010); training/professional development (Chappuis, Chappuis, & Stiggins, 2009; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Reeves, 2008); and evaluation/sustainability (Bennett, 2010; Gillespie, 2010; Kochenour, 2010). This study could have focused on many aspects of professional learning communities, but the decision to focus on the effectiveness of the existing learning community provides the best analysis of what is actually occurring and what needs to be occurring.

Prominent researchers have revisited and revised their theories over the years. Case in point, Senge's initial research on learning organizations has been correlated to learning communities in schools and attributes of PLCs (Bennett, 2010). Annenberg Institute's (2003) research on PLCs emphasized the need for system-wide professional development for all professionals. Hord's (2008) work with SEDL has continued over the years, and her theories are constantly being revised to accommodate the demands of

schools and accountability. DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour (2005) have contributed to current research with numerous publications and more importantly an implementation guide and toolkit, which is utilized by many districts seeking school improvement. While the works of Senge, Hord, and DuFour have sparked interest in learning communities, many have contributed to the body of research. Respectively, Blankstein (2004) has contributed by publishing books, furthering the works of Hord and DuFour, and the development of HOPE Foundation, which advocated for creating and sustaining collaborative school cultures. Sustaining PLCs are the focus of many of Blankstein's publications. Another effective publication related to implementation is Foord and Haar's (2008) *Professional Learning Communities*, which provided a toolkit to guide the implementation process. Hipp and Huffman's (2010) publication of *Demystifying Professional Learning Communities* provides tools for assessing and analyzing the effectiveness of professional learning communities.

DuFour (2003, 2004) advocated three components that represent the core principles of a professional learning community. These components were (a) ensuring that students learn, (b) a culture of collaboration, and (c) a focus on results. DuFour proposed three big ideas that aimed to redirect the conceptual focus of PLCs, and force schools to critically reflect on the concepts driving the initiative. Too many times schools are presented with initiatives that ultimately become a thing of the past. To prevent PLCs from being a fad or another failed reform initiative, DuFour (2004, 2007) was compelled to provide clarity and reiterate the core principles of PLCs. The three big

ideas proposed by DuFour (2003, 2004) to redirect the conceptual focus of PLCs and reflect on the concepts driving the initiative are as following:

Big idea #1: Ensuring that students learn. The focal point of this idea is based on the premise and assumption that the purpose of a formal education is not merely on teaching but on learning. PLCs advocate for a shift from teaching to learning as the main focus (Wells & Feun, 2008; Williams, Brien, Spraque, & Sullivan, 2008). Schools are guided by their beliefs, and are forced to introspectively review their mission statements to assure that they are reflective of the school's purpose and not just a cliché'. In order to effectively address this idea, schools must engage in ongoing exploration of three crucial questions that drive the work of those within the PLCs (DuFour, 2004). These questions are "a) What do we want each student to learn?, b) How will we know when each student has learned it?, and c) How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning?" (p. 8). The last question is extremely important and separates PLCs from traditional schools. This question addresses any interventions required to identify students in need of additional support and individualized assistance in a timely, ongoing manner.

Big idea #2: A culture of collaboration. The days of working in isolation become a thing of the past in collaborative cultures. Collaboration occurs in multiple ways, but within PLCs this collaboration is more systematic and purposeful. According to DuFour (2004), collaboration represented "a systematic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practices, while working in teams and engaging in an ongoing cycle of questions promoting deep team learning" (p. 9).

Additionally, all members of the staff belong to teams focusing on student learning and are committed to this partnership. Lastly, teams must be able to analyze district and state curriculum guides to discuss the best ways to improve classroom practices and to ensure that student learning remains central.

Big idea #3: A focus on results. Accountability in schools is very important and relies heavily on data. According to DuFour (2004), "PLCs judge their effective on the basis of results" (p. 10). Data must be embraced and used to guide school improvement and academic achievement. The collaboration that occurs in PLCs allows teachers to work as teams to plan, create common assessments, and reflect on what is working and what is not. Reflecting and revisiting goals are imperative if schools expect to yield successful results. A focus on results entails critically analyzing good and bad data, and honestly confronting any weaknesses after disaggregating the results.

Shifting from a Traditional School to Professional Learning Communities

The cultural shift from a traditional school to professional learning communities is no easy task. Schools must first realize that interdisciplinary teams and PLCs may be synonymous terms, but the two entities are different (Eaker & Keating, 2008). Many schools jump on the bandwagon and claim to be PLCs due to current research on latest trends, when in actuality they still operate in accordance to interdisciplinary teams' concept. However, those schools that have successfully implemented the interdisciplinary teaming model have a greater chance of properly transitioning to PLCs when adhering to the tenets to PLCs (Eaker & Keating, 2008). These cultural changes are pertinent if a school expects to transition from interdisciplinary teaming to PLCs.

Eaker, DuFour, and Burnette (2002) focused on reculturing schools to become professional learning communities by focusing on seven elements. These elements were (a) collaboration; (b) developing mission, vision, values, and goals; (c) focusing on learning; (d) leadership; (e) focused school improvement plans; (f) celebration; and (g) persistence. This area of research is critical to the success of the implementation process. A change in mindset and practices, or rather a cultural shift that seeks to change the structures as well as the belief systems of schools is imperative if schools expect to successful transition into PLCs.

Eaker and Keating (2008) discussed three critical cultural shifts needed to become a PLC. The first shift was a shift from teaching to learning. According to DuFour (2007), this shift involved a change in mindset and was probably the most difficult shift to achieve. Additionally, this mindset must be embraced by all stakeholders and becomes a part of the school's belief system (Hughes-Hassell, Brasfield, & Dupree, 2012; Maxwell, Huggins, & Scheurich, 2010). Schools must redirect their focus to student learning and best ways to create environments which encourage high expectations for all students.

The second shift was a shift in the work of teachers. One word summed up this shift, collaboration. Teachers in PLCs worked in collaboration and not isolation (Elbousty & Bratt, 2010; Ermeling, 2012; Nelson, 2009). This shift represented more than teachers talking about school issues; it represented teachers actively collaborating about best ways to improve and increase student learning (DuFour, 2007; Nelson, 2009; Nelson & Slavit, 2008; Nieto, 2009; Pella, 2011; Watson, 2014). Professional learning

communities incorporate teacher collaboration, which leads to changes in student learning and implementation through the effective use of ongoing reflection and a focus on results.

The third and final shift was a shift in focus. Educators in professional learning communities "shift from inputs to outcomes, and from intentions to results" (Eaton & Keating, 2008, p. 15). This focus on results provided evidence of student learning to guide the learning process. Data are used to guide instruction, accommodate students' needs, and make decisions. The overall goal was assessment and evaluation of student learning, and teachers working collaborative to provide success for all students.

Professional learning communities and interdisciplinary teaming utilized by many traditional schools have their share of similarities, but they are also fundamentally different. While interdisciplinary teaming encourages teacher collaboration and sharing of ideas, PLCs encourage collaboration accompanied with action and a plan for improvements. Professional learning communities require total involvement and commitment to change. Ongoing discourse and reflections aim to improve the learning process and assure that all stakeholders are focused on the outcomes and end results (Doolittle, Sudeck, & Rattigan, 2008).

Moseley (2007) conducted a qualitative, collaborative-action-research case study focusing on reculturing a public middle school. Positive school culture is a characteristic of effective middle level education as advocated by National Middle School Association, Southern Regional Education Board, and Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development. Moseley (2007) believed that "understanding the culture of a school is critical to

successful restructuring efforts" (p. iii). According to Fullan (as cited in Moseley, 2007), "reform efforts can only work if we "re-culture" our schools, and this re-culturing can lead to restructuring of the school community" (p. 44). More importantly, Moseley's study provided pertinent research on learning communities shaping school culture.

Guarino (2009) conducted a qualitative study focusing on the Pennsylvania Middle School Association-Western Region's transformation to professional learning communities. The middle schools included in the study were seeking to reculture their learning environments and transform interdisciplinary teams into professional learning communities. Participants were surveyed, and the researcher was not necessarily judging the process of this transformation but wanted to know if the schools were moving in the right direction. With the principals serving as instructional leaders in these school and the primary barriers of data, the researcher realized that the transformation was occurring. However, a significant amount of time was being spent on dealing with student issues and less time on professional activities related to PLCs. This pertinent information shed light to issues that need to be addressed if reculturing efforts are expected to be successful.

Implementation and Sustainability

After conducting a review of literature, there were numerous studies on benefits of professional learning communities and its effect on students, teachers, academics, and school improvement. On the other hand, research was scarce on sustainability (Bennett, 2010). According to DuFour (2007), "faculties throughout North America are referring to themselves as PLCs yet do not do the things that PLCs do" (p. 4). Guarino (2009)

stated, “professional learning communities are one of the most talked about and implemented techniques in education today. However, many professional communities are failing to succeed because they are not launching and focusing their professional learning community around the necessary components” (p. 43). Before implementation occurs, schools must first come to a consensus on their purpose, their focus, an understanding of the core principles of PLCs, the role of teachers and administrators, the need to embrace and understand the change process, and the importance of keeping student learning at the forefront (Doolittle et al., 2008; Lieberman & Miller, 2011). Sustainability is the ultimate goal of PLCs, and is achieved by monitoring the effectiveness of the implementation through continual assessment and planning (Cross, 2012; Doolittle et al., 2008; Foord & Haar, 2008; Hipp, Huffman, Pankake, & Olivier, 2008).

Two critical components who strengthen implementation and sustainability are teachers and school leaders (Hord & Sommers, 2008; Richmond & Manokore, 2011). Professional learning communities have the power to increase teacher efficacy and initiate school-wide change when a culture of collaboration is established and mechanisms are in place to encourage effective discourse (Hawley & Rollie, 2007; Prytula & Weiman, 2012). The success of PLCs is contingent upon effective collaboration and must be embedded in every facet of the school culture (Burnette, 2002; Carey, 2010; Clark & Clark, 1996; DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Eaker, DuFour, & Burnette, 2002; Fullan, 2005; Honnert, 2010; Hord, 1997; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Louis & Marks, 1998; Owens, 2010; Wells & Feun, 2008). A powerful way to improve

teaching and learning is through teacher collaboration and communication (Linder et al., 2012; Owens, 2010; Resnick, 2010; Sergiovanni, 2005), and as Schmoker stated, "the right kind of continuous structured teacher collaboration improves the quality of teaching" (as cited in DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005, p. xii). The collaboration and communication embedded in PLCs create a dramatic change from the teacher isolation experienced in many traditional school environments (Burke, Marx, & Berry, 2011; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Wells & Feun, 2008). Fullan (2001) cautioned that, while PLCs have the potential to create powerful collaborative cultures, overall success depends upon focusing on the right things. This type of collaboration and communication requires all teachers and leaders to critically reflect and work interdependently to achieve common goals and focus on results (Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002; Harris & Jones, 2010; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Nelson, 2009; Servage, 2008).

Teachers learn best from each other, instead of from outside experts or consultants (Prytula, 2012; Prytula & Weiman, 2012; Schmoker, 2005). Additionally, teachers working within PLCs become students themselves who are constantly learning from other teachers (Maloney & Konza, 2011; Tegano & Moran, 2005). These reciprocal relationships eventually establish a climate of trust, reflective dialogue, collective change, and allows for teacher leaders to emerge (Bennett, 2010; Foord & Haar, 2008; Patterson & Patterson, 2004). Teachers' roles are transformed and influenced by PLCs, but Servage (2009) asserted that the transformation is not always for the betterment of the teacher as a whole and sacrificed certain aspects of teachers' roles in PLCs at the expense

of others. These new roles require buy-in from all teachers and a mindset change from teaching in isolation to collaborative teaching in order to be successful (Cramer, Liston, Thousand, & Nevin, 2010; Nelson, 2009). Yet, the aim of this collaboration must be clearly defined and understood by all (Servage, 2009). Failure to articulate expectations and outcomes can potentially limit teacher growth and learning within PLCs (Servage, 2009).

According to Roberts and Pruitt (2003), teachers within PLCs were grouped into the following five categories: "(a) teachers as colleagues, (b) teachers as leaders, (c) teachers as learners, (d) teachers as pedagogues, and (5) teacher-parent relationships" (p. 14). Teachers must embrace these roles, realizing that their collaborative efforts are vital to the success of the PLCs and that it is imperative to change their focus to student learning and what's best for the betterment of all students (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003, 2009). A teacher's role in a PLC must not be minimized. Overall school improvement is contingent upon teachers evolving into leaders of their schools and inspiring other teachers to get involved (Hess, 2008; Raspberry & Mahajan, 2008). Research has shown that teachers are vital to student learning (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008; Sigurdardottir, 2010), and their perceptions of the school environment are paramount to school improvement (Chiou-hui, 2011; Hoffman, Dahlman, & Zierdt, 2009; Riveros, Newton, & Burgess, 2012; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). In order to improve student learning and achievement (Levine & Marcus, 2010; Lieberman & Miller, 2008), mechanisms must be in place to foster teacher development and improved instruction. Williams (2012) concluded in a study of 200 urban schools that collaborative teacher

learning greatly affected student learning and achievement. Saunders, Goldenberg, and Gallimore (2009) also asserted that teachers must be able to engage in collaborative discourse focused on connections between instructional strategies and student learning.

Hausman and Goldring (2001) described teachers as one of the major constituents within a school community and advocated for structures to provide conducive work conditions that facilitate the development of trust, collegiality, and shared values. Unfortunately, some teachers are resistant to change, lack skills needed to function effectively in collaborative learning communities, or work in economically disadvantaged schools that impede effective implementation (Barth, 2001; Hargreaves & Fink, 2003; Joyce, 2004). Kohm and Nance (2009) stated, "the ultimate success of any improvement depends on the behavior of teachers, and when good teachers work together, they support one another's journey toward better instruction" (p. 67). Additionally, training and professional development are paramount, need to be parallel to classroom instruction, and must facilitate teacher growth (Little, Gearhart, Curry, & Kafka, 2003; Rahman, 2011). Professional development must be meaningful, job-embedded, reinforced, reflective, revisited, reciprocal, and aligned to student learning goals (Avila, 2011; Lambert, 2003; Speck & Knipe, 2005). As Senge (2000) so vividly exclaimed, the days of "drive-by staff development," which are usually one-shot trainings disconnected from what's from what's actually occurring in the classroom and removed from the needs of the students, and these types of professional development must be discontinued (p. 385). This type of professional development has no place in PLCs and contradicts the sustained

collaborative learning process, which characterizes effective professional development (Lambert, 2003; Speck & Knipe, 2005).

Teachers must believe that their teaching is worth the effort and contributing to the success of the students (Kilbane, 2009; Lovett & Cameron, 2011; Nieto, 2009; Santagata & Guarino, 2012). This is referred to as teacher efficacy (Newmann, Ruter, & Smith, 1989). Teacher efficacy is imperative in PLCs, yet this construct is negatively affected when reform initiatives are implemented with little to no support for teachers (Dantonio, 2001; Richmond & Manokore, 2011). There is a consensus that collaboration improves instruction, yet teachers are rarely afforded the time to work collaboratively to apply, assess, and improve their instructional strategies collectively (Schmoker, 2004). This level of disconnect has ruined many promising initiatives, has presented roadblocks, and has negatively affected implementation and sustainability (Eaker, DuFour, & Burnette, 2002; Foord & Haar, 2008; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Lujan & Day, 2010; Schmoker, 2006; Sims & Penny, 2015; Supovitz & Christman, 2005).

Louis and Kruse (1995) posited, "every study related to PLCs concludes that the role of school leaders is critical" (p. 9). Additionally, leaders must create learning environments supportive of teachers' efforts that facilitate collaboration, reflective dialogue, and a collective focus on student learning (Hord & Sommers, 2008; Lomos, Hofman, & Bosker, 2011; Well & Feun, 2008). Leaders encourage individual and collective efficacy, risk-taking, and innovative teaching strategies. Leaders also understand how school culture is positively affected through celebrations and shared stories of student and teacher successes and achievements (Deal & Peterson, 2009).

Professional learning communities advocate continuous job-embedded learning for educators as a catalyst for improved student learning (Dever & Lash, 2013; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006). Nonetheless, leaders have the power to provide opportunities for teacher learning and growth. Within PLCs, shared leadership is advocated, and school leaders encourage collaboration and teacher leadership by sharing responsibilities with teachers (Kohm & Nance, 2009). Shared decision-making and transparency cultivate collaborative cultures and are facilitated by school leaders. In other words, leadership becomes the responsibility of teachers and administrators (Lambert, 2003).

Leadership is vital within PLCs, and contributes to effective implementation and sustainability (Cranston, 2009, 2011; Hamzah, Yakop, & Nordin, 2011; Hirsh & Killion, 2009; Hoffman, Dahlman, & Zierdt, 2009; Hord & Hirsh, 2009; Mullen & Hutinger, 2008; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). Leaders not only monitor progress of the PLCs, but also actively promote collaborative changes in instruction, curriculum, and assessment (Foord & Haar, 2008). However, Senge (1994) warned despite all efforts put forth by school leaders PLCs may still fail if total commitment is not evident. Leaders cannot ensure that all will actively buy-in; they can only advocate and facilitate supportive environments. Leaders must model expected behaviors as it relates to keeping the vision alive, creating collaborative cultures of communication, understanding the purpose, and sharing of information (Cranston, 2009; Jacobs & Yendol-Hoppey, 2010; Roberts & Pruitt, 2003; Roberts & Pruitt 2009).

According to Roberts and Pruitt (2003), the role of the principal in building a learning community is vital and sets the tone for expectations and outcomes. Principals must model what they expect to see by building and communicating a shared vision, mission, and values based on trust, collaboration, and commitment. Principals must also foster environments where members of the PLCs understand the change process, adapt to change, develop as teacher leaders and lifelong learners, and sustain student growth and academic improvements. Professional learning communities are characterized by tenets of constructivism. Therefore, it is only befitting that leadership is reflective of this theory as well. Lambert et al. (2002) believed that PLCs provide opportunities for constructing or understanding the change process within the school community by applying constructivist leadership principles that address and identify needs and growth potential. Leadership then takes on a new meaning and becomes redefined.

DuFour and Eaker (1998) believed educators must first decide the purpose of school and what type of schools are needed before any programs, policies, or procedures can be effectively planned and implemented. Furthermore, "the lack of a compelling vision for public schools continues to be a major obstacle in any effort to improve schools" (p. 64). Schools are unique, and the culture of the school dictates the needs of the learning community (Eaker, DuFour, & Burnette, 2002). Therefore, implementation will vary from school to school; professional development/training will be imperative yet dependent upon the needs of the PLC; barriers and obstacles such as resistance to change, poor leadership, time restraints, and money will plague some schools more than others; and finally sustainability will always be contingent upon monitoring the effectiveness of

the implementation process, and continual authentic assessment of the PLC (Foord & Haar, 2008).

Relationship to Previous Studies

This study builds upon previous studies related to teacher perceptions of professional learning communities in relation to implementation, effectiveness, ineffectiveness, transitions, sustainability, and/or collaboration. More importantly, studies utilizing various methodologies are analyzed to gain better insight. All studies chosen for this critique purposely focused on middle school or middle level learners, which is also the population for my study. Five studies will be described in this critique, focusing on the methodology utilized, a description of the population being studied, and the results of the study. The relationship between my study and the five studies highlighted will be provided upon conclusion.

Cox (2011) conducted a qualitative study focusing on teacher perceptions concerning implementation of PLCs within a middle school mathematics department. Cox's study relied upon data such as interviews, observation, and meeting minutes to analyze these perceptions to decipher whether implementation benefitted these teachers personally and professionally. The research site had been identified as a low performing school based on the standards set forth by NCLB Act 2001. Data from eight participants revealed that the implementation of PLCs was benefitting the teachers and students. Collaboration was more interactive, collaborative teams who worked together for a common goal were replacing teacher isolation, and finally growth was evident within the department for both teachers and students. Additionally, job-embedded professional development became more meaningful to the teachers in the math department.

Wiseman (2008) conducted a study focusing on middle schools in the County of San Bernadino, California that implemented PLC characteristics and those that did not. The two tools utilized to obtain data were Harvey and Drolet's *Survey of Team Characteristics* and Huffman and Hipp's *Professional Learning Community Assessment.* Utilizing the two survey instruments, the researcher discovered the responses of the participants differed from the 17 characteristics of effective teams. Additionally, the data revealed that both schools with strong evidence of PLCs and those without an established PLC had a substantial degree of teamness. The researcher concluded that schools with PLCs could strengthen their effectiveness if they were to explicitly adhere to each of Harvey and Drolet's (2003) characteristics. Congruently, those schools without PLCs would strengthen their environments by incorporating more teambuilding activities to increase and nurture collegiality.

Boone (2010) conducted a concurrent mixed-methods study investigating teachers' perceptions and professional learning satisfaction in an urban middle school. Boone's study will be examined to gain a better understanding of implementation and its correlation to teacher satisfaction. The participants consisted of 142 certificated teachers who were given the *School Professional Staff as Learning Community Questionnaire* (SPSLCQ), which was used to obtain quantitative data. Qualitative data were obtained through a typological analysis of eight teacher interviews. Data revealed dissatisfaction with PLCs, which resulted from ineffective implementation. In other words, implementation had not occurred in accordance with what the research suggested, and barriers prevented desired results. This study highlighted factors that inhibit successful implementation such as resistance to change, hostility, and teacher isolation, and the need to address these barriers.

Honnert (2010) conducted a qualitative case study focusing on participants' perspectives of their experience when a cultural shift occurred at their middle school. This shift involved a transition from traditional middle school to a PLC. The participants in this study were nine teachers and one administrator at a Midwestern suburban middle school. Data were collected from the following three perspectives: "an administrator structuring the transition, a Guiding Coalition of teachers trained to help implement the program, and individual teachers as members of a PLC" (p. 9). Qualitative data were collected through interviews, observations, and artifacts. The research included in this study is significant to my study because the benefits and barriers associated with implementation are discussed. Ten steps advocated by Eaker, DuFour, and Burnette (2002) for implementation of PLCs were examined from the participants' perspective to gain insight about this transition. These steps were as follows:

> (a) acknowledge collaboration, (b) know PLC concepts, (c) develop shared mission, vision, values, and goals, (d) communicate a mission of student learning, (e) vision as a school of excellence, (f) implementation of the vision statement, (g) link value statements to the vision statement, (f) focus on short-term and long-term goals, (g) engage in research-based and data-driven plans, and (h) expect a cyclical process. (pp. 131-133)

Effective implementation and planning are vital to the success of PLCs.

Data reveal that implementation is not as simple as the research suggests. There were many crucial factors missing and in need of refinement or rather clarity. For starters, the school lacked a shared belief system, which is a critical component of PLCs

(DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Quite naturally, this provided a fragile foundation that totally affected communication, collaboration, and commitment (Eaker, DuFour, & Burnette, 2002). This study will serve as a guide for my data collection because the ten steps for implementation of PLCs utilized provides a basis to determine effectiveness of the research site's PLCs, and to also provide clarity and awareness about creating effective PLCs.

Miller (2008) conducted a qualitative, participatory action-research study focusing on the influence of collaborative norming process on teacher perceptions of middle level teaming. The research site was Triumph Middle School, Triumph Area School District's lone middle school, and the participants were the teachers and administrators. The theoretical framework used for the study explored topics such as small group research, social constructivism, professional learning communities, and middle level teaming. The researcher collected qualitative data through interviews, observations, and artifacts. Throughout the study, a correlation was made between learning communities and middle school concept to accentuate teaming as an advocated strategy of both concepts.

Small learning communities and interdisciplinary teams are synonymous terms used to describe a group of teachers working collaboratively towards a common goal. The learning community in Miller's study was also referred to as a community of practice. The findings revealed that the participants could not articulate a shared vision for learning and that the collaborative norm process benefitted the school because of its ability to transform teams and create a mechanism for discourse. This process also

encouraged a collaboration of thoughts and reflections to attain a common or shared belief.

Taking into consideration the problem and purpose guiding my study, Honnert's (2010) study provides a blueprint for assessing participants' perceptions about PLC implementation and effectiveness. The ten steps suggested by Eaker, DuFour, and DuFour (2002) can possibly be replicated in my study and utilized as a catalyst for data collection. Another beneficial study is Wiseman's (2008), which utilized Huffman and Hipp's *Professional Learning Community Assessment*, a survey instrument used to gain participants' responses about the professional learning communities within their schools. The research site in my study has been labeled a professional learning community, and my goal is to gain teacher perceptions about the impact of PLCs on teaching and learning. Teacher perceptions of evidence of characteristics such as collaboration, communication, professional development, and supportive leadership are pertinent to my study.

Implications

Research suggests that PLCs positively impact school improvement when properly implemented, when teachers work collaboratively, and student learning becomes the top priority (DuFour, 2004; Eaker & Keating, 2008). The success of PLCs is contingent upon effective collaboration (Wells & Feun, 2008), and PLCs provide structures allowing teachers to actively collaborate about best ways to improve and increase student learning (DuFour, 2007; Nelson, 2009; Nelson & Slavit, 2008; Nieto, 2009; Pella, 2011). Schools must redirect their focus to student learning and best ways to create environments that encourage high expectations for all students. Research has

shown that teachers are vital to student learning (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008; Sigurdardottir, 2010), and their perceptions of the school environment are paramount to school improvement (Chiou-hui, 2011; Hoffman, Dahlman, & Zierdt, 2009; Riveros, Newton, & Burgess, 2012; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008).

This study addressed the refinement of the current PLCs so that they may more effectively impact and improve student achievement. The local implications of this study have the potential to affect the middle school component and the first year of high school for students at my school by utilizing data from the perspectives of teachers working within the learning environment to create a project geared towards school improvement. Also, local implications of this study can contribute to the creation of PLCs based on research within the school district, with protocols and procedures in place for ongoing evaluation of effectiveness. A larger implication of this study would contribute to existing research on implementing and sustaining PLCs through consistent practices and effective collaboration. Possible directions for this project study are a program evaluation of the current PLCs or the creation of a professional development and training based on research and data to assist with the refinement of the current PLCs.

Summary

This section outlined the problem that prompted this study and detailed research and literature germane to professional learning communities. PLCs provide a proven conceptual framework for transforming schools on all levels (DuFour, 2007; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 1997, 2004, 2008, 2009). PLCs are also an endorsed middle and high school reform strategy (DuFour, 2003, 2004, 2007, 2008; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Eaker,

DuFour, & Burnette, 2002; Hord, 1997, 2004, 2008, 2009). When implemented effectively, the professional learning model has been proven to create a collaborative culture of learning for all, and improve pedagogy for teachers (Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Linder et al., 2012; Roberts & Pruitt, 2003, 2009; Sargent & Hannum, 2009). DuFour (2003, 2004) advocated three components that represent the core principles of a professional learning community. These components were (a) ensuring that students learn, (b) a culture of collaboration, and (c) a focus on results. These components succinctly summarize the guiding principles of PLCs.

This review of literature revealed that effective collaboration and communication thrive off positive, trusting interactions within the PLCs; implementation varies from school to school; professional development/training is imperative, important, and dependent upon the needs of the PLCs; barriers and obstacles such as resistance to change, poor leadership, time restraints, lack of focus, and insufficient funds will plague some schools more than others (Lieberman & Miller, 2011); shared leadership, teacher commitment, and supportive structures minimize obstacles and barriers; and finally sustainability is contingent upon monitoring the effectiveness of the implementation process, and continual authentic assessment of the PLCs (Foord & Haar, 2008). Professional learning community is not a one-size-fit-all strategy; it is a strategy that must be tailored to the individual school environment and reflective of the students' need with an overall focus on student learning and results (Waters, 2009). Section 2 provides the methodology utilized to explore the perceptions of the participants, Section 3 will describe the project, and Section 4 will interpret the findings of this project study.

Section 2: The Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of teachers toward professional learning communities. I also wanted to examine the efficacy of the current PLCs in a secondary school with a middle school and high school comprised of Grades 7th through 12th. In this study, I focused on ways the current PLCs could be refined. With this knowledge, teachers and administrators may be better able to improve student achievement and close the achievement gap. My sample consisted of 7th through 9th grade teachers of core subjects. Because teachers are held accountable for student success (The Alliance for Education, 2010), their experiences and perceptions provided data needed to plan future PLCs that benefit teacher growth and development more effectively.

The qualitative approach was used because qualitative research occurs in natural settings through exploration, and case studies allow the perceptions and views of the participants to generate data. Case study design was chosen because teacher accountability increased and teachers were being held accountable for student performance. The teachers' concerns would then provide data needed to examine the case or issue (Creswell, 2007). My study problem concerned inconsistencies in a Louisiana urban schools' implementation of structured PLCs (Southern Regional Educational Board, 2011). Therefore, the case study design was used to explore the perceptions of educators committed to reculturing and improving their current learning environment. The case study design was also used to capture the essence of the problem

by focusing on individual experiences from PLC participations to eventually plan future PLCs reflective of the teachers' needs.

This study was guided by the following questions:

RQ1. What are participants' perceptions about the efficacy of the current PLCs at their school?

RQ2. How would participants refine current PLCs to improve student achievement?

In this section, I describe my selection of a research design, decision about which population of teachers to interview, and procedures for collecting, coding, and analyzing qualitative data.

Qualitative Research Design and Approach

I chose a qualitative approach and case study design due to characteristics germane and congruent to the purpose of this study. According to Creswell (2007), a qualitative researcher "begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning of individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 37). My decision to inquire about the current PLCs effectiveness led to a deeper inquiry about whether the teachers were actually benefitting from biweekly trainings or whether it was considered as time wasted. I also chose a qualitative approach because the researcher plays an active role throughout the study, and problems existed with the PLCs that were preventing overall effectiveness (Glesne, 2011; Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010). I wanted to

explore the issues being experienced collectively by the teachers and provide recommendations to my school leaders based on the teachers' perceptions.

In order to gain the attention of the school leaders, I needed recommendations based on research and data. Interviews and questionnaires provided multiple forms of data needed, instead of relying on a single source (Creswell, 2007). These characteristics justify my decision to conduct qualitative research, which focuses on thick, rich, descriptions of experiences. On the contrary, quantitative research focuses on the analysis of numbers and that was not the intent. I analyzed responses from interviews and questionnaires to address the problem. Case studies are an effective qualitative approach and are frequently used to answer the what, why, and how questions of the research process (Stake, 1995). Additionally, this study was interpretive in nature and situated in the paradigm of social constructivism. Using this paradigm, a researcher relies upon the subjective views of participants to provide a description of their reality and understand their personal, cultural, and historical experiences (Creswell, 2007). These subjective views provided insight from a group of teachers working within a learning institution about their experiences and recommendations for purposeful PLCs.

Case studies are characterized by the unit of analysis, which can be an institution, group, individual, or community, rather than the topic of investigation (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011; Merriam, 2009). I researched and considered other qualitative approaches before choosing this design. Narratives are focused on the life of an individual; phenomenology is focused on capturing the essence of lived experiences of persons about a phenomenon; grounded theory is focused on the development of a

theory; and, ethnography is focused on the experiences of a culture-sharing group (Creswell, 2007). After careful consideration, I determined these approaches to be incompatible with my study purpose. Subsequently, I opted to conduct an intrinsic case study to gain perceptions of the participants working in an environment labeled as a PLC and its effectiveness (Creswell, 2007, 2009). To address the overall research question about the impact of PLCs on instructional practices and ways to refine the current PLCs to maximize overall effectiveness, data were collected through interviews and questionnaires. I conducted telephone interviews to gain insight about the participants' perceptions of the current PLCs and to also seek recommendations for creating more effective trainings. I administered questionnaires to evaluate the current PLCs using a research based, widely used instrument. I used the two sources to analyze and triangulate data for the study.

Participants

Participants are vital to a study and the gatekeepers of information (Hatch, 2002). Hatch (2002) asserted that the selection of a research setting and study participants should be closely connected. I considered participants for my study that worked at the research site and attended PLC trainings biweekly. Additionally, the unit of analysis in case studies also affects participant selection. The participants selected were vital to the outcome of my study because they were members of the learning environment who taught students in Grades 7th through 9th. I selected participants using a purposeful sampling technique that consisted of participants who shared common characteristics (Glesne, 2011; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). Hatch (2002) referred to this type of

sampling as homogenous. During homogenous sampling, a small group of individuals and their experiences are the focus of the study. The goal is to understand their experiences in depth. Individuals invited to participate were seventh, eighth, and ninth grade teachers of core subjects (math, social studies, science, and English) at the research site. These individuals work directly with students during two transitional periods in students' lives: middle school and the first year of high school.

Setting and Sample

The setting for this qualitative case study was a secondary urban school in the southern U.S. state of Louisiana. Nearly 800 students attend class in Grades 7-12 at the school. Teachers attend PLC sessions twice a month during their planning period and attend departmental meetings once a month after school. The district in which the school is located offers PLC trainings on designated school days during the school year; students remain home on these days. The bimonthly school level PLCs are held during teachers' common planning periods.

The sample size consisted of 13 seventh through ninth grade core subject teachers at the school. Eight participants would have provided substantial data to conduct this study, but all 13 were invited via a flyer to voluntarily participate. The selected sample consisted of five middle school teachers, five high school teachers, and three teachers who taught middle and high school students. There were 10 female and three male participants. One participant was a special education resource teacher who taught all subjects and worked collaboratively with her students' classroom teachers. Nine of the thirteen participants individually have over 16 years of experience in the classroom. Four

of the thirteen participants have been at the research site 7-10 years while the other nine have been at the research site 1-4 years.

Protection of Participants' Rights

Permission was sought from my principal prior to any research being conducted. Once permission was granted and Walden's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved my application (Approval # 04-08-16-0151944; valid through April 7, 2017), participants were invited to participate in the study via a flyer briefly describing the purpose and expectations. I also used this flyer to invite all potential participants to take part in a questionnaire and interview (in person/teleconference) based on their availability. All who expressed interest in participating received a gold envelope with a detailed consent form. After the consent form was returned in their envelope, I then placed the questionnaire and interview questions in their envelope. Due to end of the year obligations, many elected the teleconference option. Teleconferences were then scheduled and held after school hours and on weekends. Many decided to answer the interview questions on paper first, and the teleconference allowed for greater clarity and understanding.

Participation was voluntary and participants received a description of the study and data collection procedures as detailed by Creswell (2007). Confidentiality was imperative, and procedures were explicitly stated to protect the rights of participants and address ethical issues (American Psychological Association, 2010). Confidentiality in this study was assured, and data were encrypted and secured to reduce any risks to participants. Encryption occurred through every participant being assigned a number

instead of using names to assure confidentiality, and e-mails were password encrypted. Two ways recommended to handle confidentiality are through disclosure of the research to all participants and their written consent to participate and publish; and by disguising of identifiable information (APA, 2010).

Participation consent forms were disseminated and returned prior to participating in data collection process. A hard copy of this form with signatures was retained for each participant. All documents are in the process of being scanned and stored in an electronic file on my home computer. Participants were assured that there are no foreseen risks associated with their participation and that there was no pressure to respond and participate. Their names on questionnaires were replaced with numbers assuring confidentiality, and pseudonyms were used when applicable. Participants were encouraged to answer questions based on prior knowledge, experience, perceptions, and personal beliefs. Furthermore, participants were reminded that they could withdraw at any time.

Role of the Researcher

Merriam (2002) asserted qualitative research attempts to understand and make sense of a phenomena from an interpretive stance, and the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2007; Hatch, 2002). My role as the researcher in this study was to examine documents germane to the topics; disseminate literature related to research-based characteristics of PLCs; gain permission to conduct the study; create protocols for collecting data; observe the participants in their natural environment; interview participants, take field notes and transcribe data; interpret,

analyze, and triangulate data using multiple sources to arrive at a conclusion; and finally report the findings of the study.

I currently serve as dean of students at the research site. My job is a teacher position created to provide and foster a safe and disciplined school culture. I am not involved in the management of teachers or any adults in the building. My administrators oversee teachers and their adherence to their job descriptions. I am not involved in any aspect of teacher management or their instructional practices. I do not observe, monitor, evaluate, or reprimand any teachers because I am a teacher, not an administrator. My role as dean of students involves attending to student affairs, discipline, and safety issues.

My role as researcher was vital because I was responsible for all data collected. A designated team of master teachers who are not participants in the study assisted with data collection and analysis. As the researcher, I relied on my established relationships and mutual respect with my colleagues to conduct this study with fidelity and trust. I created transparency and ensured that participation was strictly voluntary. My dual role as teacher and researcher could have possibly raised concerns and created uneasy situations. To ease any potential concerns, participants were assured that issues of confidentiality, accuracy, integrity, and validity as it related to data collection were adhered to.

My dual role and the need to clarify any biases required a validation process to judge the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. This study was based on the perceptions of the teachers; therefore the use of validation strategies prevented my personal biases from overshadowing this study. Credibility was established through

prolonged engagement with the participants, and triangulation of multiple data sources (Creswell, 2012). Additionally, member checking occurred through follow-up interviews to check for accuracy and credibility, and peer reviews occurred at the start and conclusion of the data collection process to check for accuracy and any biased information. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described member checking as "the most critical technique for establishing credibility" (p. 208).

Reliability was achieved through the use of consistent data collection methods for all participants, as well as a coding system to effectively transcribe all field notes. Validity was achieved through member checking and triangulation to ensure accuracy by utilizing multiple sources of data. Furthermore, peer review from educators within the school environment and an external auditor with no ties to the school, ensured that validation procedures and strategies were employed.

Instrumentation and Materials

Multiple methods of data collection were considered for this qualitative study. Of the recommended forms of qualitative data, this case study utilized interviews and questionnaires as primary data collection strategies as suggested by Creswell (2007), Hatch (2002), Merriam (2002, 2009), Yin (2009). I created an interview guide with interview questions related to the current PLCs and based on research to gather data (see Appendix C). A questionnaire, *Professional Learning Communities Assessment-Revised (PLCA-R)*, was utilized to assess perceptions based on the five dimensions of a PLC and related attributes (see Appendix E).

The use of various methods allowed for triangulation of data and ensured validity and reliability (Yin, 2009). To validate the accuracy of the findings, member checking and triangulation were utilized. Reliability was achieved through consistent methods used to collect data. All participants received the same instruments and materials for this study. In addition to the questions on the interview guide and questionnaire, demographical information about the participants was also included in the data.

Prior to any instrument being issued and completed, all participants signed an informed consent form. This form included background information about the study, the voluntary nature of the study, risks and benefits of participating; compensation, confidentiality, contact information of those parties who could be reached should a participant need clarity or have questions, and statement of consent that participant and researcher signed.

Data Collection

According to Creswell (2004), data collection was visualized as "a series of interrelated activities aimed at gathering good information to answer emerging research questions" (p. 118). The research questions guided the qualitative protocols utilized in this study. The two instruments utilized for data collection were interviews and a questionnaire. After gaining permission to begin data collection from my principal and IRB, participants were issued consent forms. Upon receipt of consent forms, instruments were disseminated with timelines for completion and contact information if there were any questions. All data were returned in the designated gold envelopes and remained confidential throughout the study.

Interviews

The first data collection strategy chosen was interviews. An interview guide (see Appendix C) was used to gain teacher perceptions of the current learning community in relation to components of PLCs, and to decide whether components were evident and effectively being implemented (Lodico et al., 2010). All questions were derived from the research questions, and were open-ended, clear, and broad enough to solicit in-depth conversations. The interviews followed a semi-structured format (Glesne, 2011; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). One-on-one teleconferences were held, as well as face-to-face follow-up meetings.

Interviews were conducted after a) receiving approval from the school district, b) explaining the purpose of the study to participants and administration and how results will be used, and c) distributing and receiving signed confidentiality and consent forms from participants. Interviewees were assigned numbers and pseudonym names to protect their identities, and informed that participation was voluntary. To ensure validity as recommended by Merriam (2009), interview questions were created and peer-reviewed prior to use. Interviews were then scheduled, conducted, and transcribed. Creswell (2007) encouraged the use of field notes, and an interview protocol to guide the process. Janesick (2004) described the interview process as "the most rewarding component of qualitative research" (p. 71).

One-on-one interviews were conducted at predetermined times and locations. All participants were interviewed with exception of one female middle school teacher; therefore, 12 interviews were held. Prior to each interview, participants were contacted

to discuss the nature of the interview, and to sign a form confirming the scheduled date and time. The protocol, procedures, and format were disclosed prior to any interviews being held. Interviews lasted no more than 30 minutes and utilized an open-ended question guide. Interview Questions 3 and 4 required additional probing in order to adequately address the research questions guiding this study. Question 3 asked about the current PLCs effectiveness, and Question 4 asked about ways to refine current PLCs to maximize overall effectiveness. Data were transcribed at the conclusion of each interview using a systematic process for coding (Hatch, 2002; Janesick, 2004). This process included reading notes multiple times, and then coding key words, themes, and behaviors. All notes used for transcribing were then secured electronically and in a locked file cabinet. A spreadsheet was then created with a breakdown of the interview questions and responses. The spreadsheet was used to organize data and to prepare the responses for coding during the analysis procedure.

Questionnaires

The other data collection strategy chosen was questionnaires. One questionnaire was considered to assess effectiveness, implementation, and sustainability. To evaluate the extent to which characteristics were prevalent and properly implemented, Olivier & Hipp's (2010) *Professional Learning Community Assessment Revised* was administered to participants (see Appendix E). Professional Learning Community Assessment (PLCA-R), served as an effective formal diagnostic tool for identifying school-level practices that enhance intentional professional learning. Purposely, the PLCA-R provided perceptions of the staff related to specific practices observed at the school level with regard to shared

and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions, including both relationships and structures. This questionnaire was chosen because it has been widely used to adequately acquire data and to capture the essence of participants' perceptions. Questionnaires are limited, and the PLCA-R is most widely used by educators and researchers. This instrument served as a mechanism to stimulate effective face-to-face and/or electronic discourse, and to provide a synopsis of the direction and purpose of the study. This instrument was utilized to provide data to answer the research questions guiding this study and to also stimulate dialogue about the current learning environment**.** The PLCA-R questionnaire was administered first since all questions were related to PLC core principles and implementation.

The PLCA-R used a 4-point Likert scale to score responses. If a participant answered strongly disagree (SD), one point was recorded, two points were recorded for disagree (D), three points were recorded for agree (A), and four points were recorded for strongly agree (SA). Each questionnaire was tallied based on the number of agrees or disagrees per each category to assess strengths and weaknesses of current PLCs, and then tallied per each question to gain a breakdown. Demographic questions, such as content area, grade taught, years of experience, and years at research site, were also included on the questionnaire.

Participants were advised to return all questionnaires and interview guides in their designated gold envelopes. All documents were then organized by ensuring that all data had been carefully reviewed and accounted for. This occurred by using a checklist to

confirm receipt. Notes and responses from each interview were transcribed, spreadsheets were created, and initial coding for emerging themes, patterns, and concepts began. All data were then transferred to an electronic file and stored on my office computer in a password-protected file.

Data Analysis

According to Hatch (2002), "data analysis is a systematic search for meaning" (p. 148). In order to effectively analyze all data, procedures and protocols must be established to organize the data once collected. Coding was used to organize and analyze data collected throughout the study (Creswell, 2007, 2009; Hatch, 2002). Thematic coding was used, and themes emerged as a result of inductively analyzing data. The coding process included a two-step process; one to create initial codes and the other to create more focused codes. The first step began with the extrapolation of common themes and concepts frequently mentioned during the interview as described by Rubin and Rubin (2005). During the second step, more focused codes were created based on the themes and concepts analyzed during the initial coding. Data from interviews and questionnaires were organized, categorized, interpreted, synthesized, and coded for patterns (Bogden & Biklen, 2007).

A two-column, color-coded technique was used to code the transcripts. Each interview question was individually color-coded using focused codes and categories, such as perceptions, strategies provided, effectiveness, and type of refinement suggested by participants. Patterns, themes, and concepts were color-coded based on: a) their occurrences in all sources of data, b) evidence of their existence in the transcript, and c)

their correlation to the research questions guiding this study. In order to ensure each research question was addressed, data were reviewed and analyzed numerous times to identify recurring themes or overlapping concepts. Field notes and journal notes taken during the interviews were also summarized to provide supplemental data, and then coded by themes during the analysis process.

Similar strategies were utilized to analyze data from the PLCA-R questionnaire. Since the survey already had categories, the responses were tallied to assess the areas of strength and weaknesses. These findings were compared with the responses from the interview questions, and then all data were analyzed to identify recurring themes. Codes were eventually reduced to themes and represented in the form of narratives and tables.

Throughout this study, assigned numbers identified participants. For the interviews, an electronic copy of each participant's transcript was created, followed by a spreadsheet with all interview questions and participants' responses. The spreadsheet was used for analysis to compare and contrast responses, and coded to identify any emerging themes. The themes that emerged during analysis were teacher collaboration, time management, peer observation and feedback, follow-up and support, teacher input, clear focus and purpose, planning, sharing of student work, and looking beyond the data.

For the questionnaire, analysis included reviewing three spreadsheets that were created during the data collection process to tally results under each category, tally results for individual questions under each category, and finally to highlight areas of strength and weaknesses with the current PLCs based on the results. Areas of strength directly correlated with the first research question about efficacy of current PLCs when

participants shared aspects of the benefits of PLCs, but any concerns or weaknesses revealed were noted and included in the improvement category. Areas of concern or weaknesses directly correlated with the second research question about refinement of current PLCs. The spreadsheets were used for analysis to compare and contrast responses, and coded to identify any emerging themes. The themes that emerged during analysis were collective learning and application, time, teacher collaboration, focus on learning beyond data, supportive structures, peer observation and feedback, and sharing of student work.

Evidence of Quality

Evidence of quality was exhibited throughout this study. Triangulation was ensured through two instruments, a questionnaire and interview, that were administered and responses compared with one another. The multiple perceptions from the 13 participants provided opportunities for follow-up interviews to review participants' responses for accuracy and member checking. All grade levels chosen for this study were represented, and every core teacher of seventh through ninth graders employed at the research site participated in this study. After all data had been organized and analyzed, participants were allowed to review findings and check for accuracy. Participants received a copy of the contents of their envelope and were asked to confirm the findings. All envelopes were returned, and all participants believed the findings captured the essence of their perceptions.

An external auditor with no ties to the research site and a peer reviewer examined all data for accuracy (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011). The external auditor was a veteran

educator who works as a curriculum specialist at a neighboring charter school. The peer reviewer was a veteran colleague who has a master's degree in educational leadership, but was not a participant in the study. They both were privy to de-identified data only. Therefore, the external auditor did not have to sign a confidentiality statement, but the peer reviewer did because she was employed at the research site. She was given a confidentiality statement to sign prior to reviewing the de-identified data. All data collected contributed to addressing the research questions, which invited participants to share their perceptions of the current PLCs' effectiveness and to provide suggestions for refinement, if any. Therefore, the external auditor, peer reviewer, nor I identified any discrepant data during the data analysis phase. This study was conducted with fidelity and in accordance with the rules set forth by Walden's IRB.

Findings

Two research questions provided a framework to gain insight to the participants' perceptions. Participant responses from interviews and questionnaires generated the data for my study. Thirteen participants completed a *Professional Learning Community Assessment Revised* (PLCA-R) questionnaire, and twelve participants were interviewed. Both qualitative instruments were utilized to answer the research questions guiding this study. Demographic data were also collected from each participant.

In this section, I will report the findings from the data collected and its correlation to the research question. The first set of data is participants' demographical information. This information included subject taught, grade level, year(s) of experience, and year(s) at research site. All participants are core teachers of students in Grades 7th through 9th at

the research site. Ten females and three males participated in the study. These data are being provided as background information and to introduce the participants in this study to the readers. These data are provided in Table 1 below.

Interview Findings

The second set of data collected was from the interviews conducted. There were five interview questions included on the interview guide. Questions 1-3 all connected to Research Question 1, and Question 4 connected to Research Question 2. Interview Question 5 was, would you like to share any other information related to your school's PLCs before we conclude this interview? This question offered an opportunity for the participant to share any lagniappe information. The information provided had the potential to address any of the research questions. If a participant responded to Question 5, the information was basically used as supporting details for the other questions.

Table 1

Participants' Demographics

Participant	Subject	Grade level	Year(s) of experience	Year(s) at research site
1	English/ Language Arts	Middle School	16+ years	9
2	Mathematics	Middle School	16+ years	7

(Table Continues)

Participant	Subject	Grade level	Year(s) of experience	Year(s) at research site
3	Science	Middle School	16+ years	4
4	Mathematics/ Science	Middle School	Between 1-5 years	3
5	English/ Language Arts	Middle School	16+ years	10
6	English/ Language Arts	Middle & High School	16+ years	1
7	Mathematics	High School	16+ years	3
8	Science	High School	Between 6-10 years	1
9	English/ Language Arts	High School	16+ years	10
10	Social Studies	High School	16+ years	1
11	Mathematics	Middle & High School	Between 1-5 years	3
12	English/ Language Arts/ Mathematics	Middle & High School	16+ years	1
13	English/ Language Arts	High School	Between 1-5 years	2

Interviews Informed Research Question 1

Researcher Question 1 was as follows: What are participants' perceptions about the efficacy of the current PLCs at their school? This question correlated to the following interview questions provided in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Corresponding Interview Questions for Research Question 1

Interview Question 1	What are your perceptions about PLCs and its impact on instructional practices/ academic achievement of students?
Interview Question 2	Has your participation in PLCs provided strategies to improve your instructional practices? Please explain and provide specific strategies.
Interview Question 3	Do you believe the current PLCs provide teachers with the necessary guidance and strategies to meet the academic needs of all students?

Perceptions of PLCs and impact on instructional practices. The essence of Interview Question 1 was to capture participants' perceptions of PLCs in general as well as at the research site's PLCs, and the impact PLCs had on instructional practices and student achievement. All participants believed that professional learning communities were beneficial and definitely had an impact if effectively planned to address the real-time issues and needs of teachers and students. All shared that the best way to become aware of the needs of teachers was through teacher input. Participant 1 stated that PLCs were beneficial especially for those new to the school and who are data-driven.

Participant 2 believed that PLCs were beneficial and improved her instructional practices, but total buy-in was necessary. She added that PLCs impacted her instructional practices by providing an opportunity for feedback, re-teaching, and enrichment that benefited her students. Participant 3 shared that PLCs were useful and provided opportunities for collaboration and the sharing of best practices. Participants 4 and 8 both mentioned that PLCs were helpful, especially when teacher input was welcomed and appreciated. Participant 8 added, "not only do PLCs enhance teachers' knowledge, but they also lead to improved student thinking and understanding".

What stood out were the responses of the three men who participated. The consensus was that PLCs felt mundane, unintentional, poorly planned, and not relatable to their students' needs. Participants 10, 11, and 13 all shared that PLCs were beneficial, but elaborated further by saying that "they are perceived as mandatory, rushed, and purpose unclear so impact could not be justified" (Participant 13); "some were good but unmotivated students prevented gauging the impact" (Participant 10); and, "PLCs have the potential to be beneficial, a vital part of the instructional process, and a vehicle for discourse and improvement but since many were not relatable to delivery of instruction and felt like another faculty meeting, the impact was difficult to speak on" (Participant 11). All three male participants have been at the research site for 3 years or less, and all have experienced difficulty transitioning to the school's expectations. Participant 10 just completed his first year at the research site; Participant 13 just completed his second year; and, Participant 11 just completed his third year.

Perceptions of PLCs and improved instructional strategies. Interview

Question 2 specifically asked the participants to reflect on the current PLCs and to share any instructional strategies that improved their teaching. Question 2 was expected to explicitly provide a depiction of the PLCs' efficacy, instead of assessing prior knowledge as Interview Question 1 did. Eighty-five percent of the participants echoed that the current PLCs provided strategies to improve instructional practices. Even though Participants 6, 10, and 13 experienced mixed feelings about their participation in PLCs, all participants were able to share at least one strategy that was beneficial, even though many different topics and/or strategies were discussed throughout the year. During the 2016-2016 school year, PLCs focused heavily on data and data-driven instruction. Two strategies shared by 54% of the participants were close reading, an instructional strategy that requires students to analyze text, details, and patterns in order to gain a better understanding of text; and Performance Series, a web-based program that allows teachers to track student performance through assessments uploaded and administered to students.

Results indicate that teachers attended PLCs bimonthly during their common planning periods. Other opportunities for PLC meetings were during monthly departmental meetings and days designated by the school district as a professional development day when students were allowed to remain home. Teachers have been afforded many opportunities for training, yet majority of the participants could only name one or two strategies that were beneficial. Many shared that too many topics were covered which prevented the sharing of more than one successful strategy. Participant 2 shared that the overload of information prevented teachers from mastering one strategy before another one was introduced. This concerns shared made me question how PLCs

were planned and whether teacher concerns were ever solicited by the school or district.

Participant 1 shared that the current PLCs provided strategies, and that close reading and Performance Series allowed for the use and interpretation of data. PLCs provided an avenue for her to embrace data and the various benefits. Participants 2, 3, and 8 added that invaluable knowledge was acquired during PLCs. All participants indicated that Performance Series allowed for feedback, re-teaching, and enrichment since data were the guiding force and readily accessible. Participant 4 mentioned how she was able to learn best practices from veteran teachers in her PLCs. Her favorite strategy was the creation of a website that was helpful, and allowed for better communication with parents and students. Participants 7 and 12 praised the close reading strategies and stated the strategies allowed students to gain a better understanding of lessons during class. Both participants greatly appreciated the manner in which the strategies were introduced during PLCs. The inclusion of demonstrations was helpful and allowed for better understanding of the strategies.

Participant 6 expressed disappointment because she strongly believes in PLCs and that they are well worth the time, but her participation was very limited during common planning period PLCs. She would always get caught covering classes for absent teachers, which prevented her from attending. Participant 9 mentioned that the current PLCs "somewhat" provided strategies to improve her instructional practices. Contrary to this feeling, she added that she was able to benefit from practices shared by colleagues. Participant 9 further elaborated, "One of my colleagues presented the use of foldables and the various types that could be used as instructional strategies. This changed my

perspective on using foldables with older populations of students and the benefits of using them".

Study results reveal that the three male participants who are relatively new to the school had mixed feelings about the current PLCs and whether they provided strategies to improve their instructional practices. Participant 10 replied, "Not really" when asked whether the current PLCs improved his instructional practices. His reason was because the topics shared were not beneficial to issues experienced in class, such as teaching and dealing with unmotivated students. He needed more assistance with classroom management and ways to engage students. Participant 11 replied, "Somewhat" when asked whether the current PLCs improved his instructional practices, but he did share that Performance Series was helpful because of the data generated based on student results. Participant 13 reflected, "I feel lost and unsure about how to apply topics in class, therefore I have mixed feeling about whether my instructional practices have been improved." He added, "Some strategies are easier to implement, such as foldables which were easy and useful."

Perceptions of PLCs and their effectiveness. Interview Question 3 explicitly asked the participants to assess the effectiveness of the PLCs based on their needs as teachers. Teachers are the single most important factor in the classroom, and schools must invest in teacher learning and support. The overall goal is success for all students, and this is difficult to accomplish without an effective, knowledgeable teacher in the class. The participants either replied, "No" (58%), "Depends" (25%), or "Sometimes" (17%) when asked about the effectiveness of the current PLCs. This question allowed for

deep reflection and honesty. The sentiments were that the current PLC may have provided some great strategies, but overall effectiveness was affected due to time, lack of effective planning sessions, opportunities for collaboration, lack of teacher input, too much data, lack of support and follow-up, lack of strategies to address needs of all students, and lack of focus on real-time needs.

Participant 2 shared, "the current PLCs are not effective. Even though the coaches introduced strategies, we did not explore in depth "the how" for struggling students." Participant 4 mentioned, "the current PLCs were effective sometimes, but application and implementation were difficult." This difficulty led to the PLCs being deemed ineffective. Participant 6 shared that they were ineffective due to time constraints. Participant 7 stated, "the current PLCs were effective sometimes, but teachers need more demonstrations, literature, and assistance on differentiating instructions to address the needs of all students." Participant 8 replied, "depends" when asked about effectiveness. She added, "the intent is to meet or improve academic needs but it is not always achieved."

Participant 9 explicitly stated the following:

> Most teachers believe that the current process for PLCs is ineffective. Teachers have little input into the type of professional topics and practices discussed. In addition, there is little time to really dissect student work and data, and to identify and assist struggling students. Some students are being left out and falling further behind. Instead, time is spent on learning new programs and learning how to implement new district mandates.

Participant 10 reflected that the current PLCs were ineffective because they presented too much data, and lacked teacher input and facilitation. Participant 11 revealed that, "the current PLCs were ineffective and attempted to expound on more content than the time allowed. The process needs to be revised in order for teachers to feel the impact and importance of PLCs." Participant 12 mentioned, "Ineffectiveness is due to lack of time and resources to effectively implement strategies. She also shared that students who are struggling get left behind." Participant 13 also based his ineffective rating on the needs of students not being addressed. He shared, "the current PLCs are ineffective because they need to be more student driven based on the needs of actual students. They also need more strategies to meet students where they are and build on it."

Themes From Interviews

Interview Questions 1 through 3 answered Research Question 1. The participants allowed their concerns about the current PLCs to be identified and voiced. The richness of their perceptions have also contributed to this case study and allowed for themes to emerge. The common themes that emerged were lack of time to implement and collaborate with colleagues, lack of teacher input in planning of sessions and activities, lack of strategies to meet the needs of all students, need to focus on dissecting student work and data, and lack of support and follow-up. The next section will address Research Question 2 and its correlation to Interview Question 4. This question will illustrate participants' perceptions on how the current PLCs could be refined to address the needs identified during the interviews and the themes that emerged.

Interviews Informed Research Question 2

Research Question 2 was as follows: How would participants refine current PLCs to improve student achievement? This question correlated to the interview question provided in Table 3 below.

Table 3

Corresponding Interview Questions for Research Question 2

Interview Question 4	How would participants refine current PLCs to improve student achievement?

Interview Question 4 addressed and Research Question 2. This question was intended to solicit suggestions for improvement and refinement, if any. Based on the responses from Interview Questions 1 through 3, there is a need for refinement at the research site. The participants demonstrated an understanding of PLCs and were gaining some strategies. Since Interview Question 4 specifically addresses maximum effectiveness for the teachers and students and responses to Interview Questions 1through 3 indicated concerns related to the current PLCs effectiveness, then this is an indication that improvements are needed. The recommendations and suggestions for refinement varied based on the needs of the participant. Participants 1, 3, and 8 discussed grouping of PLC members. The types of groups recommended were homogeneous grouping with teachers who teach same students (Participant 1); mixture of veteran and new teachers so that all may benefit from shared experiences (Participant 3); and, finally subject specific PLCs should be considered in addition to mixed groups (Participant 8).

Participants 4, 6, 7, and 10 focused on the need for more teacher input as a suggestion for refinement. Participant 4 recommended the need for more teacher input during PLC planning, as well as a need to revise the common planning period with PLCs in mind to ensure effectiveness, and maximize the benefits and impact on teachers and students. Participant 6 shared, "school leaders should administer a needs assessment at the start of the school year. Teachers need to be involved in the planning and facilitation of the sessions." Participant 6 added that teacher expertise was valuable and should be respected and relied upon, especially when addressing topics related to accommodating and educating special populations." Participant 7 and 10 stressed the need for teacher input in the form of teacher demonstrations, collaborations, and observations. They discussed a need for teachers to be able to discuss what worked and what didn't, which is an important technique for improving instruction.

Participants 11 and 13 recommended addressing the flaws in planning. Participant 11 stressed the need for more engaging, interactive sessions that do not feel like another faculty meeting. He also addressed providing additional time outside of the common planning period for PLCs, and that PLC objectives need to be more focused and directly related to delivery of instruction. Participant 13 advocated for more clarity and effectively planned sessions. He added, "PLCs need to meet the needs of our faculty and students, and this starts with a clear, intentional focus."

Participants 2 and 12 stressed the need to look beyond the data as a means of improvement. The current PLCs are already data-driven, but they need to become student driven. They both advocated for the sharing of student work at all levels and

looking at skills students were lacking instead of just focusing on test scores. Participants 2 and 12 further indicated that data should be used to provide interventions for struggling students, and these strategies could be discussed during PLCs. Furthermore, Participants 2 and 12 shared that teachers need time to implement these strategies and assess effectiveness before others are introduced.

Participant 9 provided the following concise explanation:

> The current PLCs may be better refined to reflect true academic practices. Teachers should have more input on what topics and practices will be impact classroom instruction and student achievement. Students who are struggling should be discussed at length to determine how to best help them improve. There should be time set aside to allow teachers to team-teach and observe other teachers. Most teachers would also like time to create and to reflect on authentic cross-curriculum assessments during PLCs.

All participants provided valuable data during the interview process. The questions and responses adequately addressed the research questions guiding this study. The perceptions provided allowed this case study to capture the essence of the issues within the current PLCs, as well as suggest ways to rectify, refine, and identify issues preventing the PLCs from being effective.

Findings From Questionnaires

The final set of data was obtained from the PLCA-R. This questionnaire assessed perceptions about the principal, staff, and stakeholders related to the effectiveness of the current PLCs' implementation. Six dimensions of professional learning communities and

related attributes are included on the questionnaire. The six dimensions are shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions-relationships and structures. My rationale for administering this questionnaire had nothing to do with quantitative purposes. I basically wanted to expose the participants to dimensions and attributes of researched-based PLCs; therefore it was primarily for the collection of qualitative data and partially for informative purposes. For this reason, the questionnaire was administered first, and then the interviews occurred. The intent was for the questionnaire to initiate meaningful discourse that would eventually contribute to addressing the research questions guiding this study and corroborate the interview results.

All responses were tallied and the findings were correlated to the research questions guiding the study. The dimensions with the "most agrees and strongly agrees" depicted an effective PLC, and those with the "most disagrees and strongly disagrees" depicted a PLC in need of improvement or refinement. Individual items were also analyzed to determine strengths and weaknesses of school-level practices that support intentional professional learning. The analysis provided an opportunity for me to review the dimensions for internal consistency in an attempt to gauge whether the current PLCs fall within the initiating (starting), implementing (doing), or institutionalizing (sustaining) phases of PLC development.

Questionnaires Informed Research Question 1

Research Question 1 was as follows: What are participants' perceptions about the efficacy of the current PLCs at their school? To assess what dimensions are prevalent, the

PLCA-R was analyzed and results were tallied for each dimension. It was imperative to carefully analyze this questionnaire from multiple angles in order to capture the essence of the participants' perceptions. These data are provided in Table 4 below.

Table 4

PLCA-R Results

Dimensions of PLCs	Total Responses to Statements under each Dimension	Total Agree/Strongly Agree (%)	Total Disagree/Strongly Disagree (%)
Shared and Supportive Leadership	141	111 (79%)	30 (21%)
Collective Learning & Application	130	107 (82%)	23 (18%)
Shared Values & Vision	116	91 (78%)	25 (22%)
Supportive Conditions-Structures	128	70 (55%)	58 (45%)
Supportive Conditions-Relationships	64	53 (83%)	11 (17%)
Shared Personal Practice	89	47 (53%)	42 (47%)

The dimensions with the greatest number of participants who agreed that the attributes of each were prevalent within PLCs were supportive conditions-relationships, collective learning and application, shared and supportive leadership, and shared values

and vision. By scoring these dimensions high, it was perceived that the current PLCs are implementing these dimensions and attributes. It was also perceived that these dimensions revealed that the teachers viewed these aspects within their PLCS as evident and effective, which answered Research Question 1. Participant responses revealed that four out the six dimensions were evident within their current PLCs. The two dimensions that participants rated with close percentages for agreeing and disagreeing were shared personal practice and supportive conditions-structures. Based on the responses, 53% strongly agreed or agreed that shared personal practice was evident, and 47% strongly disagreed or disagreed that the dimension was not evident. Similarly, 55% strongly agreed or agreed that supportive conditions-structures were evident, and 45% strongly disagreed or disagreed that the dimension was not evident. These two dimensions will be reviewed during the analysis of Research Question 2.

Questionnaires Informed Research Question 2

Researcher Question 2 was as follows: How would participants refine current PLCs to improve student achievement? Information gained from the questionnaires was also used to address the research questions guiding the study. As Research Question 1 provided the necessary data to gain the participants' perceptions, Research Question 2 aimed to reveal refinements and improvements, if any. The two dimensions that the participants indicated were not evident were closely analyzed to address Research Question 2. The first dimension, shared personal practice, related to opportunities for peer observations, coaching and monitoring, and receiving feedback to guide and improve instructional practices. The goal of PLCs is learning for all, teachers and

students (Fulton & Britton, 2011); therefore, failure to effectively implement this dimension directly affects overall success. The participants, who felt the attributes within this dimension were not prevalent or evident within the current PLCs, replied disagree or strongly disagree to 47% of the statements listed under this dimension.

The second dimension, supportive conditions-structures, related to communication, resources (time and fiscal), and facilities. The participants, who felt the attributes within this dimension were not prevalent or evident within the current PLCs, replied disagree or strongly disagree to 45% of the statements listed under this dimension. The findings from the PLCA-R revealed that the current PLCs were implementing some dimensions and failing to adequately implement others. In order to gain a greater insight of the needs and areas of refinement, I reviewed individual questions with the most disagree or strongly disagree responses (see Table 5).

Table 5

Individual Questions with the Most Disagree or Strongly Disagree Responses

Dimension of PLCs	Statement #	Number (percent) of participants who disagreed or strongly disagreed
Supportive Conditions-Structures	#48: The school facility is clean, attractive, and inviting.	12 (92%)
Shared Person Practice	#31: Opportunities exist for staff members to observe peers and offer encouragement.	9 (69%)

(Tables continues)

Supportive Conditions-Structures	#43: Time is provided to facilitate collaborative work.	8 (62%)
	#45: Fiscal resources are available for professional development.	8 (62%)
	#49: The proximity of grade level and departmental personnel allows for ease in collaborating with colleagues.	8 (62%)
Shared Personal Practice	#37: Staff members regularly share student work to guide overall student improvement.	8 (62%)
	#32: Staff members provide feedback to peers related to instructional practices.	7 (54%)
Supportive conditions-Structures	#44: The school schedule promotes collectively learning and shared practice.	7 (54%)
Shared Values & Vision	#17: School goals focus on student learning beyond test scores and goals.	7 (54%)

Themes From Questionnaires

The findings from the PLCA-R produced similar themes as the interviews. The themes that emerged were as follows: a need for more collaboration, the need for more shared experiences and practices, planning with teacher input, more time needed to work as a team towards improved instructional practices, and focusing on learning beyond data and test scores. The use of both instruments definitely corroborated the findings. The

perceptions gained from the interviews and the PLCA-R questionnaires added richness to the data collection and analyses.

Project as an Outcome

A final analysis of all themes that emerged during this study led to the extrapolation of four main themes. The findings revealed that the current PLCs were operating in the implementation phase of PLC development. The current PLCs were beneficial and a majority of the teachers were being exposed to valuable knowledge and instructional strategies. However, study results also revealed areas in need of refinement. Areas of concern relate to planning and implementing PLCs reflective of the needs of teachers and students. The four themes that guided the development of a potential project based upon the study results are collaboration, time, shared responsibility, and a focus on learning and results to ensure success for all students. The project will address implementing PLCs with fidelity so that all stakeholders reap the benefits. This goal will be achieved through the creation of professional development trainings for all teachers at the school that addresses the concerns of the participants. The data and findings from the study will guide the professional development trainings. The critical areas of concerns identified will be addressed in detail to aid in the refinement of the current PLCs.

Conclusion

The data from the study provided insight to perceptions of 13 middle and high school teachers working in a secondary school and participating in professional learning communities (PLCs). Each teacher contributed to the data collection process by participating in interviews and by answering questionnaires to assess implementation and

sustainability. In this section, I provided justification for the qualitative approach being chosen as the most appropriate research design to gain teachers' perceptions about their current PLCs and to evaluate the effectiveness. Additionally, the research design, study population and setting, data collection and analysis, and ethical protection were discussed in detail.

After analyzing all data, the findings revealed that majority of the participants viewed PLCs as beneficial and a mechanism for acquiring knowledge and instructional strategies geared towards school improvement and student achievement. Many participants were able to share at least one strategy learned, but also shared that overall effectiveness is lacking. While the PLCs exhibited strong evidence of relationships, trust, supportive leadership, shared values/vision, and collective learning/application, failure to address the areas of concern could adversely affect what's working now. Therefore moving forward, teachers are advocating for PLCs that consider the importance of teacher input; acknowledge the importance of teacher collaboration and sharing of experiences; recognize that teachers need time to implement and assess the effectiveness of strategies before new strategies are introduced; understand that teachers need ongoing support and feedback; and, respect that data-driven PLCs are important but so are student-driven PLCs planned with the real-time needs of students in mind. The current PLCs already advocate and incorporate a focus on learning and using data to guide instruction. However, leaders must shift this focus beyond the test scores and data to explore in depth *the how* for struggling students. The findings revealed that teachers were eager to learn new strategies, and were advocating for PLCs reflective of their

needs. The proposed project, professional development trainings reflective of the concerns revealed in this study, will address implementing PLCs with fidelity so that all stakeholders reap the benefits. Section 3 will provide a description of the project, and Section 4 will provide reflections and a conclusion.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of teachers toward professional learning communities. I also wanted to examine the efficacy of the current PLCs in a secondary school with a middle school and high school comprised of Grades 7th through 12th. In conducting this study, I sought to contribute to literature on the implementation of structured PLCs and whether these strategies needed to be refined (Leclerc et al., 2012). Data collected from participants' interviews and surveys revealed that the school's current PLCs were beneficial but could be refined to improve their effectiveness.

In this section, I will describe the project that I created to address my study problem and present my goals and rationale for it. Next, a review of literature based on the findings will be included to guide the development of my research-based project. Lastly, the project will be described in detail. I will offer a framework for implementation, discuss resource needs and evaluation procedures, and consider implications.

Description and Goals

The project will consist of a 3-day professional development training related to PLC implementation. The areas of critical concern relate to planning and implementing PLCs that are reflective of the needs of teachers and students. The four themes that will guide my project are collaboration, time, shared responsibility, and a focus on learning and results to ensure success for all students. In the proposed project, I will address

implementing PLCs with fidelity so that all stakeholders reap the benefits. I plan to achieve this goal through the creation of professional development trainings for those who facilitate trainings at the school. I used study findings (particularly, the concerns of participants) as a guide in developing the proposed trainings.

Ongoing professional development is vital to the success of PLCs and the learning community as a whole. With constant curriculum changes and increases in accountability expectations, professional development is a priority in schools (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003). Continuing development and learning by teachers is critical to improving student learning (Desimone et al., 2013). Most reforms rely on teacher learning and improved instruction to increase student learning. Desimone et al. (2013) added that schools must first understand what types of professional development effectively transform teacher practices and enhance student achievement.

My first goal for the project is to provide clarity and transparency about effective PLC implementation. My second goal is to address the importance of planning professional development with a focus on the students' and teachers' needs. My third goal is to discuss strategies to increase teacher collaboration and learning in PLCs. My fourth goal is to focus on learning and results to ensure success for all students. The overall purpose of the project being proposed is to provide the knowledge, data, and skills needed to implement future PLCs with fidelity and teacher input.

The title of the proposed project is *Implementing PLCs with Fidelity*. The project will consist of three training sessions to be conducted during the first week of school or during the summer prior to the start of school. The sessions will be interactive and

hands-on. The four topics related to implementation that I will discuss are meaningful collaboration, lack of time to effectively implement and evaluate strategies, shared responsibility as it relates to planning, and a focus on learning and results beyond the data. Each session during the first two days address issues revealed from the findings. Participants will discuss these issues during a morning and afternoon session.

During the last day of training, training participants will create a group project. All participants will pick one Skittle from a bag containing 10 Skittles (two reds, two orange, two purple, two yellow, and two green). Groups will be formed based on who chooses the same colors. The colors will also dictate each group's topic. All groups will be given a scenario or topic to focus on to avoid repetitive presentations. I will also provide an outline of the activity's guidelines. Each group must follow the directions on the card and create a 30-minute presentation based on the topic provided. The presentations must consist of an interactive, hands-on, and informative training. All presentations should exhibit an improved PLC model reflective of future PLCs. Groups will use knowledge acquired and shared during the sessions, as well as findings from the study, to plan PLCs.

Rationale

I chose a professional development initiative to train department heads and instructional coaches about PLC implementation and effective planning. PLCs either operate at the initiating, implementing, or sustaining phase. The findings from Section 2 revealed that the current PLCs were operating at the implementation phase. The three phases of PLC implementation are initial, implementation, and sustainability.

At the research site, the goal of the PLCs since inception has been to close the achievement gap by offering training to improve teaching and learning (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman, 2011), but this goal has not been achieved (Southern Regional Education Board, 2011). In order to achieve this goal, PLCs must move past the implementation phase towards sustainability (Jones & Thessin, 2015; Leclerc et al., 2012). According to Leclerc et al. (2012), PLCs operating at the implementation stage consist of leaders providing trainings and teachers implementing the strategies in their classes. In order for PLCs to be sustained over time, leaders must distribute leadership and encourage teacher engagement and facilitation during PLCs (Jones & Thessin, 2015). Teacher empowerment and leadership is vital when striving for sustainability (Leclerc et al., 2012; Masuda et al., 2012). Shared responsibility also allows for trainings relevant to the teachers' needs (Attard, 2012). Distributed leadership and shared responsibility are two features that could enhance the current PLCs through improved planning and trainings. I believe the proposed project, professional development trainings, is a good first step to initiate discourse about improvements.

Most participants said that their school's current PLCs were beneficial and exposed them to valuable knowledge and instructional strategies. However, based on my data analysis, I concluded that improvements were needed in order to afford the teachers an opportunity to fully benefit from the PLCs. Results revealed a disconnection between theory and practice. In other words, teachers were aware of PLCs and their purpose, but PLCs were not being implemented with fidelity. Participant 9 shared that effective PLCs

are structured, intent, and allow for follow-up, reflections, and feedback instead of different topics being introduced without any evaluations about effectiveness.

Because professional development trainings are intended to enhance teacher learning (Attard, 2012, Desimone, 2011; Minor et al., 2016), this project has the potential to address the disconnection between theory and practice in PLCs by adding application, synthesis, and offering teachers the opportunities to work collaboratively towards greater understanding and clarity about effective PLC implementation and sustainability (Leclerc et al., 2012; Wells, 2014). Professional development was the best means to address concerns revealed by study results. According to Wells (2014), professional learning has the potential to significantly change teacher practices when teachers are afforded opportunities to actively participate and reflect on their teaching practices. These trainings allow for sharing of results with all stakeholders, increasing participants' knowledge and awareness through reflections and hands-on activities, and gaining suggestions for improvement and future planning.

Review of the Literature

In this section, current literature related to the proposed project based on my findings was reviewed. The project genre will be professional development. This literature was used prepare a professional development training for the PLC leaders and department heads at my school. From my analysis of data, I concluded that successful implementation of PLCs at my study site was being hindered due to the absence of several factors. These include a lack of opportunities for meaningful collaboration; time to effectively implement and evaluated strategies; shared responsibility in planning and

implementation; and a focus on learning and results to ensure success for all students. In order to address barriers to implementation at the research site, I will focus my literature review on these concerns.

Literature Search Strategy

Walden University's library was used to access the following education databases: Education Source, Education Research Complete, ERIC, Sage Premier, and ProQuest Central. I searched using Boolean phrases such as *teacher learning*, *teacher collaboration*, *data use*, *data-driven*, *collaborative professional development*, *job-embedded professional development*, *school-based professional development*, *professional learning communities*, *collaboration*, *student learning*, *academic achievement*, and *shared responsibility*. I chose peer-reviewed articles and journals published from 2011 to 2016 to obtain relevant literature for project development. The databases I searched provided extensive research and saturation was attained.

In this review of literature, I will discuss the purpose and focus of professional development, and types of professional development. Subsequent topics will relate to the findings from Section 2. These findings, collaboration, time, shared responsibility, and focus on learning and results, provided the content for the project.

The needs of 21st learners differ from learners of the past, and schools have to adapt to these changes (Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2010). School leaders must take into consideration the direct correlation between teaching and learning and the school environment (Woolner, McCarter, Wall, & Higgins, 2012), as well as the correlation between teacher quality and professional learning (Koellner & Jacobs, 2015). When

professional learning communities are a component of the school environment, professional development and training must contribute to the growth of teachers and student outcomes by providing a clear focus of what is to being learned and collaborated about (Brodie, 2013). School leaders are forced to rethink education, develop new approaches to teacher learning, and implement best practices that contribute to school improvement and student achievement (Gulamhussein, 2013). School leaders must invest in teacher learning and training in order to respond and adequately address the changing demands of the 21st century learner (Campbell, Saltmarsh, Chapman, & Drew, 2013). Additionally, school leaders have to pay particular attention to how students learn and how best to prepare teachers to address the various learning styles exhibited by students. Teachers must also be provided with the necessary skill set and training to respond to these needs.

Teachers must reshape instruction in order to adequately prepare and equip students with 21st century skills, and students must be prepared for the society in which they live and work (Larson & Miller, 2011; Owen; 2015). Teaching and learning should be viewed from a different lens and redesigned (Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2010). One of the most effective ways to train and retrain teachers is through ongoing professional development that addresses the needs of the changing needs of the teacher and student (Trust, 2012). Professional development should strive to contribute to student improvement and learning, and teacher learning, empowerment, and improved practices. The proposed project will be designed to provide the necessary training and knowledge that would provide clarity, address the issues and concerns of the teachers related to PLC

implementation, and promote future planning with shared responsibility and teacher input.

Professional Development

The purpose of professional development is to provide teachers with opportunities for growth through increased knowledge and skills that contribute to improved student learning, teacher learning, and teaching practice (Hunzicker, 2011; Petrie & McGee, 2012). Teacher quality is paramount to student success (Harris & Sass, 2011), and professional development is a mechanism widely utilized for teacher improvement (Desimone, Smith, & Phillips, 2013) and to foster classroom change (Minor, Desimone, Lee, & Hochberg, 2016). Just because a school has professional development trainings does not necessarily guarantee teacher improvement (Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Sappington, Pacha, Baker, & Gardner, 2012). Schools must have procedures in place to assess and understand which type of professional development affects teacher practice that contribute to an increase in student achievement (Desimone, Smith, & Phillips, 2013; King, 2014). Furthermore, "activities that effectively support teachers' professional learning need to be sustained and intensive rather than brief and sporadic" (Opfer & Pedder, 2011, p. 384).

Professional development trainings should have a clear vision for learning, and must be strategically planned with the real-time needs of the students and teachers in mind. These trainings must be content focused and coherent in order to effectively boost student learning (Desimone, 2011; Minor, Desimone, Lee, & Hochberg, 2016). The primary focus is student outcomes; therefore the trainings should be sustained,

supportive, job-embedded, instructionally focused, collaborative, interactive, practical, results oriented, and ongoing to afford teachers an opportunity to acquire knowledge that is relatable, relevant, and authentic (Attard, 2012; Fogarty & Pete, 2011; Hunzicker, 2011). Professional learning communities rely heavily upon trainings to impart knowledge and skills, and the overall success is contingent upon the participants' understanding of the intent of each session and experiencing a sense of fulfillment upon completion. Learning experiences within PLCs need to be parallel to teachers' prior knowledge for teachers to fully benefit from the trainings (Minor, Desimone, Lee, & Hochberg, 2016). Since teachers are central to student learning, they should be afforded opportunities to actively participate in trainings where their experience and expertise are appreciated and utilized to plan trainings (Wells, 2014).

School leaders need to also take into consideration that teacher outcomes play a vital role and set the tone for the type of knowledge teachers receive during trainings (Harland & Kinder, 2014). It is very important to gain teachers' perceptions of the trainings within the PLCs to not only plan future sessions, but to also evaluate the impact of the trainings (King, 2014). In other words, teachers are affected and impacted in different ways. Some teachers may depart trainings with new approaches that impact practice, increase their confidence as a practitioner, and improve their understanding about a school-wide initiative or classroom strategy (Harland & Kinder, 2014). Others may depart with increased confusion and frustration due to lack of clarity about the intent or their inability to relate or correlate the information to their classroom and students.

Any issues or concerns should be addressed to ensure implementation occurs smoothly and that teachers are benefitting from their time spent in PLCs.

There are many types of professional development. Professional development may be collaborative, job-embedded, school-based, or a combination of all. The consensus and the most important factor is that professional development has to be ongoing and sustained in order to effectively contribute to school change and improvement (Hunzicker, 2011; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). Since PLCs are a part of the school environment, the professional development trainings are collaborative, job-embedded, and school-based. The trainings are collaborative because teachers are expected to work within teams toward improved teaching practices by sharing experiences and solving problems collectively. Within collaborative professional development trainings, learning is expected to be reciprocal where teachers learn from each other and construct their own understanding of issues occurring in the classroom. Teachers need to be able to engage in active and interactive learning opportunities within collaborative professional development that involves role-playing, simulations, problem solving, and application (Hunzicker, 2011). Teachers are able to reflect and evaluate their strengths and weaknesses in order to grow, and this connection to their inner strengths increases teacher efficacy, teacher identity, and opportunities for self-change and improvements (King, 2011; Prytula & Weiman, 2012; Zwart, Korthagen, & Attema-Noordewier, 2015). These interactions are the catalysts for change and allow for the acquisition of new knowledge within collaborative professional development.

Job-embedded professional development occurs during school hours, and trainings are authentic and relevant to teachers' daily responsibilities. The trainings should be reflective of real time issues experienced by teachers. Relevancy is very important, and teachers relate better when trainings are applicable to their situations (Hunzicker, 2011). This type of professional development may occur in collaboratively, individually, or web-based. Job-embedded professional development that is collaborative allows for teachers, staff, and administrators to discuss issues, reflect on what's working and what isn't, and use critical thinking skills and inquiry to solve problems or refine any programs in place. These trainings are content-focused, data-driven, results driven, aim to expand teachers' knowledge and efficacy, improve teaching practice, and focus on what students need to learn with adherence to different learning styles. Collaborative job-embedded professional development also has the potential to empower teachers by providing opportunities for teacher leaders to evolve (Hunzicker, 2011). Teacher leaders not only contribute to the professional trainings during PLCs, but also are pivotal to the implementation of school-wide initiatives.

School-based professional development provides an opportunity for leaders to create learning environments that encourage teacher collaboration and discourse, reciprocal learning experiences built on trust and support, and opportunities for teacher growth (Nabhani, Bahous, & Hamdan, 2012). Effective schools commit to preparing their teachers with the knowledge and skill set required to become highly qualified through well designed professional development programs (Bayar, 2014). Teacher motivation and professional growth are fostered as schools strive to establish a culture of

partnership where all participants are encouraged to take risks and engage in ongoing learning experiences (Nabhani, Bahous, & Hamdan, 2012). Leaders are given the autonomy to make the necessary decisions that directly affect the culture of the school. School-based professional development is planned based on the needs of the school in accordance with district policies.

According to Woodland (2016), "professional learning communities are a form of evidenced-based collective inquiry that aims to bridge the research-practice divide" (p. 12). School-based professional development was implemented at my school through PLCs. The sessions were collaborative and job-embedded, but the findings from my study revealed a need for refinement. The focus and intent of the activities varied and depended upon needs indicated in the school improvement plan. Teachers' perceptions about implementation were retrieved through interviews and a questionnaire, and provided the necessary data for my study. The next part of the review of literature will correlate the findings from the study with current research to guide the development of the project. The four themes that emerged were collaboration, time, shared responsibility, and focus on learning and results.

Theme #1: Collaboration

The first theme that emerged from the study was collaboration. Collaboration is a tenet of professional learning communities. However, the concept should be explained and understood to gain clarity about what's expected and how it looks. As I researched the term *collaboration*, I began to realize part of the problem contributing to the confusion about what it entails. Collaboration is multi-faceted, depends on the situation,

occurs in different ways, and is not equal or equally productive (Ronfeldt, Farmer, McQueen, & Grissom, 2015). A study conducted by Forte and Flores (2014) revealed that collaboration occurs in many forms, and lack of clarity about the meaning and intent negatively affects productivity and outcomes. The findings from my study revealed that the participants felt that there was a need for more collaboration as it related to planning, support, and follow-up, as well as an understanding of what was expected. Leclerc et al. (2012) stressed the need for support and follow-up during PLC implementation, and indicated that failure to provide support and follow-up only creates obstacles; thus impeding progress.

As I researched literature for this theme, I could not help but to correlate teacher learning to student learning. As educators, we always espouse to educating the whole child. Similarly, teacher learning must contribute to the overall balance of a teacher's learning experience. Kennedy (2011) explained that teachers must be engaged during collaborative learning, and that they should be able to gauge the extent to which their personal, social, and occupational domains are affected as a result of the professional learning.

Further, collaboration is critical to teacher development and student achievement. Factors that enhance collaboration based on data from Forte and Flores (2014) were "school leadership, informed staff, personal and professional motivation, willingness to change and improve, and communication" (p. 99). Additionally, the findings from Forte and Flores' study revealed that PLC participants needed to receive training on how to effectively collaborate in groups (Forte & Flores, 2014). The theme of collaboration is

overlapping and encompasses various aspects of the concerns revealed. Therefore, collaboration will most likely be mentioned throughout this review of literature and correlated with the other themes. However, I will focus on factors needed to foster a collaborative learning environment. Two factors that have led to confusion and affected successful PLC implementation are lack of understanding about the different phases of implementation and the inability to sustain a culture of collaboration within the learning environment.

Successful implementation is possible as evident in the research. However, mechanisms need to be in place to ensure understanding and to address any barriers present (Forte & Flores, 2014; Kennedy, 2011). Schools should be aware of their level of implementation in order for any improvements, refinements, or fair evaluations to occur. Levels of implementation mentioned by Leclerc et al. (2012) are initial stage, implementation stage, and integration stage. Jones and Thessin (2015) described the phases of implementation as developing, implementing, and sustaining. The terms are interchangeable and the processes are the same. Collaboration takes on different forms in each phase, and there is an urgent need to develop a culture of collaboration that is structured and relies on the school leadership to set the tone and expectations during the initial stage. As a PLC progresses along the continuum, the need for collaboration becomes more complex during implementation and relies on factors such as trust, critical inquiry, reflective thinking, problem solving, and mutual support (Leclerc et al., 2012). The integration stage is reflective of distributed leadership, teacher development based on

identified needs and not a mandated district initiative, and an evaluation protocol. A plan for improvement also is also presented at this stage to address any weaknesses.

The findings from the study revealed that the PLCs have surpassed the initial stage and are functioning in the implementation stage. The proposed project would provide the necessary knowledge that will possibly refine and catapult the PLCs to the integration stage; one in which the PLCs are sustaining and impacting student achievement. Since continuous collaboration is viewed as "pivotal to shifting the education focus from how teachers teacher to how students learn" (Williams, 2012, p. 33), it is imperative that all stakeholders have an understanding of what collaboration is and how collaboration affects their teaching practices.

School leaders should foster a culture of collaboration within the learning community; one that is supported, valued, appreciated, and exhibited by partnership of all stakeholders (Kennedy, 2011; Ning, Lee, Lee, 2015; Peppers, 2015), and one that encourages involvement in professional discourse (Ghamrawi, 2011). Kennedy (2011) asserted that learning is central in effective PLCs and good relationships are fundamental. The culture of collaboration is strengthened when a culture of shared responsibility is fostered and leads to improved teacher understanding and practice. The culture of collaboration then paves the way for a culture of learning exists; one that is inclusive of formal and informal learning opportunities with an understanding that informal learning leads to social interactions that are beneficial (Kennedy, 2011; Leclerc et al., 2012). Within cultures of collaboration, relationships established lead to the emergence of other cultures. Cultures of social cohesion, collegiality, support, shared values, respect, shared

decision-making, high expectations, and high achievement begin to emerge within the learning environment. All cultures that emerge co-exist, and are equally important in successful PLCs. A culture of trust sets the tone for all interactions within the PLCs, is the foundation for collaboration, is influenced by principal leadership, and is critical for successful PLC implementation, student learning and improvement, and teacher learning and improved practices (Brown, 2015; Cosner, 2011; Costa & Anderson, 2011; Gray, Kruse, & Tarter, 2015; Gray, Mitchell, & Tarter, 2014; Gray & Summers, 2015; Hallam, Smith, Hite, Hite, & Bradley, 2015; Jones & Thessin, 2015; Rhodes, Stevens, & Hemming, 2011). Research indicates that there is a direct correlation between school cultures of learning and improved student learning when these cultures are sustained and valued (Tichnor-Wagner, Harrison, & Cohen-Vogel, 2016).

Theme #2: Time

The second theme that emerged from the study was time. Time represented a barrier to implementation because participants shared that they were unable to effectively implement and evaluate strategies to ascertain whether they contributed to student growth. Analysis revealed that participants did not think enough time was allowed effectively collaborate about issues related to student learning or improved teaching. Participants also expressed concern about the inability to consistently attend PLCs due to job constraints such as class coverage for absent teachers or last minute cancellations by the leaders. In a study conducted Maloney and Konza (2011), participants experienced the same inconsistency regarding PLC attendance. Time was an issue for the participants in Maloney and Konza's study because some participants found the trainings valuable,

while others did not attend due to lack of relevancy or scheduling conflicts. PLC attendance was scarce, and participants did not think enough time was allowed to engage in collaboration and collegial discourse.

In addition, Kennedy (2011) explained that a barrier to continuing professional development (CPD) was resistance by teachers to meeting during non-class contact time to work together collaboratively. Many viewed the non-class time as their time and did not understand the overall purpose of the professional development. Further, Thornburg and Mungia's (2011) study sought teachers' perceptions about collaboration and professional development. Findings revealed that some teachers viewed time spent in PLCs as taking away from valuable class time and instruction, while others believed time was needed to collaborate and discuss best practices. Leclerc et al. (2012) described time as a crucial organizational factor that affected PLC implementation, and revealed that time should be designated during school hours for collaborative meetings. Additionally, PLC attendance should be ~~a~~ non-negotiable, made a priority, and respected so all are able to attend during their scheduled time.

The issues with time can possibly be alleviated with improved understanding of the purpose of PLCs and working in cooperative groups, relevancy of the trainings, and increased teacher input with planning. A study conducted by Sleegers, den Brok, Verbiest, Moolenaar, and Daly (2013) viewed PLCs as a multidimensional, multilevel model to gain conceptual clarity about the concept. Their study analyzed data based on personal capacity, organization capacity, and interpersonal capacity of teachers at the school level and at the teacher level. Conceptual clarity is needed to guide PLC

development and implementation because clarity allows teachers to gain a better understanding of expectations, intent, and use of time. One suggestion as a result of the study's findings was that schools must engage in discourse with the participants of the PLCs about what constitutes community at multiple levels of a system (teacher, school, district) (Sleegers et al., 2013). This is a first step towards clarity and refinement, and the discourse jumpstarts conversations about purpose, personal and professional benefits, and individual and cooperative roles within PLCs. Once participants gain clarity then the learning within PLCS become relevant and relatable, and time becomes a precious commodity that is respected and used wisely.

Time is one of the most common barriers prevalent in literature about PLC implementation (Attard, 2012; Caskey & Carpenter, 2012; Fortes & Flores, 2014; Hunzicker, 2011; Kennedy, 2011; Leclerc et al., 2012; Linder et al., 2012; Masuda, Ebersole, & Barrett, 2012; Thornburg & Mungai, 2011). Masuda et al. (2012) described time as a construct needed for high quality, effective professional development that is well organized, instructionally focused (content and pedagogy), structured and planned, and has intent or purpose. Time was viewed as valuable to teachers, and high quality professional development is required to improve teachers' knowledge and practice with intent of improving student learning. To this end, the findings revealed from Masuda et al. (2012) served as a guide for my project as I plan my 3-day professional development and the segment of the training related to use of time in PLCs. The study relied upon data related to teacher attitudes and willingness to engage in professional development. Four themes emerged, intent, value, topics, and tensions, which are vital to professional

learning and directly correlates with human dynamics. The themes would also address the issue of using time wisely because purpose, clarity, relevancy, as well as issues of concern would take precedence and guide the professional learning trainings.

One issue related to time, that is not prevalent at the research site, was the absence of job-embedded professional development. This absence negatively intensified attitudes and willingness to participate (Masuda et al., 2012). The research site has job-embedded professional development in the form of professional learning communities, departmental meetings, and whole group meetings. The missing factor prevalent in my findings was a need for the school to make participation non-negotiable with mandatory attendance. All participants mentioned the inability to attend PLCs due to covering classes for absent teachers. Therefore, the concerns revealed in my study related to using time wisely while in professional development. The participants in my study understood the importance of district and school level initiatives, but needed the school leaders to understand the importance of teacher level needs, support, and concerns. Teachers are basically advocating for shared responsibility in the planning process to ensure that relevant and relatable topics indicative of their needs are included in future professional learning trainings.

Theme #3: Shared Responsibility

The third theme that emerged from the study was shared responsibility. Shared responsibility within the PLCs was viewed as teachers being active participants and having input in the planning and implementation of professional development topics and activities. Shared responsibility has been correlated with teacher empowerment in the

literature (Harris, 2011; Leavitt et al., 2013; Leclerc et al., 2012; Pyle, Wade-Wooley, & Hutchingson, 2011; Thornburg & Mungai, 2011). Transformative leadership exists and is evident in effective PLCs with shared responsibility. School leaders are viewed as equal participants who experience growth, distribute leadership, facilitate change, support all, build meaningful relationships, provide clarity and direction when needed, and advocate for a culture of professional learning (Bahous, Busher, & Nabhani, 2016). Leadership sets the tone for trust, respect, effective collaboration, and sustainable changes. School leaders must strive to build a culture of sharing that ultimately empowers teachers to change practices to enhance student learning and provide ongoing opportunities for teacher collaboration (King, 2011; Levine, 2011; Nabhani et al., 2012).

In order for professional learning to impact teacher and student learning, schools should first assess what type of professional development is needed, and teachers' perceptions are a great starting point (Desimone et al., 2013). Teacher input is valuable, and their concerns need to be addressed during planning and implementation within the professional learning community. Teacher outcomes are just as important as student outcomes because the acquisition of teacher knowledge from professional development that is relevant, relatable, and applicable has the potential to positively impact outcomes through improved practice, greater understanding, and personal growth (Harland & Kinder, 2014; Masuda et al., 2012). Shared responsibility facilitates teacher leadership, accountability, efficacy, and self-identity when it is valued and a part of the school culture.

The participants in my study viewed shared responsibility as means of making PLCs more connected to the real time needs of the students, while giving teachers the autonomy to choose topics that would foster professional and student growth. The participants understood the purpose of PLCs in general, but agreed that theory and practice within the school's PLC were not aligned. A need existed for professional learning reflective of the school's culture and population. Another added benefit of shared responsibility would be an avenue for communication and a means to provide time within the PLCs for teachers to collaborate about student work and suggestions for improved teaching. Participant 6 shared during her interview that sessions would be more meaningful if teachers and school leaders planned topics together. She added that the collaboration during planning would allow for effective use of time, and time embedded to discuss, implement, and evaluate the trainings. As Thornburg and Mungai (2011) mentioned, participation in professional learning becomes an issue of accountability versus needs when it is not reflective of what is practical, and more attention is given to the reform initiative instead of the actual needs of population within the PLC.

Theme #4: Focus on Learning and Results

The fourth and final theme that emerged from the study was a focus on learning and results. The goal of PLCs is to positively impact student outcomes, student learning, and improved teacher learning and practices. The findings from my study revealed teachers believed that there was a need to not only view student data, but also to look beyond the data to create strategies and interventions to meet the needs of all students.

Teachers were advocating for PLCs to focus on dissecting student work and data, instead of just viewing data as a whole to create school-wide action plans. The lack of strategies and interventions that were being omitted or overlook during PLCs were only causing many students to fall further behind. After consistently receiving data year after year, frustration began to set in as teachers watched the same students' scores decrease with each passing year. Many believed that this was a critical factor that was preventing the school from experiencing high student achievement when the state issued school performance scores at the end of the school year. The school has maintained a B average for consecutive years. However, the leadership team noticed the academic levels of students who are currently enrolled are lower than in past years. With that being said, the time is now to provide guidance and knowledge related to looking beyond data to educate the 21st student and their needs. Accountability and teacher evaluation systems that gauge teacher quality have intensified the demand for training on how to use data to effectively plan instruction based on the needs of all students (Verbiest, 2014).

School-wide data are used to guide instruction and make decisions within the learning community. Teachers are able to access trend data on their students, as well as use supplemental web-based programs to track student progress. One concern illustrated in the findings was that teachers experienced a data overload and lacked the proper training to use the information wisely and effectively. As the research has continuously indicated, educators will complain and have issues when training isn't relevant and relatable (Jimerson & Wayman, 2015). For those who have a better understanding of data-driven instruction, the load can sometimes become cumbersome and other

requirements take precedence. Coburn and Turner (2011) stressed that teachers make data come to life, and their level of comfort and understanding influence whether data use will possibly impact student learning. Effective collaboration around data must be planned and structured with a clear and persistent focus.

There was an abundance of literature related to data use and developing a culture of data as a means of improving teacher instruction, performance, and student achievement when training, clarity, and support are provided (Farley-Ripple & Buttram, 2014; Gerzon, 2015; Jimerson & Wayman, 2015; Marsh, Bertrand, & Huguet, 2015; Marsh & Farrell, 2015; Schildkamp & Poortman, 2015). Literature focused on the intersection of data use and professional learning was scarce in the research (Jimerson & Wayman, 2015). A large amount of the research has advocated for data-driven decision-making in schools, which has proven to be multifaceted with many interacting components (Mandinach & Gummer, 2015), and the consensus is that professional development related to data use is needed but has often been ineffective at improving knowledge, skills, and attitudes as professional learning attempts to do (Schildkamp & Poortman, 2015). Marsh and Farrell (2015) described "data-driven decision-making as the next major strategy to support instructional improvement and student achievement". (p. 270) Based on Marsh and Farrell's (2015) assertion, data-driven decision-making serves as a catalyst for school improvement and should be embraced, understood, and modeled in order to yield successful results.

Datnow (2011) studied two school districts where school and district leaders made data use a priority, and understood how data could positively affect teacher

performance and student achievement. In Datnow's study, the school districts were located in Texas and California. The districts directly linked data to teaching and learning, defined the purpose for data use, stressed the need for using data to guide learning, and emphasized improvement efforts (Datnow, 2011). As I compare the research site to the schools in the study, our leaders make data-informed discussions and even dissect data to assess areas of strength and improvement, but rarely are concrete, applicable suggestions for improvement provided. This disconnect kept growing with each passing year, leading to increased tensions and apprehensions about PLC implementation, especially when teacher quality and effectiveness were linked to student performance. Every year, school leaders would disseminate data to the staff without a purpose or plan for improvement. The use and dissemination of data alone cannot improve student learning; they are dependent upon the receiver's level of understanding and the intent of use (Marsh, 2012; Marsh & Farrell, 2015; Verbiest, 2014).

Common factors revealed during this literature review were that school leadership is important, and that many educational institutions are struggling to effectively make sense of the data and put the information to good use for planning and improved teaching (Schildkamp & Poortman, 2015). Leaders must become data literate and serve as the catalyst for change if a school truly expects to improve teaching and learning (Vanhoof, Vanlommel, Thijs, & Vanderlocht, 2014). Leadership within the school not only consists of administrators, but also instructional leaders, teacher leaders who are designated to train teachers, and teachers who may be more data-literate or data-wise than others (Verbiest, 2014). The inclusion of data discussion meetings within the learning

environment would also be beneficial because participants would be aware of the focus and intent of the meeting.

During Datnow's (2011) study, the school districts developed and provided protocols to guide the collaborative discussions. Teachers were given directions and paperwork beforehand so they could prepare for discussions. Discussions during PLCs were related to classroom level assessments and provided the teachers an opportunity to collaboratively evaluate what worked, what did not work, and use any suggestions shared to development an action plan. Teacher attitudes and willingness to participate are positively affected when future PLCs are planned with designated days to cover topics, instead of overloading teachers with topics at once. Effective planning would allow time to discuss data, address school level initiatives, and review instructionally focused strategies in isolation (Masuda et al., 2012).

Since data-driven decision-making is not a singular construct, I decided to delve deeper for clarity. The review of literature yielded seven studies that could possibly guide the creation of my 3-day professional development project, and the segment of the training related to use of data in PLCs. The seven studies that will be succinctly mentioned in the subsequent paragraph addressed data use within PLCs, and the need to first gain clarity and purpose in order to effectively make data-driven decisions. After reviewing the studies, I realized that data literacy must be discussed in isolation within PLCs prior to any data-driven decisions can be made.

Jimerson and Wayman (2015) discussed data-related professional learning that takes into consideration the organizational structures related to professional learning in

schools. This study depicted individual and collective learning of teachers, and how data-related knowledge and skills correlate with professional learning. Gerzon (2015) identified five essential characteristics based on a conceptual framework of school-level and classroom-level data use. Gummer and Mandinach (2015) aimed to develop a conceptual framework based on data literacy, in an attempt to gain clarity and arrive at a conceptual meaning of data use. Data use was linked to content and pedagogical knowledge. Schildkamp and Poortman (2015) reviewed factors that influenced data use in data teams, and Marsh, Bertrand, and Huguet (2015) examined the role of data coaches and literacy coaches within the PLCs. Marsh (2012) shared interventions that could be used to support educators' use of data, and Marsh and Farrell (2015) highlighted data-driven decision-making as a framework where leaders understand the importance of need for support. The researchers address the question, what to do next with the data? A set of concepts is provided to attempt to answer this question.

Professional learning communities should include trainings that teach and model effective use of data, and skills necessary to become data-literate. Effectively using data to drive instruction is no easy task. Educators have access to so much data but lack the understanding or training to effectively use this information. Data-driven instruction requires time to understand the data, disaggregate the data, and effectively use the data toward school improvement efforts (Marsh & Farrell, 2015). It takes strategic planning with teacher input, time to understand and use the data, respect for time and other demands of the job, protocols and norms for collaboration, and meaningful, evidence-based professional development (Kallemeyn, 2014). A component of the 3-day

professional development training will be providing participants with skills to become data-literate. Since data are used to guide PLCs, data must be embraced and not viewed as extra work. Jimerson and Wayman (2015) asserted that there is a need for more research on data-related professional learning. This statement alone provides a valid reason for the issues revealed in my study related to looking beyond data to improve teaching and learning.

I have come to the conclusion that training related to becoming data-literate has not been prevalent in the PLCs due to lack of knowledge and understanding revealed in the findings. As I plan the project (a 3-day professional development training), I have paid particular attention to the research on effective data use and will make this a focal point of the proposed training initiative. I realized that before any school-wide training commences, schools must assess how the teachers and leaders conceptualize data use; in other words, how do they think about data and what data use entails (Jimerson, 2014).

School leaders must strive to implement PLCs with fidelity, ensuring that the necessary components and protocols that facilitate success and improvement are evident, efficient, and functional. PLCs should focus on understanding data first to ensure proper use in the development of instruction that addresses the needs of students. Supportive structures must be in place to address all aspects of data use, especially if all decisions within the PLCs are based on data. Just as the purpose of professional development is improvement of teacher and student learning, data are essential to improving student achievement and quality of instruction provided to students (Schildkamp & Poortman, 2015). The overall goal is to create a culture of learning at my school that is led by

transformational leaders, sustainable, collaborative, data-driven, cultivates positive school climate, advocates learning for adults and students, encourages growth and responsibility, holds all stakeholders accountable, fosters student and teacher leadership, and celebrates the successes and provides support for of all stakeholders.

Constructivist Learning Theory and Social Learning Theory

Two learning theories guiding this project are the constructivist learning theory and the social learning theory (Biniecki & Conceicao, 2016). Zepeda (2011) asserted that adult learning is supported and advocated through ongoing professional development. The authors also purported that the purpose of professional development was to enhance the overall effectiveness of teachers through the acquisition of knowledge to refine teaching practices and skills. According to Zepeda, Parylo, and Bengtson (2014), "adult learning is self-directed, motivational for the learner, problem centered, relevancy oriented, and goal oriented" (pp. 300-301). Professional learning communities strive to provide meaningful learning experiences for teachers that eventually are applied and incorporated within the teacher's instructional strategies.

The constructivist learning theory correlates to this project because teachers will be expected to use prior knowledge and experiences to gain a better understanding of information. Participants must be able to make the connection between the old and new knowledge, and then use this newfound knowledge to reflect and improve teaching practices. Adult learning within the constructivist theory begins with an individual understanding of concepts, and this understanding increases as one gets actively involved in the learning process (Biniecki & Conceicao, 2016). In my study, the teachers voiced

their concerns related to implementation. Many exhibited an understanding of PLCs, but shared a need for increased purpose and greater understanding of PLCs with the building. The goal is for the teachers to be active participants in the PLCs and leaders to understand the importance of incorporating more hands-on activities based on real-time needs of teachers and students. Future PLCs must be relatable, offer autonomy and choice, and not mundane. Once understanding has been achieved, the teacher can then contribute to the larger group collaboratively, cooperatively, and collectively.

Social learning theory correlates to this project because teachers will partake in a 3-day professional development training that will require teachers to reflect on their own teaching experiences and knowledge as they interact with others. Teachers are expected to work collaboratively and cooperatively while actively participating in learning activities. Professional learning communities advocate for teachers to work cooperatively, therefore this project will provide examples of working as a team to address the concerns highlighted in the data for the study. Learning within the social learning theory is reciprocal and based on the interactions and behaviors of the participants (Biniecki & Conceicao, 2016). Sleegars et al. (2013) mentioned how teachers socially interacted within PLCs represented the social capital theory. This learning theory described and was used to examine teachers' social network and trust within the study's structural and relational dimensions of PLCs.

Implementation

The proposed project, a set of professional development trainings designed to address the concerns expressed during the study, and to train and re-train PLC leaders

about implementing future PLCs with fidelity. As detailed in Appendix A, the trainings will consist of three full days of engaging, informative, and interactive sessions. On the first 2 days, there will be two sessions per day with four themes being covered. These themes are collaboration, time, shared responsibility, and focus on learning and results. The third day will focus on collaborative planning inclusive of all the themes discussed.

Potential Resources and Existing Supports

There are existing supports in place at the school that would contribute to a smooth implementation. The school currently has PLCs embedded in the regular schedule; therefore time is already designated for collaborative learning. Teachers attend PLCs during their common planning periods and departmental meetings. PLC leaders consist of instructional coaches and department heads. These leaders are potential support because they committed to effective implementation, and appreciate feedback about their deliverance and facilitation. Their knowledge and processes already in place are resources that would provide a foundation to build upon during implementation. The sessions will be held in the school's library. For the sessions, we will need my laptop, iPad, Promethean board, notebooks, folders, cardstock for nametags, refreshments, chart paper, tabletop self-stick easel pad, handouts, PowerPoint, markers, manipulatives, sign-in sheet, and evaluation forms. In the event the sessions are held in the summer, compensation will be needed. The principal previously agreed to use stipend pay to compensate participants for the professional development when I first shared my study.

Potential Barriers

A potential barrier might include not being able to conduct all trainings on consecutive days at the start of school. Due to numerous planning sessions for successful opening of school, sessions may have to be conducted in intervals during the first week of school or during the summer time. In the past, we have been able to offer professional development during the summer at the school with stipend pay for participants. Even though this time would be suitable, I would prefer to implement at the start of school so that the PLC leaders are able to use the information to plan the upcoming PLCs. A discussion will be held with the principal at the end 2016-2017 school year to decide whether the trainings will occur during the summer or when teacher's return for the upcoming school year.

Proposal for Implementation and Timetable

The implementation will occur during the 2017-2018 school year. My principal is already aware of the project's details. The leadership team will meet in May 2017 to plan dates for training. Once the decision has been made to conduct the professional development trainings during the summer or start of school, the PLC leaders will receive directions for registering online for the sessions. The professional development will then be planned, library reserved, and materials needed for implementation secured.

The title of the proposed project is *Implementing PLCs with Fidelity*. This will consist of three training sessions. The sessions will be interactive and hands-on. The four topics related to implementation that will be discussed are meaningful collaboration, lack of time to effectively implement and evaluate strategies, shared responsibility as it

relates to planning, and a focus on learning and results beyond the data. Each session during the first 2 days will address issues revealed from the findings. There will be a morning and afternoon session, with different issues being covered during each. The last day will include the creation of a deliverable to be presented to the whole group.

Roles and Responsibilities of Students and Others

Implementation for this project will be my responsibility. I developed the project, materials, and evaluation forms. I will build upon the prior knowledge, expertise, and experiences of the PLC leaders during the facilitation of the sessions. Learning will be reciprocal throughout the sessions. On the last day, PLC leaders will be afforded an opportunity to plan a PLC reflective of the information shared and relevant to the teachers' needs. PLC leaders are expected to plan future sessions based on relevant, relatable, and applicable strategies for improving teacher and student learning. Additionally, they are expected to actively engage teachers in interactive, hand-on activities during PLCs.

Project Evaluation

Evaluations will be ongoing during the 3-day professional development training. All sessions will start with a reflection. An evaluation form (Appendix A) will be issued at the conclusion of the training for all participants to complete. The form will consist of five open-ended questions, and will assess what was learned and allow participants to include any areas they may need more assistance with. Participants will also be afforded opportunities to reflect throughout the sessions. A reflection box will be placed on each table for participants to place notes when a topic reminds them of an experience worth

sharing throughout the session. The reflections will be used to guide discussions prior to the start of subsequent sessions.

Implications Including Social Change

Local Community

Professional learning communities must be implemented with fidelity in order to create a culture of learning that increases academic achievement for all. When PLCs are effectively implemented and sustained, professional development is relevant, relatable, applicable, and based on real time needs of students and teachers. When professional development is coherent and instructionally focused, student learning and classroom practices are positively affected (Desimone, 2011; Minor, Desimone, Lee, & Hochberg, 2016). The project addresses the needs of the school by creating training sessions focusing on data retrieved from participants within the learning environment. These sessions are inclusive of the four themes synonymously throughout the data.

Improvement to the current PLCs would benefit students, teachers, PLC leaders, and administrative leaders. Students and teachers benefit from improved teaching practices and increased student achievement. PLC leaders benefit from restructured professional development that is collaborative, evidence-based, sustainable, and provides trainings reflective of the teachers' needs. Administrative leaders benefit when PLCs and professional development foster a culture of learning that encourages shared leadership, teacher empowerment, and student-centered learning.

Far-Reaching

Professional learning communities and professional development rely on data and sustainable relationships to impact and improve academic achievement. The results of the project study and proposed project add to the body of research on implementing professional learning communities and the perceptions of teachers working within the learning environment. This project study has the potential to positively impact social change by providing transparency, clarity, and a greater understanding about the importance of effectively implementing and sustaining PLCs. When PLCs are implemented with fidelity, they are reflective of the needs of the stakeholders and serve as an effective tool for school improvement. Based on the findings, other school districts may also realize the importance of utilizing teachers' perceptions and experiences to guide PLC implementation and foster collaborative learning environments.

Social change is impacted through improved collaborative relationships and communication in our educational institutions, as well as improved student performance and teacher quality. This professional dialogue leads to teacher collaboration, acquisition of new knowledge and skills, teacher empowerment, sharing of best practices and experiences, collective inquiry, and active research. Additionally, the relationships established and knowledge acquired correlate with the goals of Walden's mission for social change and justice. More importantly, society benefits when schools cater to the development of whole child through improved instructional strategies and school cultures that model positive relationships.

Conclusion

In this section, I presented the proposed project for my project study. This project was developed based on the findings from the participants' data that revealed a need for refinement of the current PLCs at the school. The project chosen was a 3-day professional development training that was described in this section, along with goals and rationale my decision. The review of literature provided theory and research to support the content of the project. A description of how implementation would occur, a proposed timetable, potential resources, supports and barriers, and roles of stakeholders were also discussed. Lastly, project evaluation and implications for social change were described.

Section 4 will focus on reflections and conclusions about the project's strengths and weaknesses. I will address what I learned about scholarship, project development leadership, and change. The impact of this study on my growth as a scholar, practitioner, and project developer will be analyzed. Finally, I will discuss the project's impact on social change and implications for future research, followed by a summary of the section.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine teachers' perceptions concerning the implementation of PLCs to promote a positive school culture and increased academic achievement among students. To address the needs revealed from the data, I proposed and developed a project to train the PLCs with the intention of improving the quality of professional development. These improvements may potentially foster cooperative, sustainable cultures of learning and result in increased academic achievement and enhanced teaching practices (Bayar, 2014; Fogarty & Pete, 2011; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Ronfeldt et al., 2015; Wells, 2014; Zwart et al., 2015). The refinements hopefully will benefit all stakeholders.

In this section, I will offer my reflections on my study's strengths and limitations and my growth as a leader, scholar, project developer, and practitioner. Writing this section allowed for deep reflection about my project experience as well as my overall time at Walden. My Walden experience has been fulfilling and has definitely allowed for growth in all aspects of my life. The section will conclude with a discussion of implications for social change and suggestions for further research.

Project Strengths and Limitations

The greatest strengths of this project are structures that are already in place and support for leaders. My school already has professional learning communities embedded into the schedule and a process to assign teachers for trainings on designated days. I have administrative support from my leaders, and they understand the importance of my study

as it may potentially benefit the school's learning environment. In my interviews, participants revealed a general understanding of PLCs and their possible benefits when effectively implemented. Their prior knowledge was considered a strength and a promising starting point as I planned the training sessions. PLC and administrative leaders shared in conversation that they are anxiously awaiting the results of my study because they are committed to improving the quality of professional development, teaching practices, and student learning at the school. Additionally, they are committed to fostering a culture of learning that fosters academic achievement for all (Tichnor-Wagner, Harrison, & Cohen-Vogel, 2016).

The abundance of literature on PLC implementation (Bayar, 2014; Hunzicker, 2011; King, 2011; Leclerc et al., 2012; Linder et al., 2012; Wells, 2014) is a noteworthy strength, as it allowed me to view the project through multiple lenses. From my review of the literature, I realized that many schools have experienced similar issues with implementation and aligning theory with practice. Twenty-first century schools in the U.S. are data-driven with heavy reliance on accountability (Hardy & Boyle, 2011), making improved teacher quality and effectiveness a critical need in schools. Teachers must reshape their instructional strategies in order to adequately prepare and equip students with 21st century skills (Larson & Miller, 2011). The commitment of teachers, along with the school's provision of opportunities for enhanced growth and improved collaboration, are also strengths of the project.

The most notable limitation of the study is the sample size. My school is a secondary school comprised of Grades 7th through 12th. Instead of including all of the

school's teachers in the study, I recruited core teachers who taught 7th through 9th grade students. By using a purposeful sampling strategy, I selected participants who shared common characteristics (Glesne, 2011). Using a larger, more inclusive sample or adding core teachers of students in Grades 10th through 12th would have made study findings more representative of the total population (Hatch, 2002; Merriam, 2009). Nonetheless, I believe that my target population provided adequate data to answer my research questions.

The project's primary limitation is also related to its sample size. Only PLC leaders will participate in the 3-day professional development, as they are responsible for planning and facilitating the training sessions throughout the school year. My intention is for these leaders to use the findings and trainings as a first step to improving the quality of professional development within the PLCs. One way to address the project's limitations would be to include all teachers in the professional development and not just the leaders. Teachers would collaborate about the areas of concern with suggestions for improvement, and then use these suggestions to plan future sessions with the leaders. Being that the goal is refinement of the current PLCs, I believed it was most appropriate to train the leaders first in a small group setting.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

Another option would be to develop a PLC handbook with research-based strategies for practice and application that would be distributed to leaders and teachers at the school. The book would be a means of sharing study findings and offering recommendations for improvement. Unlike interactive professional trainings that

incorporate hands-on activities and demonstrations, the handbook would not allow opportunities for modeling cooperative learning and sharing experiences with other participants. When teachers actively participate, classroom practices have the potential to be significantly affected (Wells, 2014). To address the problem, ongoing evaluations could also be used if leaders regularly review and use them as a mechanism to guide, plan, and improve the PLCs. Teachers' attitudes and willingness to engage in professional development is contingent upon how meaningful and relevant the information is to teaching and students and how realistic it is to practice and apply such content in their work (Masuda, Ebersole, & Barrett, 2012). I considered the pros and cons of the alternative options prior to deciding that a professional development would be the best approach for my project.

Scholarship, Project Development, and Leadership and Change

As I reflect upon my doctoral process, I started out wanting to implement a character education program for middle school students. As I matriculated through the program, I began to realize my contributions were needed in other areas. I had so many ideas but lacked a topic worthy of investigating. As I continued to write during my earlier classes, one of my instructors used the term PLCs and I became excited. From that point on, I began to extensively research PLCs and knew that my school's PLCs would become the focus of my study. My growth over the years have led to newfound knowledge and enhanced scholarship. My growth has also led to an appreciation for developing projects for school improvement. Lastly, I have evolved as a leader and change agent as a result of my doctoral journey.

Scholarship

I have acquired a wealth of knowledge as a result of this doctoral study. I have witnessed my study come full circle and gained a greater understanding of professional learning communities. I realized that there are benefits and barriers involved with implementation. I also gained an appreciation for data. Data, however, alone cannot lead to improvement or change. Change is based on how one uses and interprets data. After completing my analyses, I felt that I was able to capture participants' voices, which gave me a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction. This led to a newfound feeling of hope and excitement after working on my study for years. I was able to reflect on my school's PLCs, while assessing the pros and cons and areas needing improvement.

Once data were disaggregated and coded, and common themes were identified, I felt as if I had reached a milestone. I began my review of literature with great anticipation of what was in store. In researching PLC implementation at other schools, I realized that participants in other studies shared similar experiences as my participants. The revelation challenged me to delve deeper to find adequate, relevant, and reputable literature to create the professional development training for my project study. I was able to correlate the literature with prevalent school issues related to accountability, school improvement, and teacher quality (Fogarty & Pete, 2011; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Riveros et al., 2012; Ronfeldt et al., 2015; Zwart et al., 2015). I was also able to think about the direction of future PLCs that might benefit my school (Bayar, 2014; Desimone, 2011; Gerzon, 2015; Hunzicker, 2011; Jimerson & Wayman, 2015; Minor et al., 2016). Future professional learning must be structured to develop a culture of data use if teachers and

leaders are expected to be data-literate, and fully understand, analyze, and embrace the importance of data on the school level and classroom level (Datnow, 2011; Gerzon, 2015; Mandinach & Gummer, 2015; Marsh et al., 2015; Marsh & Farrell, 2015;Verbiest, 2014).

Project Development

As a project developer, I realized that one must focus on what topics are most important and relevant and reflective of the participants' needs. I had to focus on my intended audience and what information needed to be covered to adequately address the needs of the teachers. I had to pay attention to details and strategically plan the project to ensure successful implementations. With collaboration being a key factor in professional learning communities, I had to incorporate collaborative strategies, hands on activities, and interactive discussions into the project. The project must be engaging, and respect participants' prior knowledge and expertise yet be inclusive of the needs revealed from the study's findings.

As the project developer, I was able to establish a framework for success to gauge whether the professional development achieved its intended goals. Evaluation is very important and critical to assessing effectiveness. I aimed to assess prior knowledge as well as acquired knowledge, and an evaluation form was issued at the conclusion of the training. The final evaluation was a deliverable reflective of the needs revealed from the study's findings and the PLC leaders' style of delivery. The only other requirement was that the sessions were hands-on, collaborative, engaging, and interactive.

Leadership and Change

I learned that leaders must facilitate the change process, and success is contingent upon their guidance and beliefs. The two concepts actually go hand in hand, and must coexist and be in alignment within the learning environment. I've learned that leadership is complex and sometimes uncomfortable. The effectiveness of a leader is evaluated based on their ability to initiate and facilitate change focused on school improvement and successful outcomes. As schools are constantly required to implement reform strategies, leaders must accept the task, obtain buy-in, and make it happen. Everything begins with a vision that's shared and embraced by those within the learning environment.

As I conducted this review of literature, leadership was prominent in all research. There are many styles of leadership, but the transformational leader was the style that stood out. The transformational leader is one who shares power with teachers and respects the leadership abilities of those within the learning environment as means of supporting and sustaining change (Leclerc et al., 2012). Transformational leaders understand that change is a collective effort that relies upon the strengths of the team, not just the person in charge. The learning environment thrives when leaders are supportive, attentive, involved, and encourages decision-making and collaboration. Effective leaders understand that change requires patience, motivation, support, trust, teamwork, and professional discourse. Most importantly, a change in school culture is often required to improve teaching and learning of all within the learning environment, and it is the leaders' responsibility to make sure that this change is heading in the right direction.

Reflections on the Importance of the Work

As I reflect on my work from inception, I have always embraced change and had a zeal for learning. I have always believed that teacher leadership was just as powerful as administrative leadership. Education is my calling and teaching is my passion. As I reflect on myself as a scholar, practitioner, and project developer, I do so with pride and gratification. I am proud of my work, growth, and accomplishments. I could have given up when faced with adversity and challenges, but instead I stayed the course and remained committed.

Analysis of Self as Scholar

As a scholar, I have evolved as a result of this doctoral study. The ability to conduct research that is beneficial to my learning community made the entire process worthwhile, relatable, and relevant. I realized the importance of researching literature that supported and refuted theories and systems of learning. Furthermore, I learned to respect both sides. The peer-reviewed articles depicted the feelings of my participants, and this realization instilled a greater sense of hope within. I felt confidence that I was definitely doing what was best for my school, and that the results supported by research would lead to changes within the PLCs. I understand that I must commit to be a life-long learner and change agent, even after completing my program of study.

As I reviewed and analyzed the data, I was able to vicariously embody the experiences of the participants. I gained an appreciation for data and how when used properly, data can provide the necessary information to implement change. In schools, educators are often inundated with data. I learned that data alone do not lead to change

and improvements. Schools must foster a culture of data use to train the teachers and leaders how to comprehend, dissect, analyze, and effectively implement initiatives based on data. As a scholar, I realized that it is my job to empower those around me to strive to do their best and commit to educating the whole child.

Analysis of Self as Practitioner

As a practitioner, I confirmed and solidified my role as a teacher-leader and school leader. Effective leaders are able to objectively assess their learning environments to improve and facilitate learning for all. Effective leaders understand the importance of building and sustaining positive relationships within the learning environment. As a result of my study, I was able to analyze the needs of the school from the viewpoints of the students and teachers. I realized that school leaders put so much pressure on teachers when it comes to accountability and school improvement, but fail to adequately provide teachers with support and training relevant to what they actually experience in the classroom. I have learned through my journey that teacher quality and student achievement has a direct correlation, and school districts must invest in teachers if they are expected to achieve academic achievement and success outcomes. My Walden experience has heightened my awareness of the need to promote social change within the learning environment, and provided the knowledge and skill set to be the change I desire to see.

Analysis of Self as Project Developer

As a project developer, I have learned that it is important to respect the needs and learning style of your audience. My audience was adult learners, and I realized that I

needed to research best practices for training adults. As a result of the extensive body of knowledge, I realized why our current PLCs were not achieving the goal of improvement for all learners. The common factor missing was teacher learning based on their needs and experiences in the classroom. A disconnection existed that was not being acknowledged or prioritized. I realized that any future training had to be relevant, relatable, and applicable. Additionally, these trainings had to be interactive, hands-on, and collaborative with follow-up and support.

As I created the project for this study, I kept the voices and needs of the teachers at the forefront. The thought that resonated was that the teachers understood the benefits of PLCs and their effect on student achievement, but agreed that the school's PLCs needed to be reflective of what the student and teachers' needs. Obtaining the teachers' perceptions was a first step. Implementing and improving future PLCs are the second step. My school has supportive conditions already in place, and the refinements suggested in this study could provide the catalyst for change that many have been longing for. The ability to finally apply theory to practice would be a win-win for all learners within the learning community, teachers, students, and leaders.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

This project may have a profound impact on the school by providing the guidance needed to improve professional development and PLCs within the school, and contributing to the body of literature on PLC implementation. The job-embedded professional learning would be embraced from a different perspective because teachers would experience a sense of respect for their time, and professional development would

be enriched through collaborative planning and shared responsibility. This planning would lead to the creation of professional development that is relevant with clear intent and increased value based on teacher and students' needs. The current PLCs within the school were in need of refinement, and this project provided a starting point. By changing existing PLCs based on research and data provided by those working within the environment, the trainings would become more relatable and relevant to the teachers. By modeling what effective collaboration resembles, teacher collaboration and communication would shift to conversations about student work and improvement.

In short, social change within the school would be impacted through increased empowerment, growth, shared responsibility, and the fostering of a culture of learning for all. Social change in a larger context would be impacted through increased investment in teacher learning based on teacher perceptions, data, and research. State accountability systems and improvement plans advocate for teacher training as a mechanism to foster classroom change (Minor, Desimone, Lee, & Hochberg, 2016). Therefore, providing data that policymakers and superintendents could utilize to restructure teacher training to benefit the teachers and students positively impacts social change, especially since accountability and teacher evaluations are based on teacher effectiveness. A fair accountability system provides the necessary support to improve teacher quality by enhancing instructional skills and content knowledge. When support and follow-up are provided with fidelity, the entire school environment benefits by providing the best possible education for all.

The work completed during this project accentuated the need for job-embedded professional development based on the real-time needs of the teachers and students. Professional learning communities are implemented in schools as a means to increase student achievement, but implementation and sustainability have caused many to question the overall effectiveness of PLCs and further research the construct. I analyzed the pros and the cons of PLCs, and realized job-embedded training such PLCs were needed, but the purpose needed to be reiterated, attendance mandated, structure modified, and focus redirected.

My study focused on the perceptions of a small population of teachers within the school. Further research could invite the entire school body or other schools in the district to participate in a study about current PLCs in place. Another avenue could be a mixed-methods study that would rely upon qualitative data from surveys, interviews, observations, and quantitative data from test scores and student assessments to gauge effects of PLCs on student achievement. The possibilities for future research were vast as the needs were revealed. The need for effective and improved teacher training is an area of critical concern, and the creation of professional development opportunities that is reflective of the needs of the 21st century students and teachers have the potential to positively affect school achievement if effectively planned and implemented with fidelity.

Conclusion

The goal of this project study was to examine teachers' perceptions concerning the implementation of PLCs to promote a positive school culture and increased academic

achievement among students. The next step was to create a project based on the concerns to improve the quality of professional learning within the PLCs. This improvement began with reviewing how teachers were acquiring knowledge and whether this acquisition was leading to effective application. In order to jumpstart the improvement process, I realized PLCs needed to be modified by reiterating the purpose for actively participating and buying-in to the concept, mandating PLC attendance as non-negotiable, modifying how professional development training was planned and structured, and redirecting the focus of PLCs so that they address teacher and student needs with support and follow-up. Most importantly, I realized that effective collaboration had to be modeled and that trainings on data use needed to be ongoing.

In this section, I was able to reflect on the project created for my project study. I evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of the project, as well as alternatives to addressing the problems revealed. My growth as a leader and change agent were discussed. I reflected on my growth throughout this process as a scholar, practitioner, and project developer. Finally, I discussed my project's potential for social change, and its importance to the school, other school districts, and future research.

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Appendix A: The Project

Professional Development: 3-Day Training Session

"Implementing PLCs with Fidelity"

Purpose

- To train and retrain department heads and instructional coaches about PLC implementation and effective planning

Program Goals

- To provide clarity and transparency about PLC implementation
- To provide an opportunity for effective collaboration and teacher learning
- To emphasis the importance of planning PLCs reflective of the students and teachers' needs
- To emphasis the importance of being data-literate in order to effectively understand and use data within the PLCs

Program Outcomes

- PLC leaders will implement PLCs with fidelity with time embedded for effective collaboration
- PLC leaders will plan future PLCs with teacher input and reflective of their needs
- PLCs will become relevant, relatable, and applicable to improve teachers' attitude and willingness to actively engage
- PLC leaders will educate, train, and model how to effectively use data to guide instruction

Target Audience:

- Individuals responsible for facilitating professional training within the learning environment;
- Also referred to as PLC leaders throughout the project;
- 10 participants

Format

- PowerPoint presentation
- Cooperative learning
- Role playing
- Reflective writing
- Hands-on activities
- Critical thinking
- Group presentation

Timeline

- The implementation will occur during the 2017-2018 school year. I will meet with the principal in May 2017 to plan dates for training. Once the decision has been made to conduct during the summer or start of school, the PLC leaders will receive directions for registering online for the sessions. The professional development will then be planned, library reserved, and materials needed for implementation secured.

Materials/Equipment

- Laptop/iPad
- Audio visual equipment/Promethean Board/Active Board
- Cardstock
- Paper and writing utensils
- Name tags
- Refreshments (Candy for tables)
- Chart paper
- Table top self-stick easel pad
- Markers
- Handouts
- Sign in sheet
- Evaluation forms
- Manipulatives/Artifacts
- Notebook
- Bag of Skittles
- Note cards/Index cards
- Pocket folders

"Implementing PLCs with Fidelity"

Agenda for 3-Day Training Sessions

Day 1: Collaboration and Time

8:30-9:00	Breakfast: Coffee and Conversations
9:00-10:00	Welcome and Introductions (Slides 3-5)
	Icebreaker (Slide 6)
	Reflective Writing (Slide 7)
	Purpose, Goals, and Outcomes (Slide 8)
	PLC Facts (Slide 9)
	Overview of study (Slide 10)
Theme #1: Collaboration	What is effective collaboration? (Slide 11)
10:00-11:00	Different types of collaboration
	How does collaboration look within PLCs?
11:00-11:15	Break
11:15-12:00	Collaboration in action: Scenario A
	(Slide 12)
12:00-1:00	Lunch
Theme # 2: Time	How does effective use of time look within
1:00-2:00	PLCs? (Slide 13)
2:00-2:15	Break
2:15-3:00	Time, Use or Lose: Scenario B (Slide 14)

Day 2: Shared Responsibility and Focusing on learning and results

8:30-9:00	Breakfast: Donuts and Discussions
9:00-10:00	Icebreaker (Slide 17)
	Reflective writing and sharing (Slide 18)
Theme #3: Shared Responsibility	How does shared responsibility look within
10:00-11:00	PLCs? (Slide 19)
11:00-11:15	Break
11:15-12:00	Shared Responsibility: Scenario C
	(Slide 20)
12:00-1:00	Lunch
Theme # 4: Focusing on learning and results (Looking beyond data)	Are you data literate? (Slide 21)
1:00-2:00	What's needed to effectively look beyond
	data?
2:00-2:15	Break
2:15-3:00	Data Use: Scenario D (Slide 22)

Day 3: Planning and Presentations

8:30-9:00	Breakfast: Tea and Talk
Topic: Planning with a purpose (with	Icebreaker (Slide 25)
teacher input/needs at the forefront)	Reflective writing and sharing (Slide 26)
9:00-9:30	Brief discussion about planning (Slide 27)

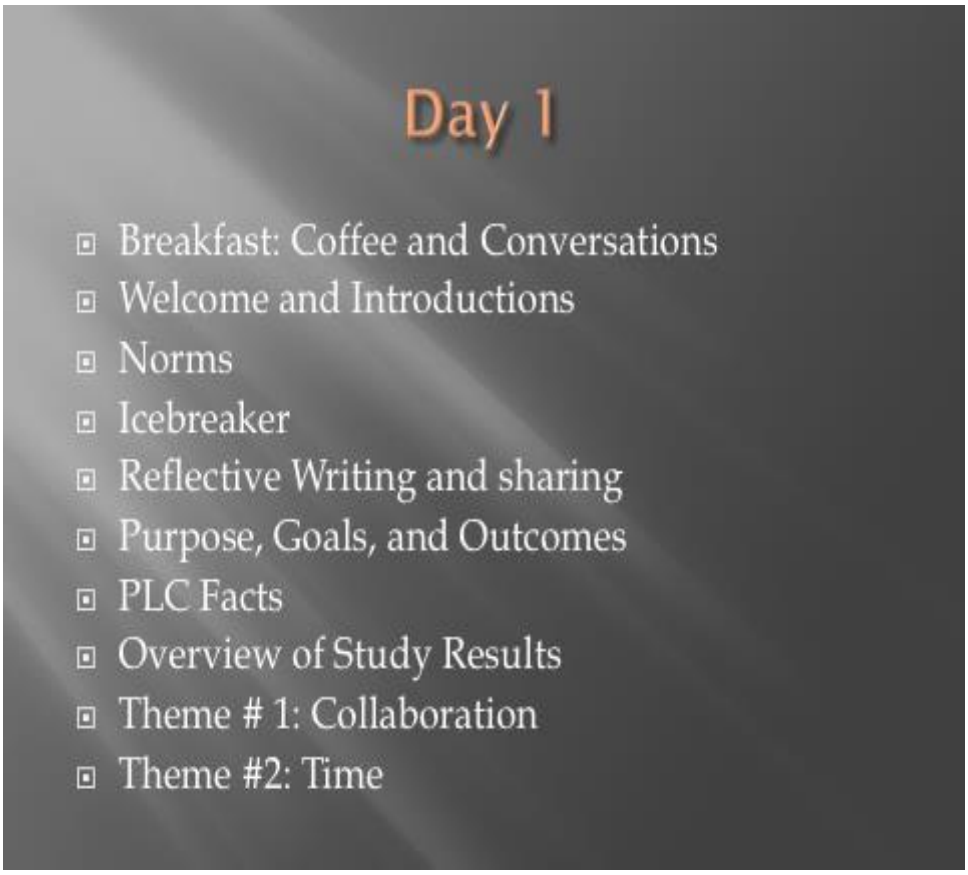
9:30-11:00	Groups assigned (2 per group) (Slide 28) Collaboratively plan trainings based on scenarios
11:00-12:00	Lunch
12:00- 2:30	30 minute group presentations (Slides 28-30)
2:30-3:00	Closing/Evaluations (Slide 31)

PowerPoint Presentation

Slide #1

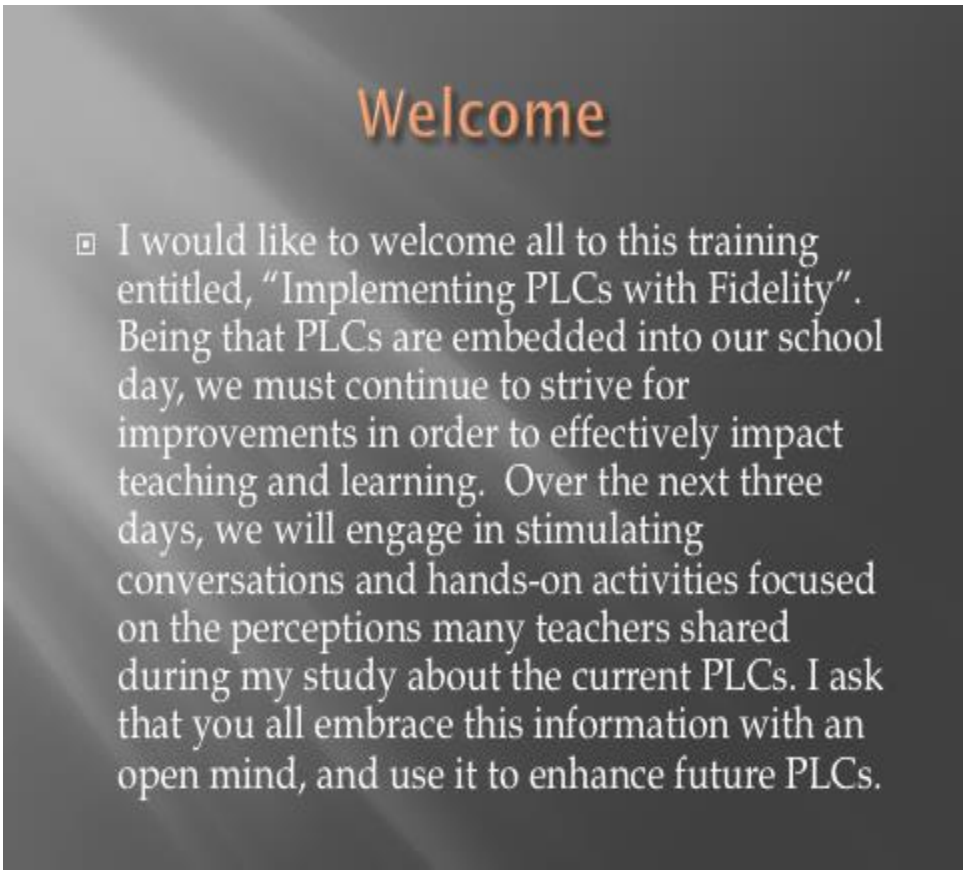
Say: Welcome to Implementing PLCs with Fidelity, a 3 day professional development training based on teachers' perceptions about the current PLCs with the school. Over the next 3 days, we will engage in discussion about 4 areas of concern echoed by majority of the participants of the study.

Slide #2



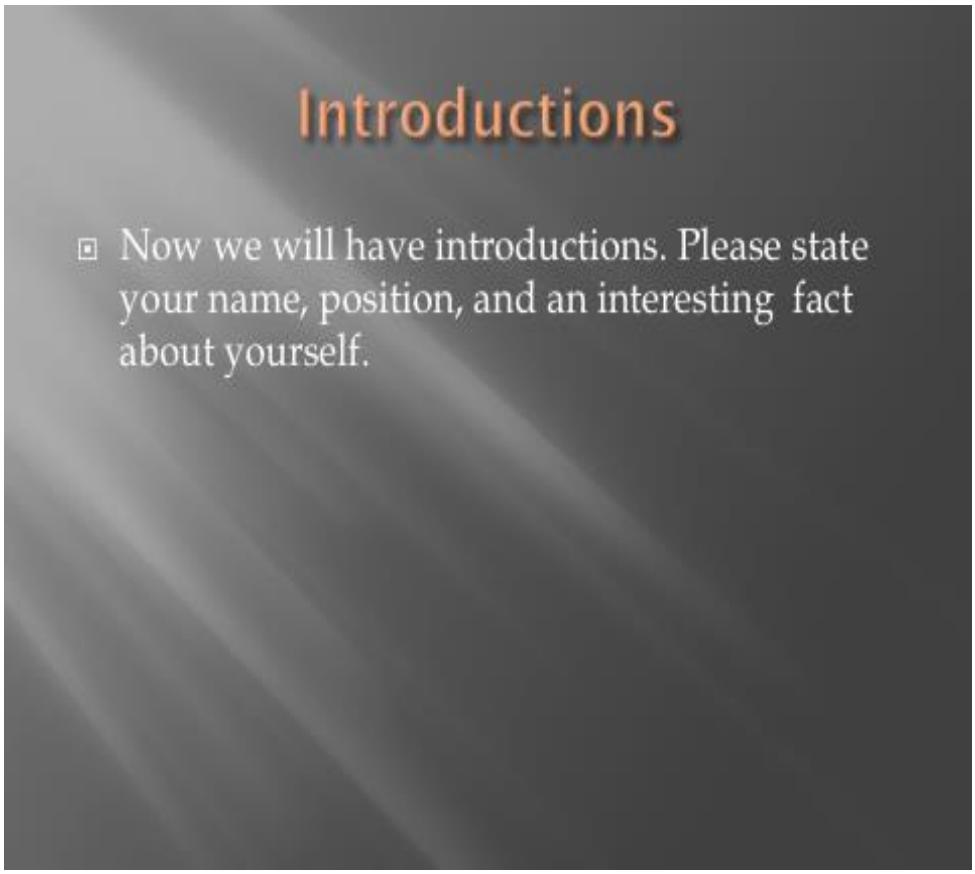
Say: We will begin with introductions of all in attendance and the norms. If you noticed, I purposely invited the PLC leaders and department heads. The changes with PLC planning and implementation will begin with you.

Slide #3



Read the slide.

Slide #4



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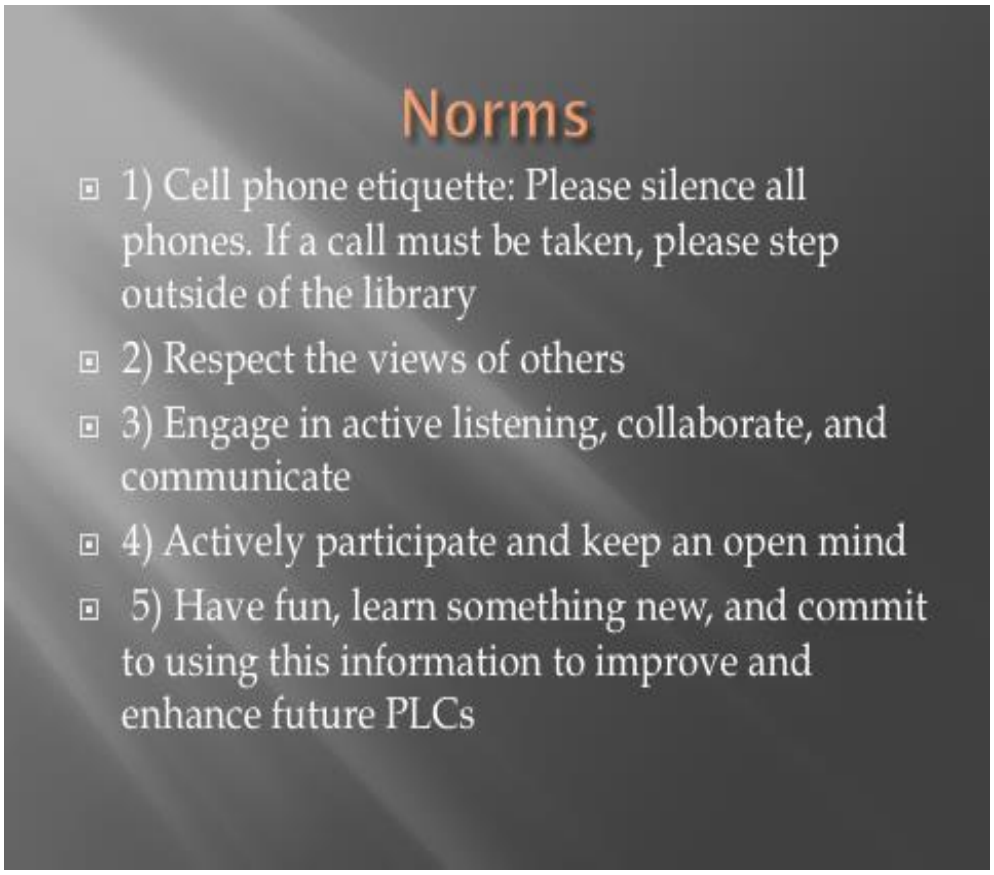
Slide #5



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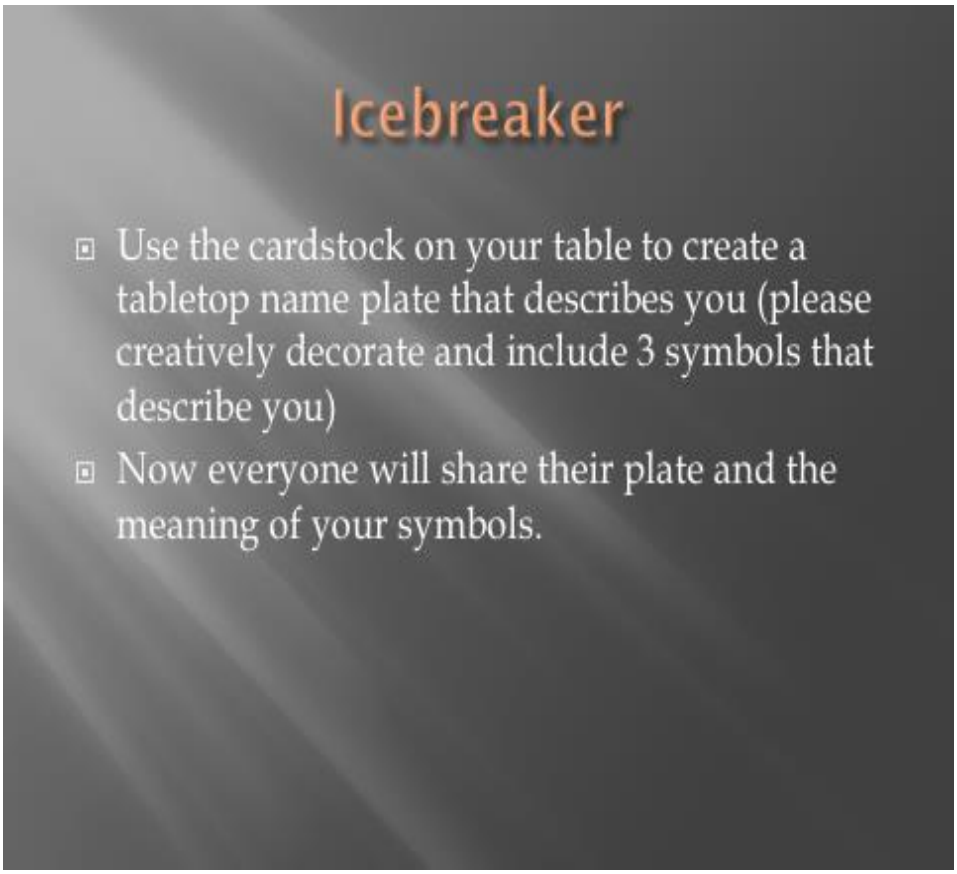
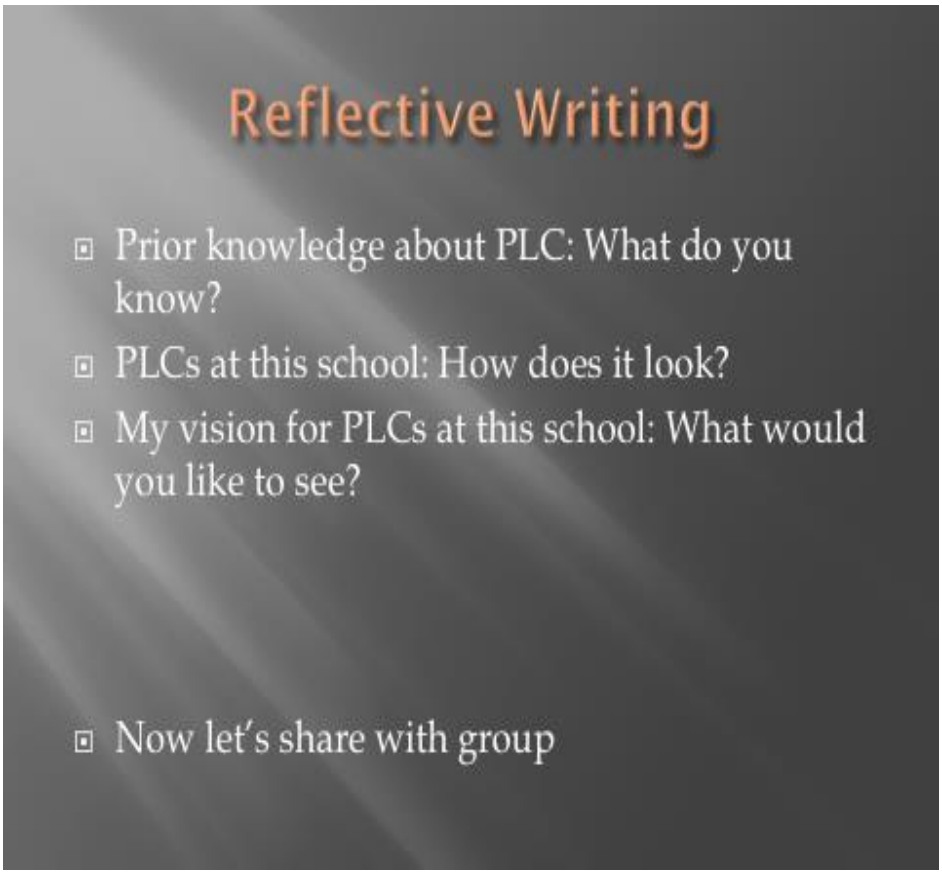
Slide #6



Say: Now let's participate in an icebreaker activity.

Read the slide.

Slide #7

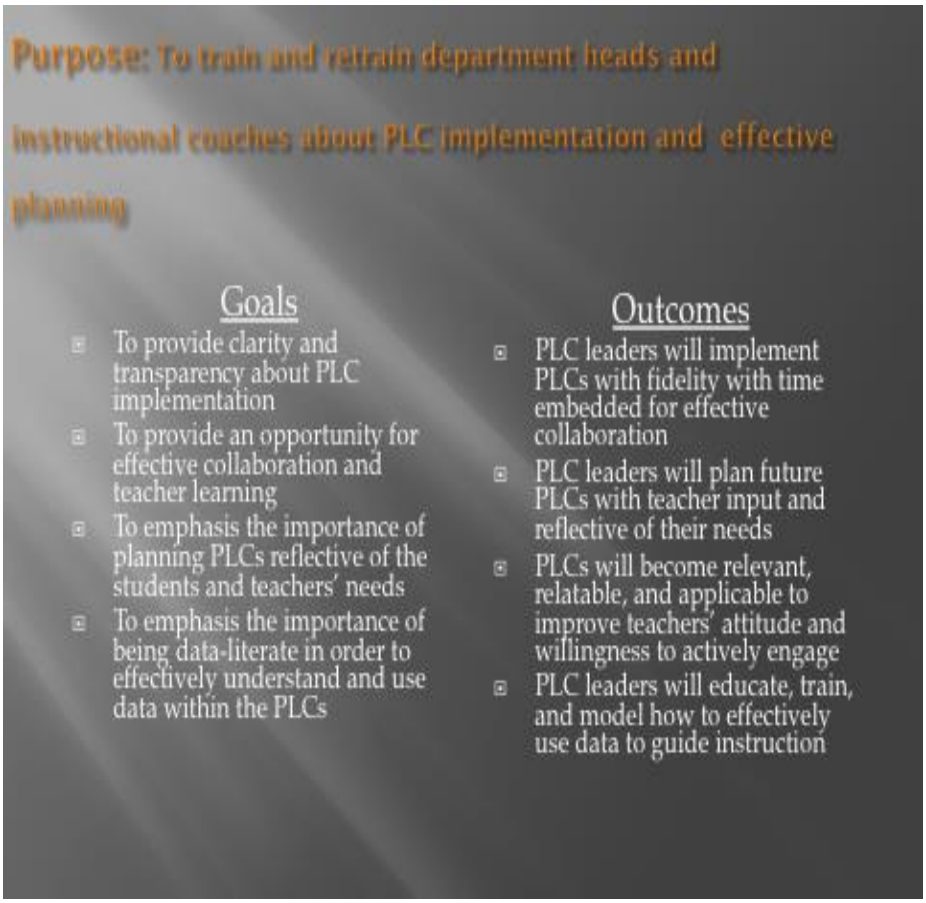


Read the slide.

Write your responses in your notebook.

Allow 15 minutes for this activity.

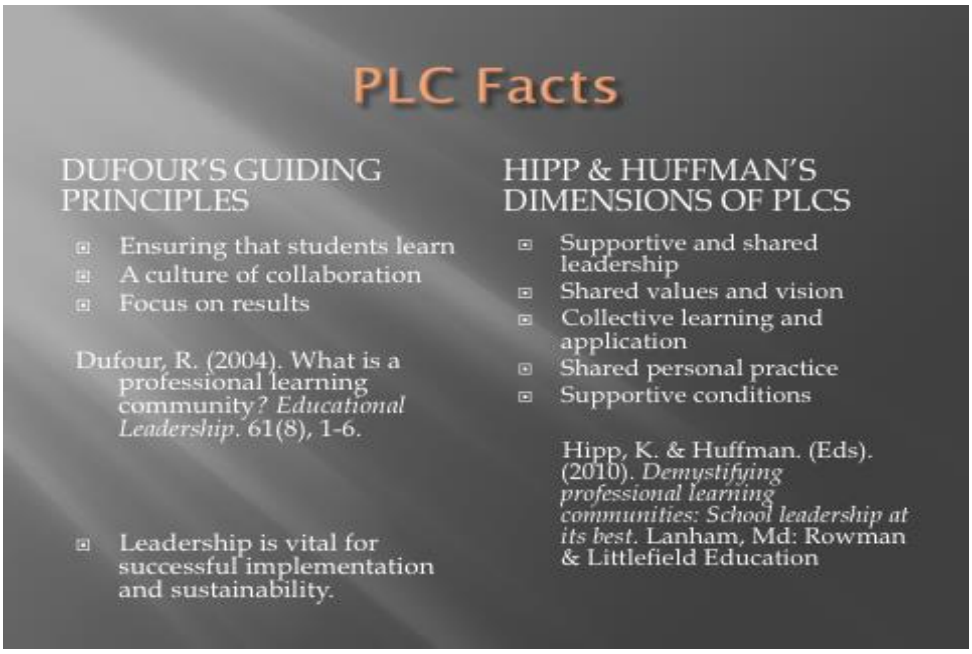
Slide #8



Say: This slide explains the reason we are here.

Read the slide. Purpose, Goals, and Outcomes

Slide #9



Read DuFour's principles, then Hipp and Huffman's and refer to the descriptions below:

Based on Hipp and Huffman (2010):

Supportive and shared leadership: School administrators share power, authority, and decision making, while promoting and nurturing leadership.

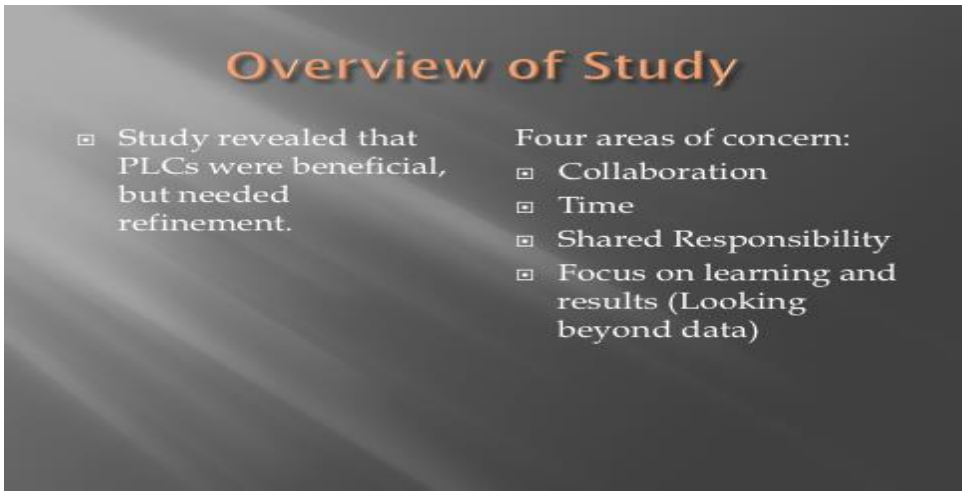
Shared values and vision: Focus of student learning and supports norms of behavior that guide decisions about teaching and learning.

Collective learning and application: Staff shares information, work collaboratively to plan, solve problems, and improve learning opportunities.

Shared personal practice: Peers meet and observe one another tor provide feedback on instructional practices, to assist in learning, and to increase human capacity.

Supportive conditions: Relationships and structures {systems and resources} to enable staff to meet and examine practices and student outcomes. Provide time and opportunities to communicate, plan, and grow…. Must cater to physical, mental, and emotional well being; caring relationships based on trust and respect.

Slide #10



Read the slide.

Discuss and elaborate on aspects of the study with training attendees:

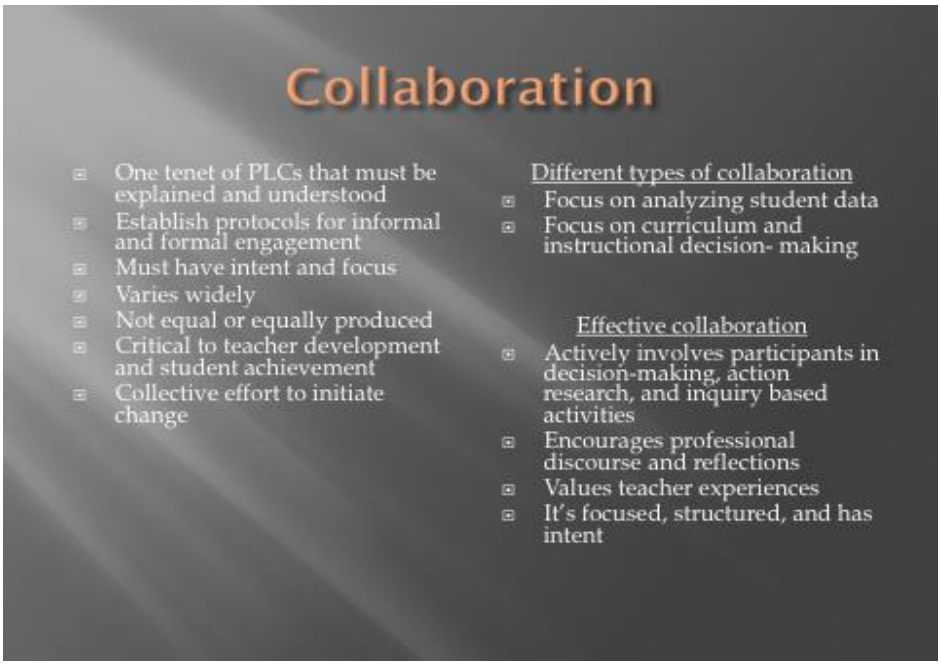
Theme #1: Collaboration-Study participants shared that collaboration occurred but not in a way to effectively impact classroom practices. More collaboration centered on reviewing student work samples, and peer observations and planning needs to occur in PLCs.

Theme #2: Time-Study participants shared that more time is needed to plan as a team and collaborate about instructional practices. Time is also needed to effectively implement and evaluate the effectiveness of strategies. Also, that PLC attendance needs to be made mandatory instead of teachers not being able to attend due to covering classes of an absent teacher.

Theme #3: Shared Responsibility-Study participants shared that sessions would become more interesting, relevant, and relatable if teachers are included in the planning process. Also allow teachers to share methods that work in their classrooms and use these experiences as guiding points.

Theme #4: Looking beyond data (focusing on learning and results)-Study participants shared that the school provides data and test results every year, but many don't understand how to effectively use the data to guide instruction and interventions. Many of the teachers are data illiterate and must be taught how to interpret data.

Slide #11



Read the slide.

Elaborate on this information:
<u>Different types of collaboration</u>

Focus on analyzing student data: Teachers work together to identify students' needs based on multiple sources of data. Teachers must be data-literate in order to effectively use data to positively influence student learning. These data are then used to create interventions to address students' needs.

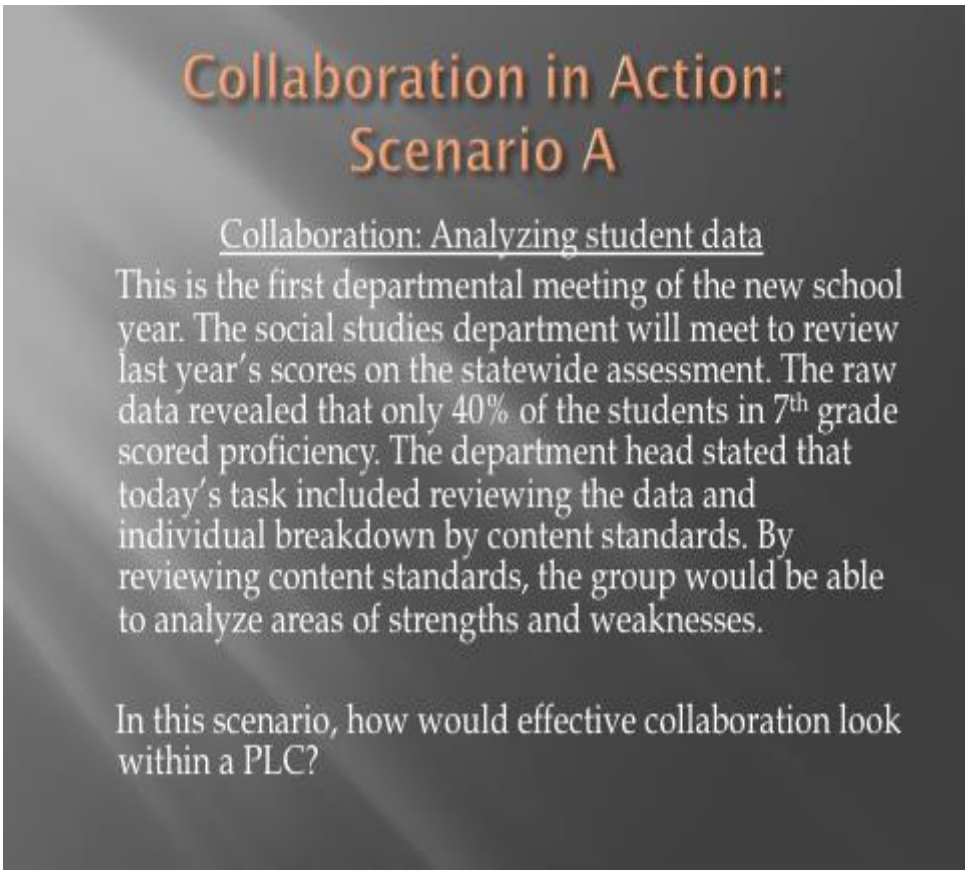
Focus on curriculum and instructional decision-making: Teachers work together to plan lessons, co-teach, and observe each other. Teachers are able to have professional dialogue based peer observation and review of student work. This type of collaboration has the potential to improve student outcomes because discussions are centered on the real-time needs of the students and teachers.

What is effective collaboration?
Read the slide. Encourage two-way conversations.

After discussion has ended, it's time for a break.

Say: We will now take a 15-minute break.

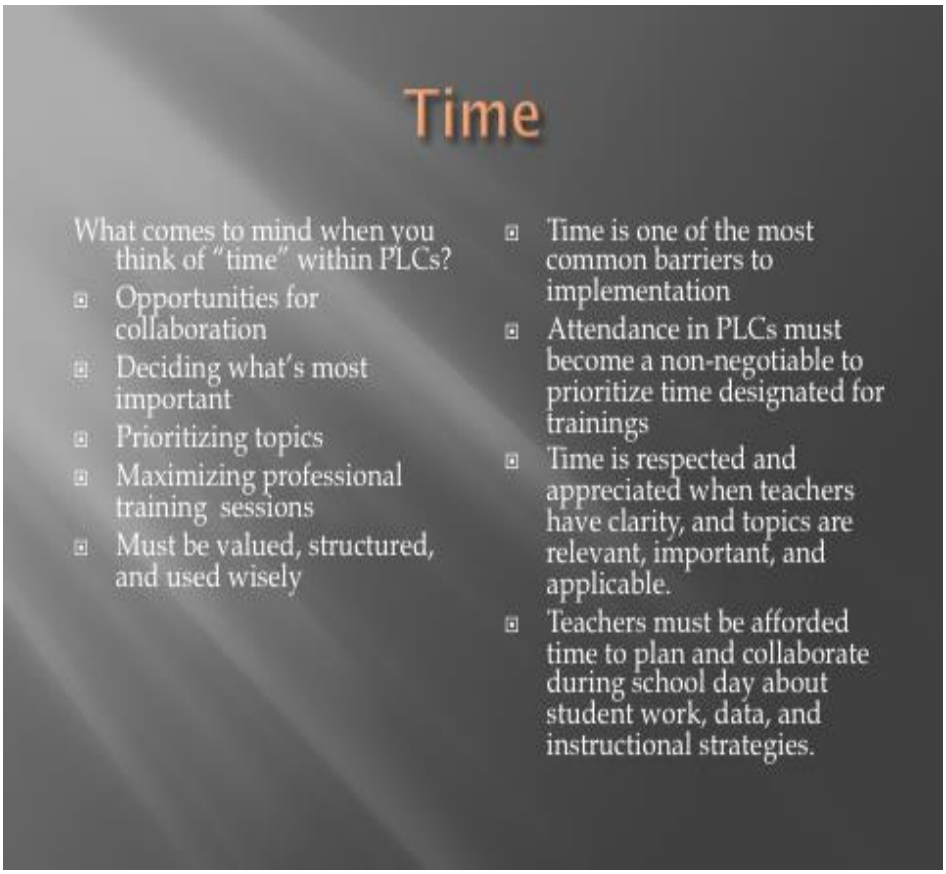
Slide #12



Say: Please read the scenario then write in your notebook about how effective collaboration would look within a PLC to complete the Social Studies department's task.

Please reflect on the previous discussion about collaboration to answer the question. Groups will share responses and engage in a round table discussion about collaboration and the scenario, and how it correlates to real-time school setting.

Slide #13

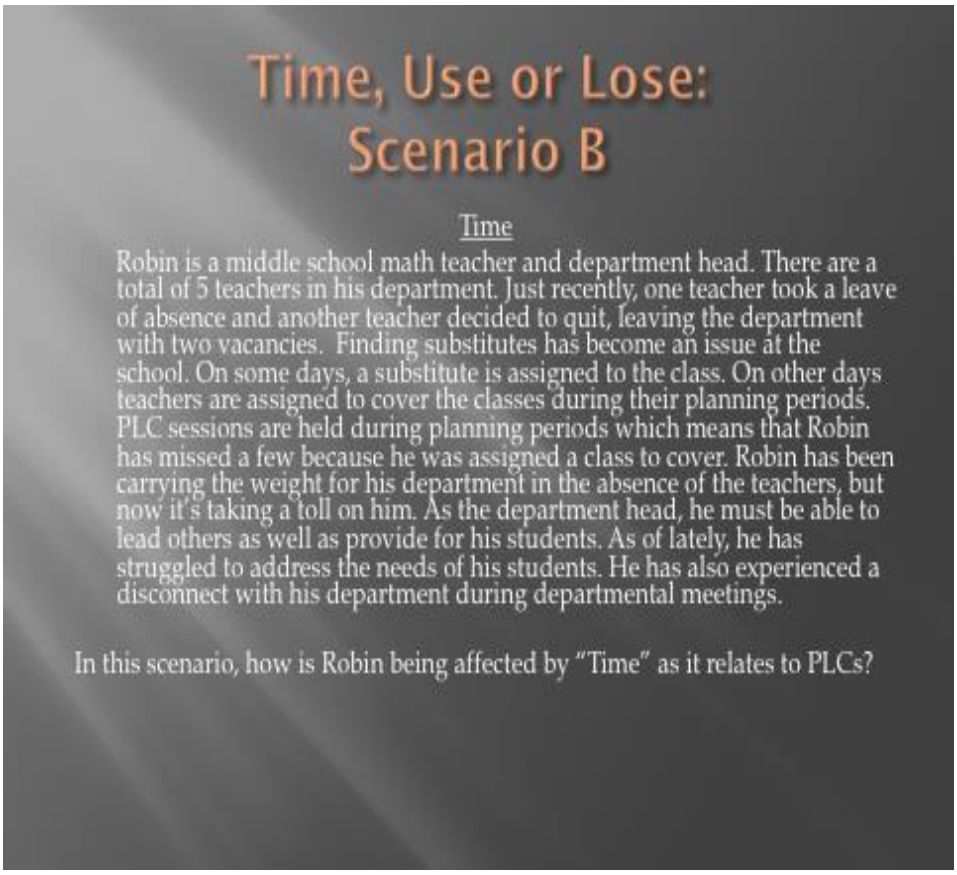


Read the slide. Encourage two-way conversation.

After discussion has ended, it's time for a break.

Say: We will now take a 15-minute break.

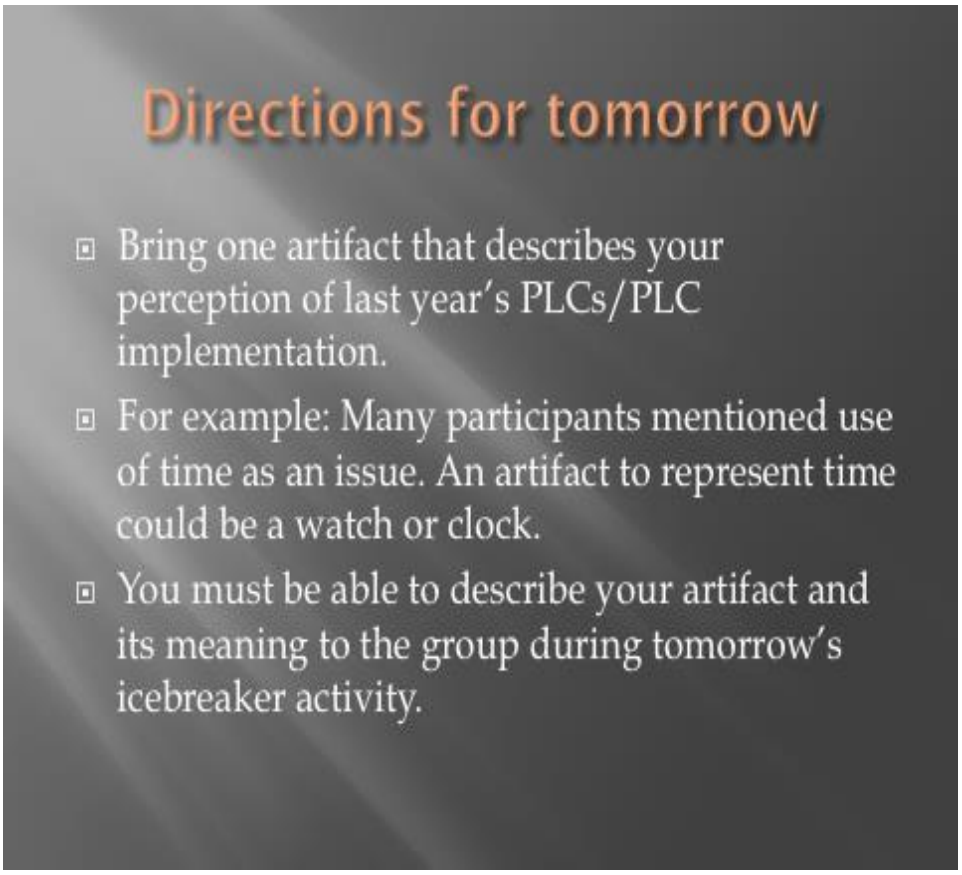
Slide #14



Say: Please read the scenario then write in your notebook about the effects of Robin's lack of time in PLCs and how his performance was affected.

Please reflect on the previous discussion about time to answer the question.

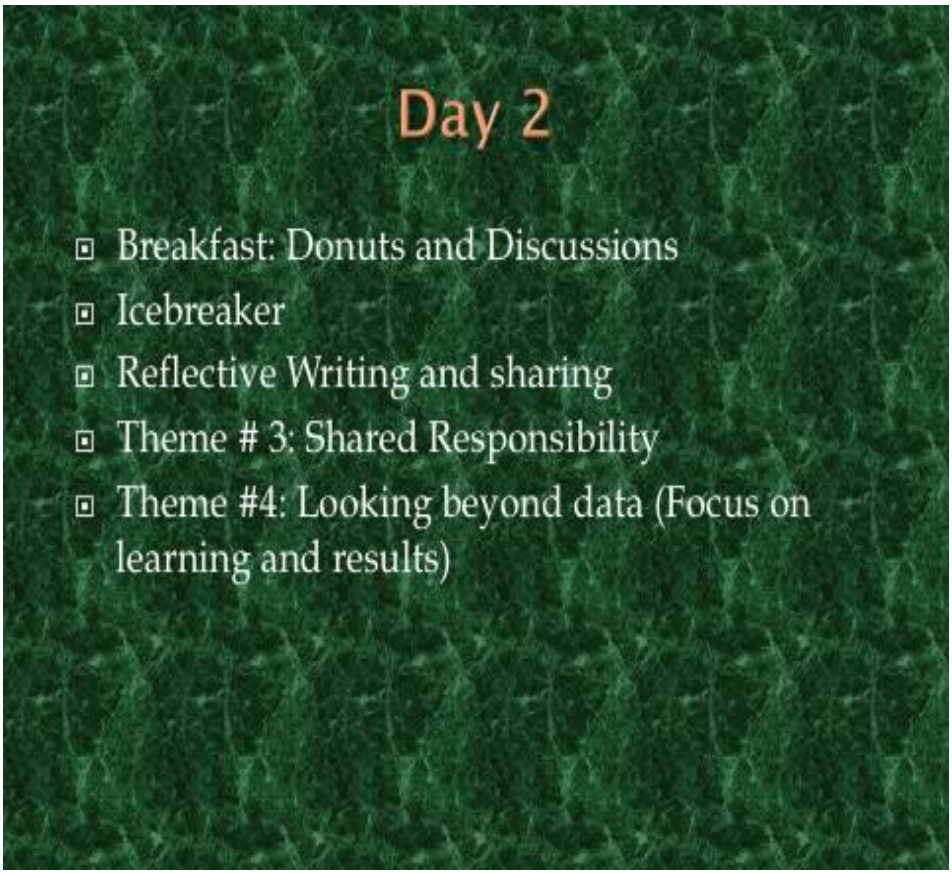
Slide #15



Read the slide.

Say: The artifact is based on the your experience as a PLC leader related to planning and implementation.

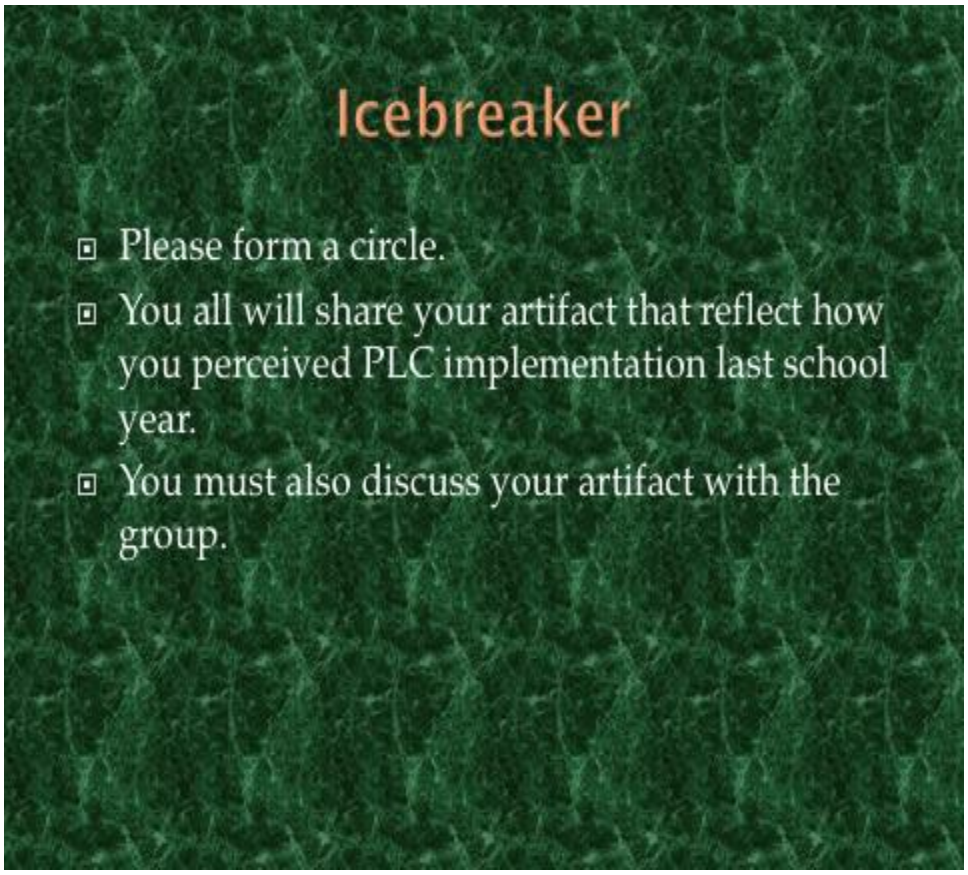
Slide #16



Say: Today we will continue our training. I hope you enjoyed yesterday's activities.

Read the slide.

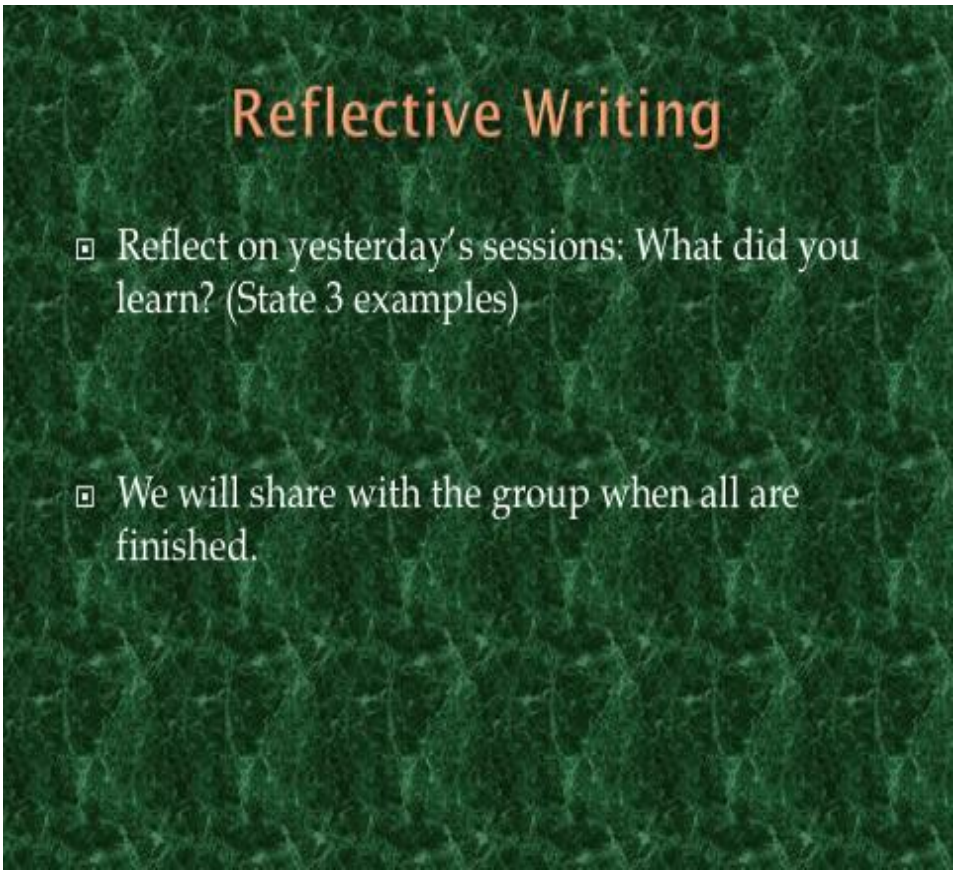
Slide #17



Say: Now let's participate in an icebreaker activity.

Read the slide.

Slide #18

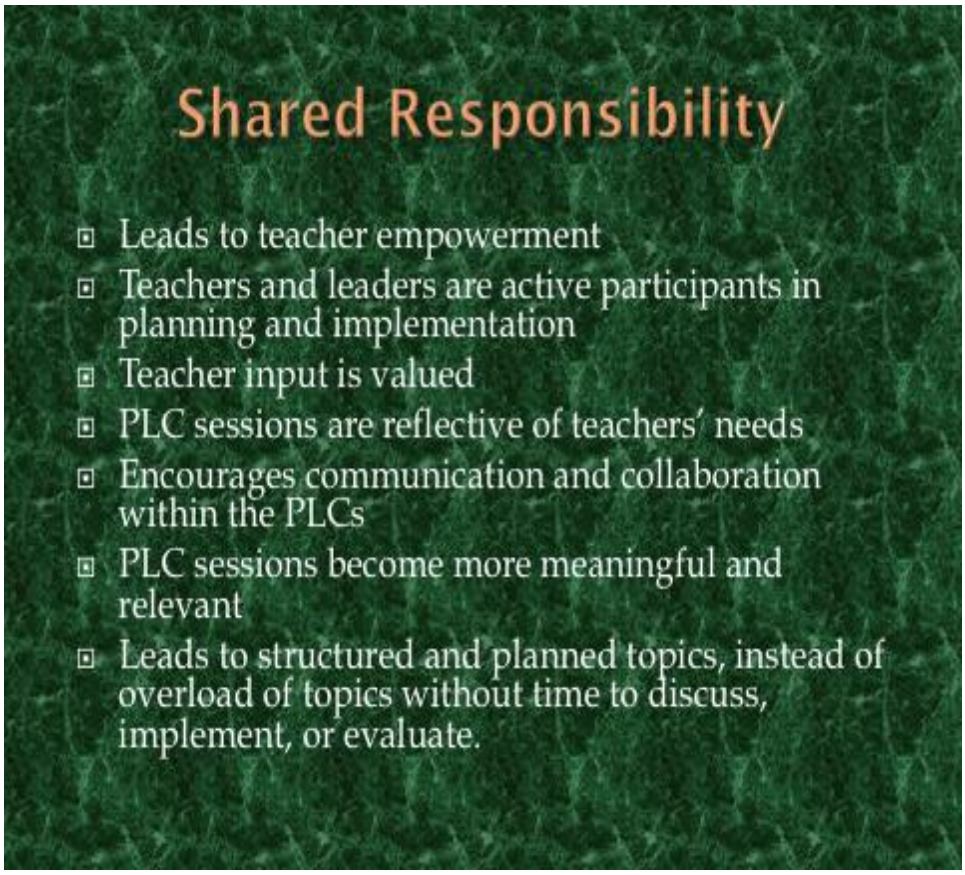


Read the slide.

Write your responses in your notebook.

Allow 15 minutes for this activity.

Slide #19



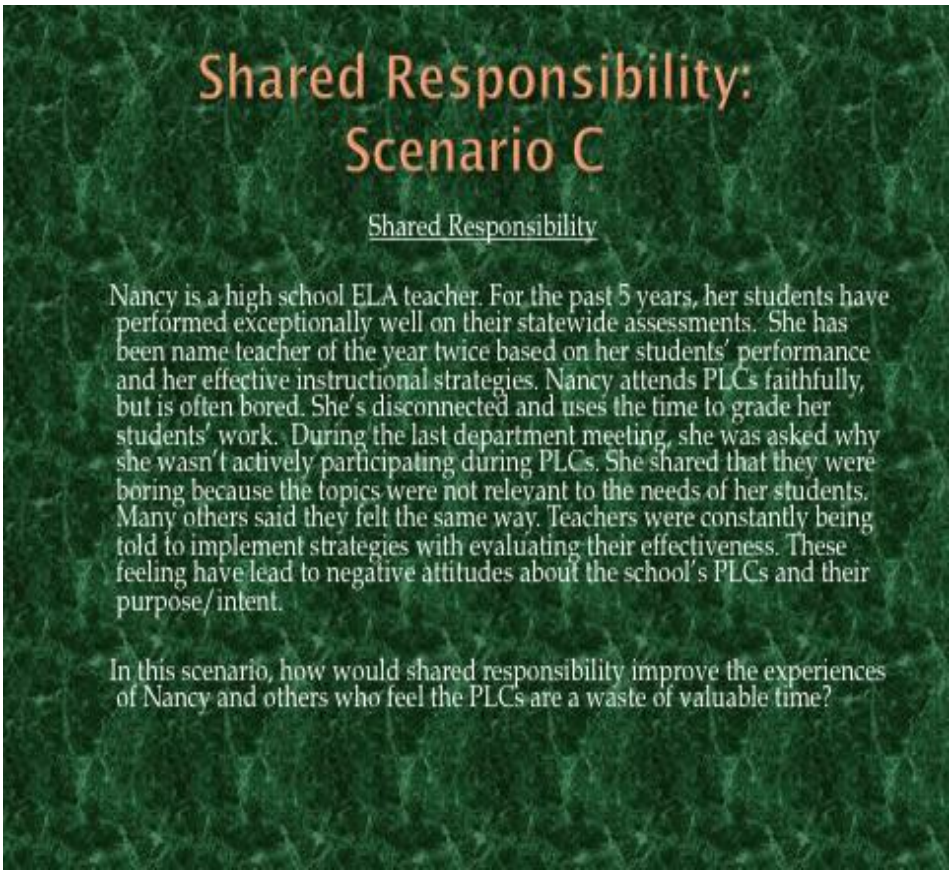
Ask: What is shared responsibility?

How does it look within PLCs?

After discussion has ended, it's time for a break.

Say: We will now take a 15-minute break.

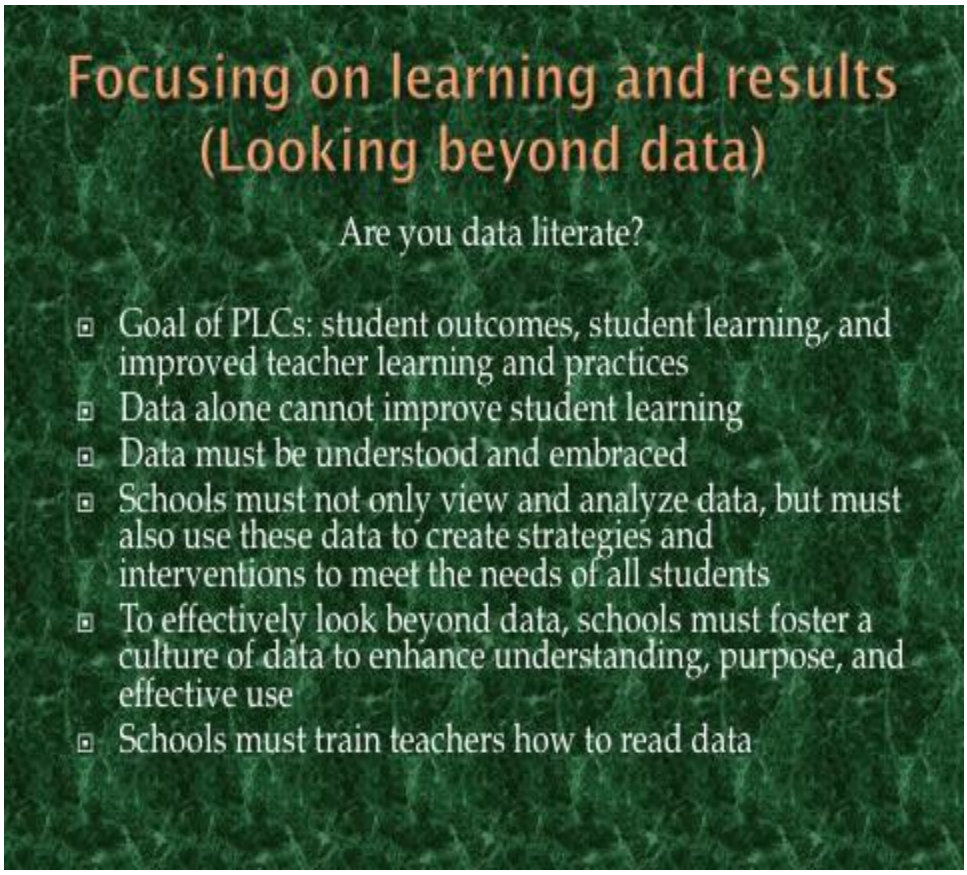
Slide #20



Say: Please read the scenario then write in your notebook the benefits of shared responsibility during PLC planning and implementation and how Nancy's scenario could be positively affected by the change?

Please reflect on the previous discussion about shared responsibility to answer the question.

Slide #21



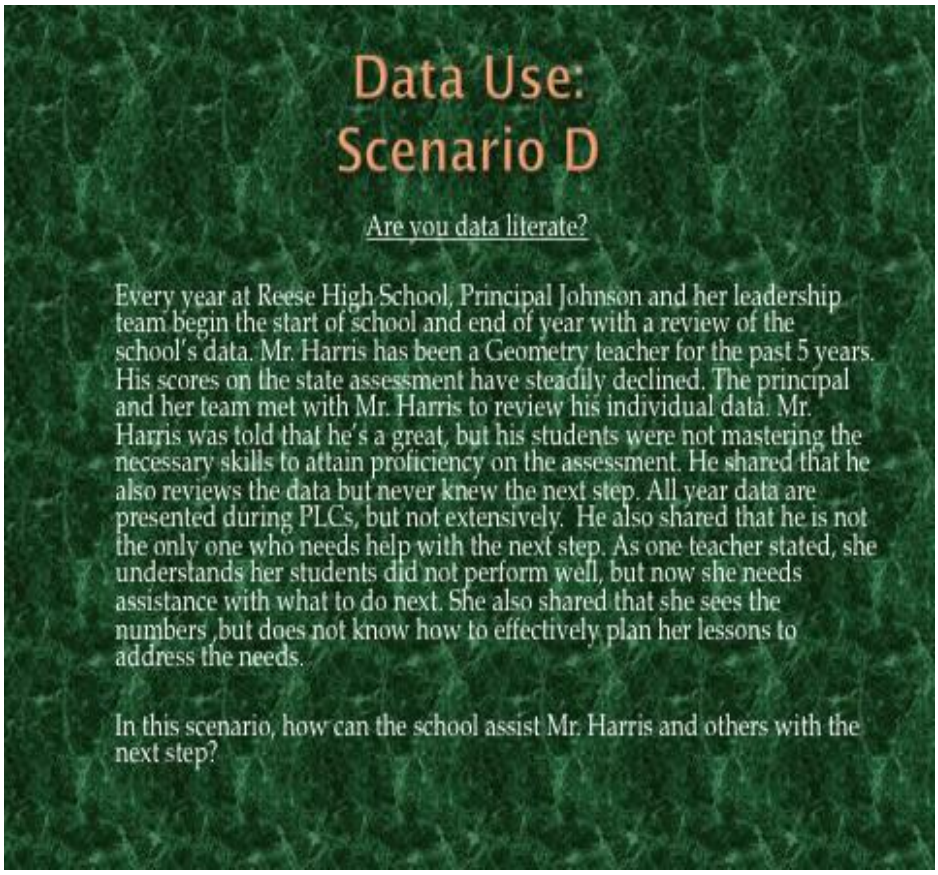
Say: It's impossible to look beyond data if leaders and teachers are data illiterate. Schools must foster a culture of data where training and modeling are embedded; one where PLC participants are taught how to analyze data, and use this information to create interventions and strategies to improve teaching and learning.

Read the slide. Encourage two-way conversation.

After discussion has ended, it's time for a break.

Say: We will now take a 15-minute break.

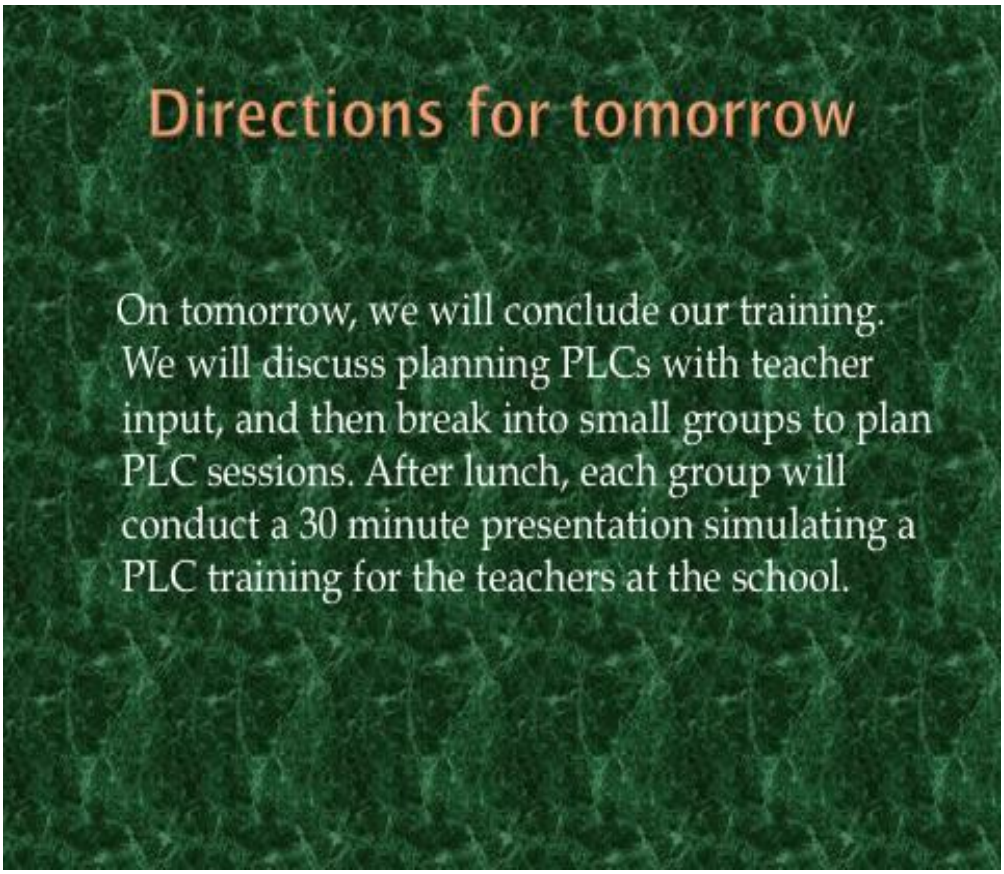
Slide #22



Say: Please read the scenario then write in your notebook the benefits of shared responsibility during PLC planning and implementation?

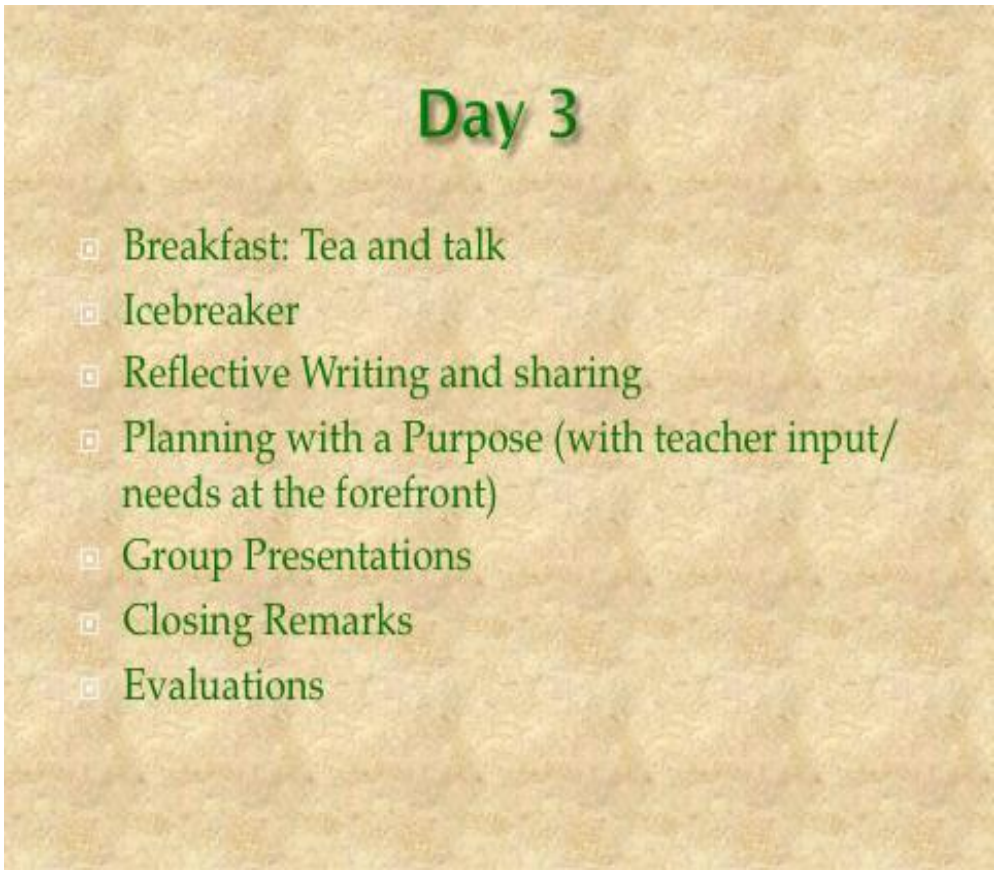
Please reflect on the previous discussion about shared responsibility to answer the question.

Slide #23



Read the slide.

Slide #24



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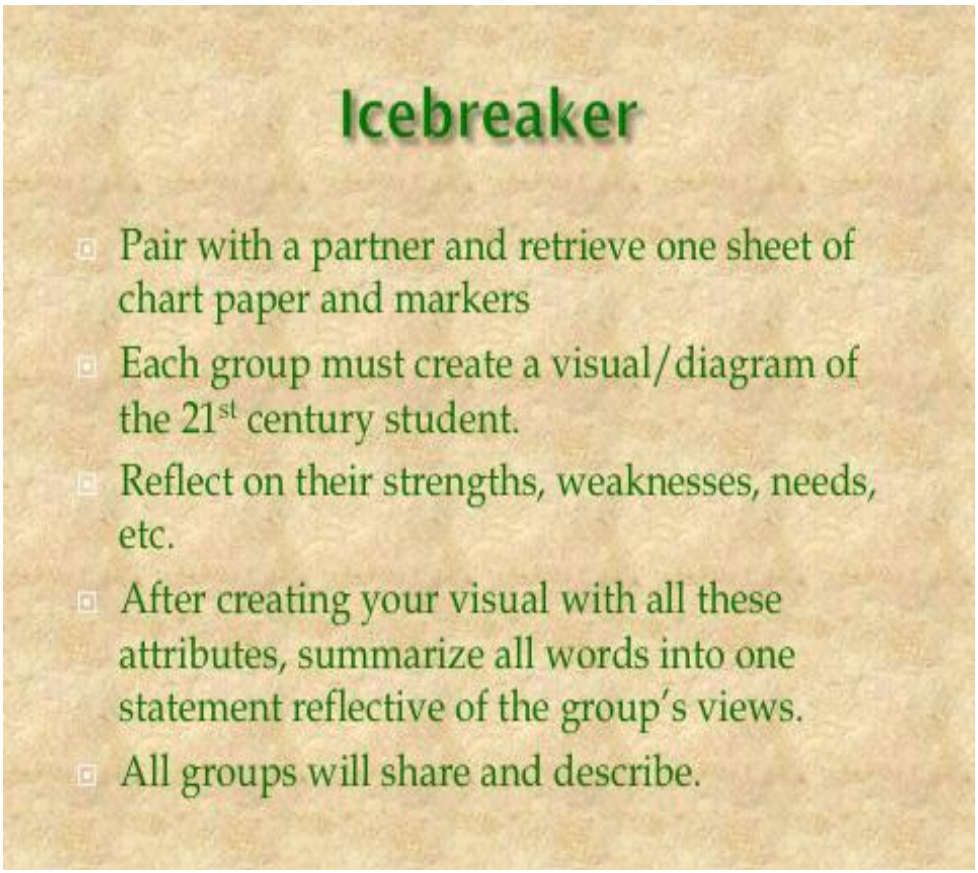
Slide #25

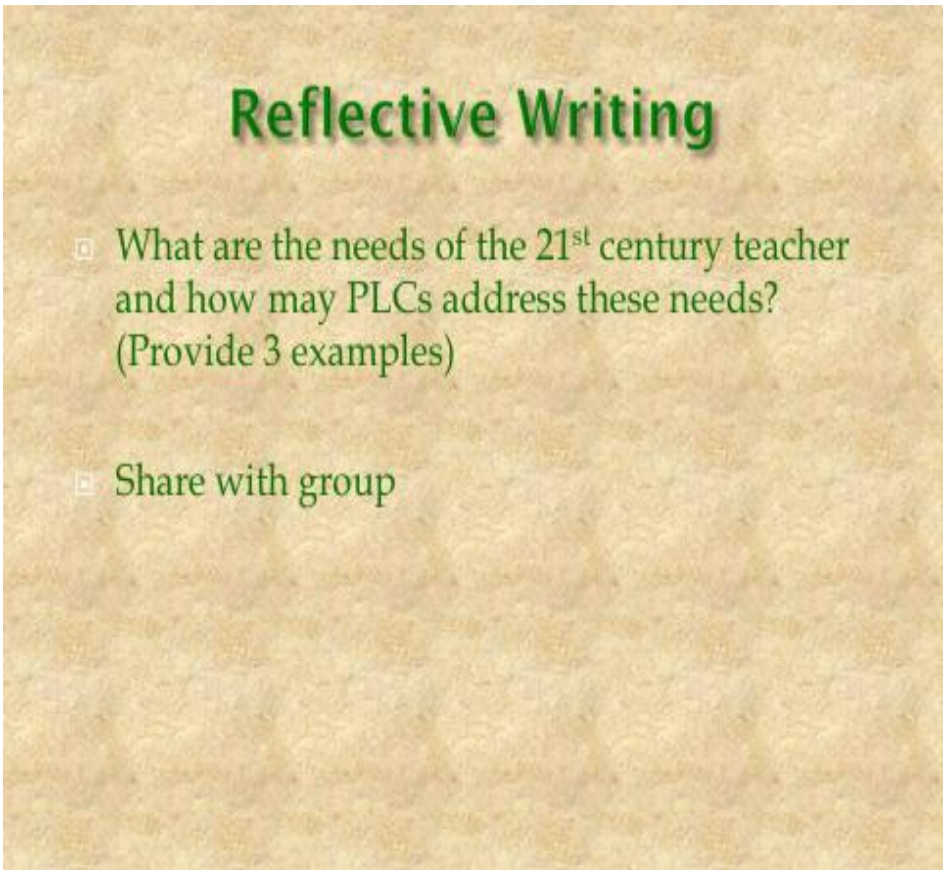


Say: Now let's participate in an icebreaker activity.

Read the slide.

Allow 15 minutes this activity.

Slide #26

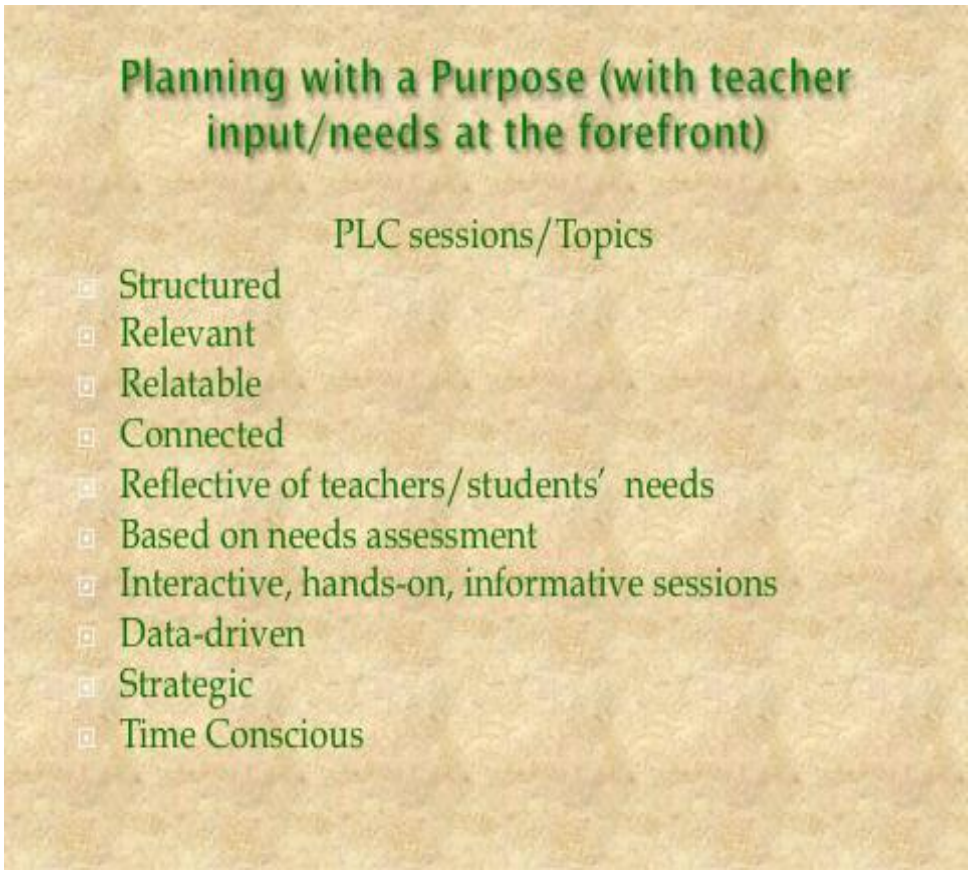


Read the slide.

Write your responses in your notebook.

Allow 15 minutes for this activity.

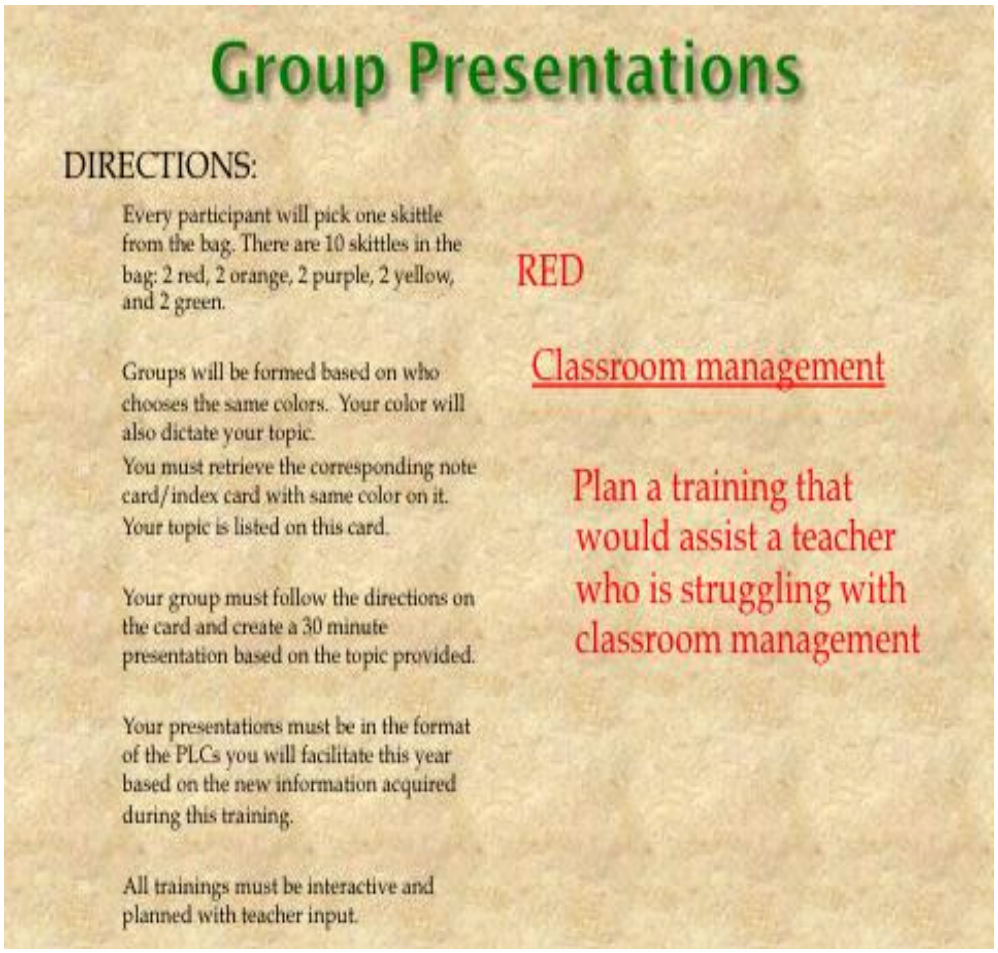
Slide #27



Say: Now that we have reflected on the 21st century student and teacher, keep these attributes in mind as we discuss planning PLCs.

Read the slide and encourage two-way conversation

Slide #28



Read the directions. Then read the guidelines listed below:

1) Each group will be provided a topic and they must plan a 30-minute professional learning session to address the appropriate need.

2) Trainings must be interactive, hands-on, informative, and planned with teacher input.

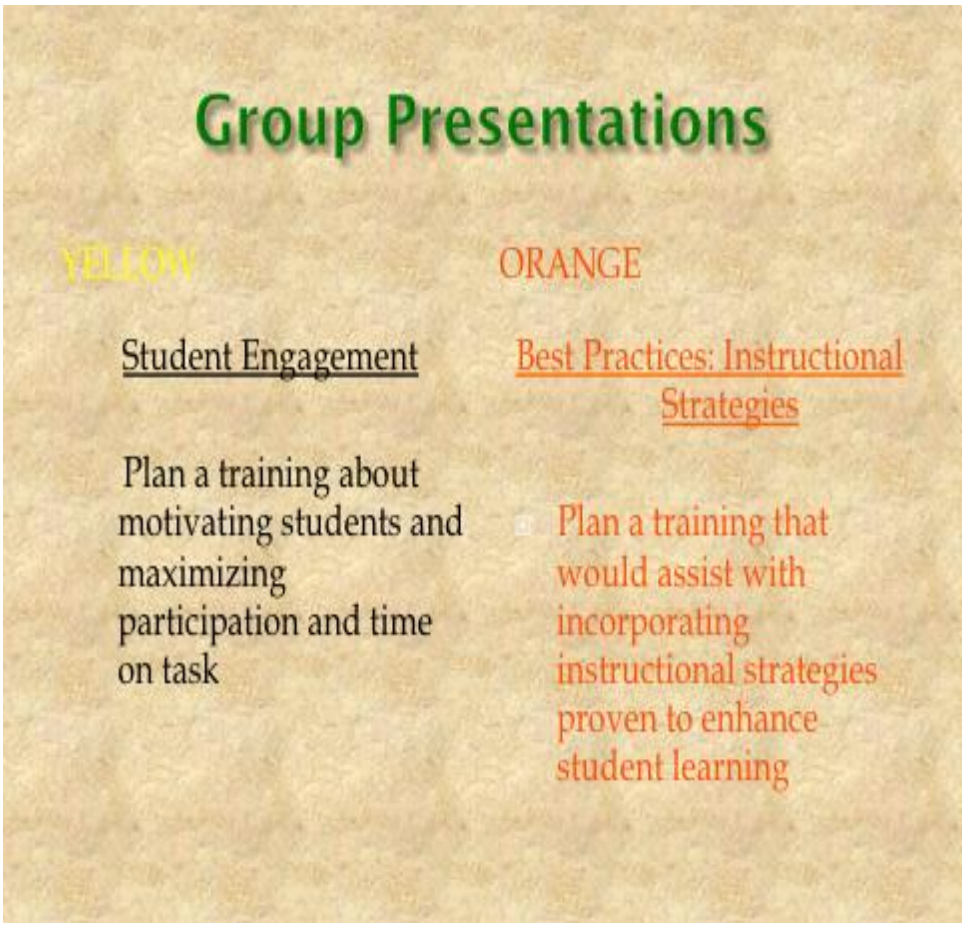
3) Assume that you have administered a needs' assessment survey at the start of school and these are the top five areas of interest.

Red: Classroom management **Green: Classroom assessments**

Yellow: Student engagement **Purple: Becoming data literate**

Orange: Best practices-Instructional strategies

Slide #29



Read the guidelines listed below:

1) Each group will be provided a topic and they must plan a 30-minute professional learning session to address the appropriate need.

2) Trainings must be interactive, hands-on, informative, and planned with teacher input.

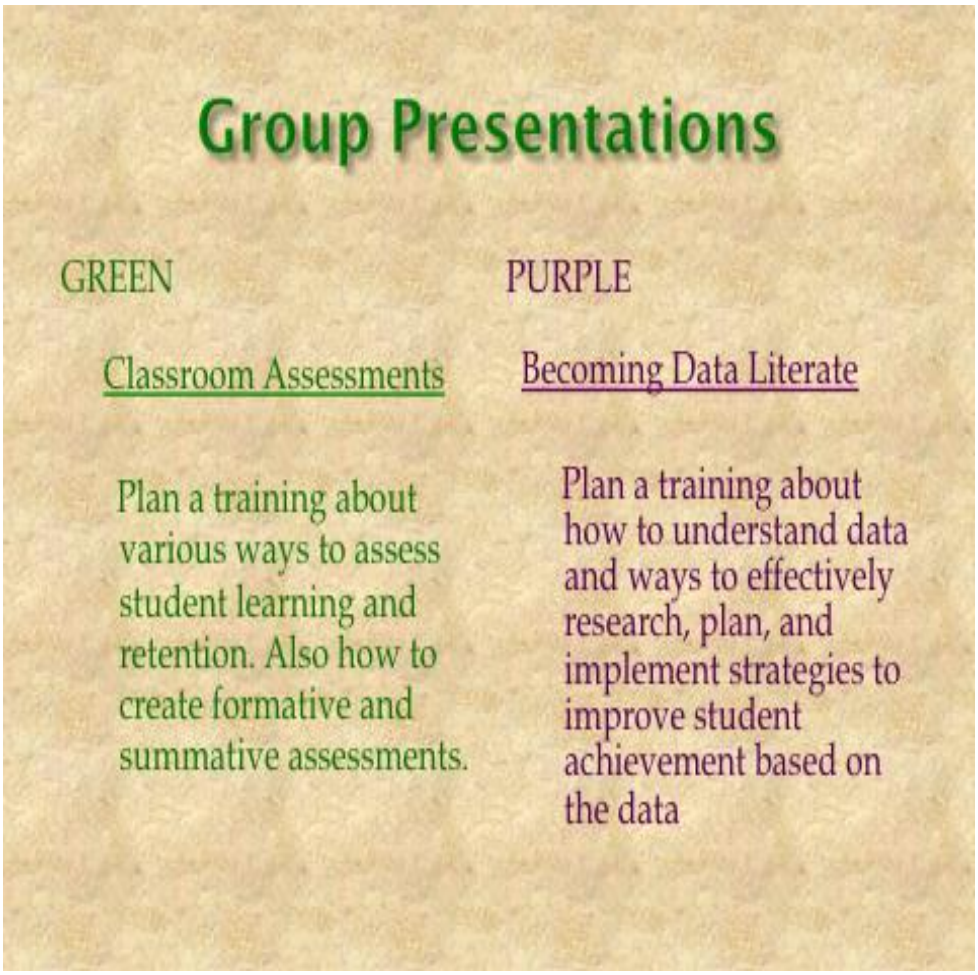
3) Assume that you have administered a needs' assessment survey at the start of school and these are the top five areas of interest.

Red: Classroom management **Green: Classroom assessments**

Yellow: Student engagement **Purple: Becoming data literate**

Orange: Best practices-Instructional strategies

Slide #30



Read the guidelines listed below:

1) Each group will be provided a topic and they must plan a 30-minute professional learning session to address the appropriate need.

2) Trainings must be interactive, hands-on, informative, and planned with teacher input.

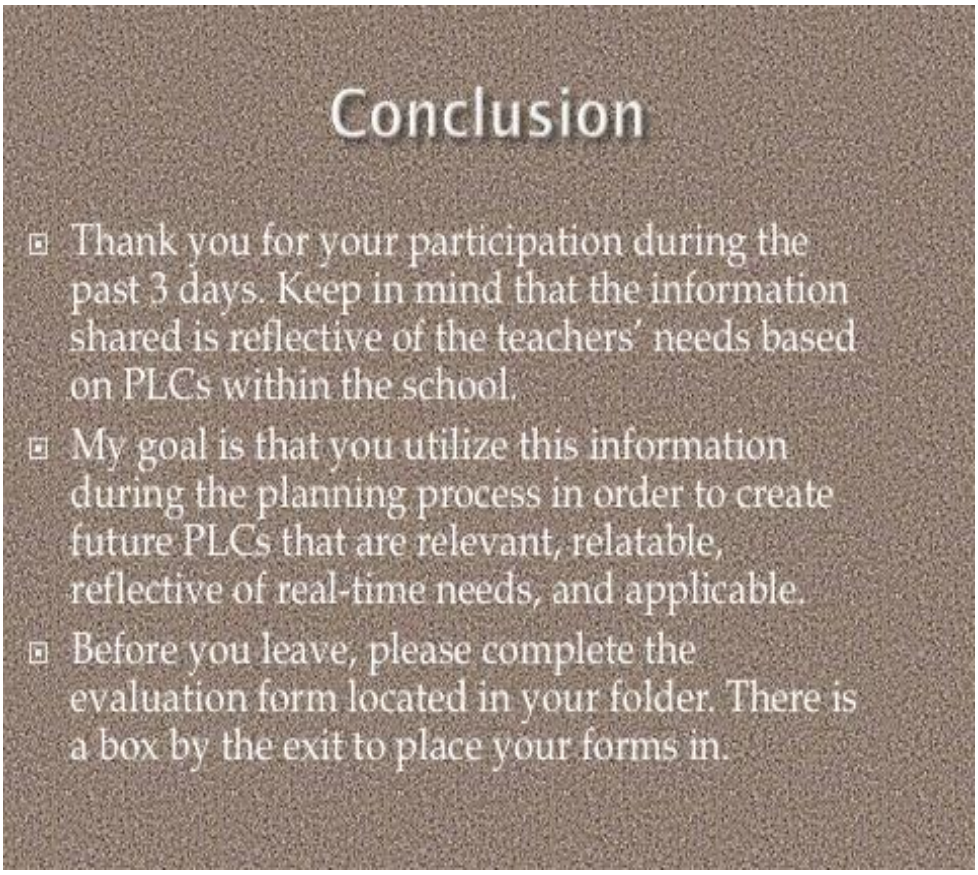
3) Assume that you have administered a needs' assessment survey at the start of school and these are the top five areas of interest.

Red: Classroom management **Green: Classroom assessments**

Yellow: Student engagement **Purple: Becoming data literate**

Orange: Best practices-Instructional strategies

Slide #31



Read the slide.

Implementing PLCs with Fidelity

3-Day Professional Development Training

Evaluation Form

Thank you for your participation during the past 3 days. Please provide feedback about the sessions and your learning experience. Use this evaluation form as a means of reflecting about past and future PLC implementation at the school.

1) What did you learn about the past PLC implementation at the school?

2) How can you use this information to plan future PLCs at the school?

3) What did you learn about the importance of effective collaboration within PLCs?

4) What did you learn about your role within PLCs?

5) Is there anything else you would like to know about implementing PLCs with fidelity that we did not cover?

Appendix B: Interview Guide

Introduction: The purpose of this interview is to examine perceptions of teachers related to the prevalence of professional learning community (PLC) principles within their learning environment and its impact on instructional practices and student achievement. Since you are a member of the school's professional learning community, I'm inviting you to participate in a 30-40 minute interview session. Your participation is voluntary and greatly appreciated. You will be assigned a participant ID number to use throughout the study, instead of your name.

Name of Researcher:_____

Date:_____ Time:_____

Participant ID:_____

Please answer the following questions based on your perceptions, experience, and knowledge. All questions relate to the PLCs at your school.

Research questions:

a) What are teachers' perceptions about the efficacy of the current PLCs?

b) How might the current PLCs be refined according to educators so that the PLCs more effectively impact and improve student achievement?

Interview guide/questions

1) What are your perceptions about PLCs and its impact on instructional practices/academic achievement of students?
2) Has your participation in PLCs provided strategies to improve your instructional

practices? Please explain and provide specific strategies.

3) Do you believe the current PLCs provide teachers with the necessary guidance and strategies to meet the academic needs of all students?
4) How might the current PLCs be refined to maximize overall effectiveness in instructional practices and student achievement?
5) Would you like to share any other information related to your school's PLCs before we conclude this interview?

Appendix C: Sample Interview Guide with Participants' Responses

Professional Learning Communities' Interview Guide (Teleconference Held)
May 24, 2016
Participant #9

Research Questions:

a) At the research site, most teachers believe that the current process for PLCs is ineffective. Teachers have little input into the type of professional topics and practices that are discussed. In addition, there is little time to really dissect student work and data. Instead, time is spent on learning new programs and learning how to implement new district mandates.

b) The current PLCs may be better refined to reflect true academic practices. Teachers should have more input on what topics and practices will best benefit/impact classroom instruction and student achievement. Students who are struggling should be discussed at length to determine how to best help them improve. There should also be time set aside to allow teachers to team-teach and/or observe other teachers. Most teachers would also like time to create and to reflect on authentic cross-curriculum assessments during PLCs.

Interview Guide/Questions

1. My personal perception about PLCs is that they can be more effective with teacher input into topics of discussion instead of mandated topics from the district. In addition, PLCs need to be utilized to review student work and to develop strategies for identified struggling students. However, some of the professional practices that have been discussed and implemented during PLCs have been beneficial. For the most part, it appears that the practices mandated by the district may have worked due to the increase in student scores across disciplines. This may also be due in part to teachers' tenacity in proving to the district that we will succeed despite the unnecessary and restrictive mandates.

2. My participation in PLCs has provided some strategies to enhance my instructional practices. For example, I really didn't utilize foldables as part of my student engagement and instructional practices. However, one of my colleagues presented the use of foldables and the different types. This changed my perspective on using foldables with older populations of students and the benefits of using them. In addition, one of my lessons was videotaped for discussion. It allowed me to receive invaluable critics from not only the coaching team but also my colleagues. It was also nice to be validated in some of the instructional practices that I utilize.
3. The current PLCs do not provide teachers with the necessary tools to meet the academic needs of all students. Unfortunately, most of McMain's students come to us significantly behind their grade levels. As a result, it is difficult to master strategies that

will reach all students. Most of the strategies that we learn in PLCs teach to the middle group; this leaves out the academically astute and the low achievers.

4. The current PLCs may be refined to maximize overall effectiveness in instructional practices and student achievement by researching, developing, and implementing strategies to meet all learning abilities. Also, allowing more teacher and student input based on real-time needs and data would be beneficial.

5. PLCs are Professional Learning Communities; therefore, teachers whom are professionals should have more input. PLCs, if not effective, take invaluable time away from teachers who need that time to grade papers, plan lessons, collaborate, etc.

Appendix D:

Table 6. Summary of Participants' Responses to Interview Questions

Participant	Question #1	Question #2	Question #3	Question #4
	Perceptions and Impact	Strategies provided	Current PLC Effectiveness	Refinement
1	Beneficial; Esp. for those new to school or who are data driven	Yes. Close reading, Performance Series, and various ways to interpret data	No. Only some may benefit.	Homogeneous groups {teachers who teach same students}
2	Beneficial; Improved instructional practices; allowed for feedback, re-teaching, and enrichment	Total buy-in is a must. Allows for open, honest dialogue; invaluable knowledge acquired	No. Coaches introduce strategies. Do not explore in depth "the how" for struggling students	More sharing of student work (all levels); Look at skills lacking not just test scores and devise interventions for these students
3	Useful; Opportunities for collaboration; Address real time problems; Assist new teachers and sharing of best practices that work	Yes. Improvement of instructional strategies. Data allows for tracking, grouping, and feedback.	Possible. If teachers utilize tools they could address needs.	Mixture of veteran and new teachers so that all could benefit
4	Effective when there's total buy-in; Lack of teacher input makes it hard to relate to impact	Yes. Created website helped a lot and used during the year	Sometimes. Application and implementation is difficult.	More teacher input needed. Common planning needs to be revised with PLCs in mind.
5	Did not participate			
6	Strongly believe in PLCs; well worth the time and effort	Very limited participation due to covering classes during my planning for absent teachers	No. Time constraints are an issue	Needs assessment survey at start of school; more teacher input; rely on teacher expertise to demonstrate and address topics with accommodating and educating special populations
7	Helpful and informative; practices were demonstrated	Yes. Close reading assisted students with work problems; Think, pair, share and KWL were also beneficial.	Sometimes. Useful information is provided. However, teachers need more demonstrations, literature, and assistance on differentiating instruction to address needs of all students	More teacher demonstrations; more teacher collaboration, peer observations, and time to discuss what worked and what didn't needs to be considered.

(Table continues)

Participant	Question #1	Question #2	Question #3	Question #4
	Perceptions and Impact	Strategies provided	Current PLC Effectiveness	Refinement
8	Beneficial. Enhances teachers knowledge; leads to improved student thinking and understanding	Yes. Use of data allowed for re-teaching. Assessments were uploaded to Performance series.	Depends. That is the intent to meet or improve academic needs but it is not always achieved	Subject specific PLCs should be considered in addition to mixed groups
9	Beneficial; more effective with teacher input	Somewhat. Benefitted from practices shared by colleagues. Foldables were great. Lesson videotaped allowed for colleagues and coaches to critique lesson.	No. Needs to be utilized to review student work to develop strategies to identify and assist struggling students. Some students are being left out.	Strategies to meet all student abilities; more teacher input, student review based on real time needs and data; valuable time being taken up so let's make time in PLCs worthwhile
10	Some are good but need to pertain to teacher's needs like dealing with unmotivated students	Not really. Topics were not be beneficial to issues experienced in class	No. Too much data presented; teachers should deliver during some sessions	Whole group study; Analyze peer observations; teacher input; demonstrations and simulations
11	They have the potential to be; could be vital part of instructional process and vehicle for discourse and improvement	Somewhat. Performance Series was helpful.	No. Attempt to expound on more content than the time allows; work needs to be done in the process for teaches to feel the impact and importance of PLCs	Make more engaging, interactive, hands-on; Provide additional time outside of planning period; make PLC objectives more focused and directly relatable to the delivery of instruction.
12	Helpful; makes teachers aware and kept abreast of expectations, school wide/district initiatives, focuses on a common goal	Yes. Close reading was beneficial. Use Think, pair, share instead of whole group; incorporated more strategies during class	Sometimes. Students who are struggling get left behind; lack of time and resources prevent effectively implementing strategies	Time to implement strategies; can't just focus on data without discussing how to meet needs of students
13	Perceived to be mandatory; great tool but feels more like a necessity. Seems rushed and purpose unclear so impact can't be justified. Feel lost and unsure about how to apply topics in class	Mixed feelings. Some strategies are easier to implement. Foldables were easy and useful.	Nol. Needs to be more student driven (based on needs of actual students); need strategies to meet students where they are and build on it.	More clarity is needed; intentional about purpose and focus; greater change would be visible with clarity and focus.

Appendix E: Professional Learning Communities Assessment-Revised (PLCA-R)

Professional Learning Communities Assessment - Revised

Directions:

This questionnaire assesses your perceptions about your principal, staff, and stakeholders based on the dimensions of a professional learning community (PLC) and related attributes. This questionnaire contains a number of statements about practices that occur in some schools. Read each statement and then use the scale below to select the scale point that best reflects your personal degree of agreement with the statement. Shade the appropriate oval provided to the right of each statement. Be certain to select only one response for each statement. Comments after each dimension section are optional.

Key Terms:

- Principal = Principal, not Associate or Assistant Principal
- Staff/Staff Members = All adult staff directly associated with curriculum, instruction, and assessment of students
- Stakeholders = Parents and community members

Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree (SD) 2 = Disagree (D) 3 = Agree (A) 4 = Strongly Agree (SA)

Demographic Questions:

1. What grade(s) do you teach?
2. What is your content area? Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies,
3. Which of the following best describes your years of experience? (1-5, 6-10, 11-15, 16+)
4. How many years have you worked at this school?

	STATEMENTS	SCALE			
	Shared and Supportive Leadership	SD	D	A	SA
1.	Staff members are consistently involved in discussing and making decisions about most school issues.	0	0	0	0
2.	The principal incorporates advice from staff members to make decisions.	0	0	0	0
3.	Staff members have accessibility to key information.	0	0	0	0
4.	The principal is proactive and addresses areas where support is needed.	0	0	0	0
5.	Opportunities are provided for staff members to initiate change.	0	0	0	0
6.	The principal shares responsibility and rewards for innovative actions.	0	0	0	0
7.	The principal participates democratically with staff sharing power and authority.	0	0	0	0
8.	Leadership is promoted and nurtured among staff members.	0	0	0	0
9.	Decision-making takes place through committees and communication	0	0	0	0

	across grade and subject areas.				
10.	Stakeholders assume shared responsibility and accountability for student learning without evidence of imposed power and authority.	0	0	0	0
11.	Staff members use multiple sources of data to make decisions about teaching and learning.	0	0	0	0

COMMENTS:

	STATEMENTS	SCALE			
	Shared Values and Vision	SD	D	A	SA
12.	A collaborative process exists for developing a shared sense of values among staff.	0	0	0	0
13.	Shared values support norms of behavior that guide decisions about teaching and learning.	0	0	0	0
14.	Staff members share visions for school improvement that have undeviating focus on student learning.	0	0	0	0
15.	Decisions are made in alignment with the school=s values and vision.	0	0	0	0
16.	A collaborative process exists for developing a shared vision among staff.	0	0	0	0
17.	School goals focus on student learning beyond test scores and grades.	0	0	0	0
18.	Policies and programs are aligned to the school=s vision.	0	0	0	0
19.	Stakeholders are actively involved in creating high expectations that serve to increase student achievement.	0	0	0	0
20.	Data are used to prioritize actions to reach a shared vision.	0	0	0	0

COMMENTS:

	Collective Learning and Application	SD	D	A	SA
21.	Staff members work together to seek knowledge, skills and strategies and apply this new learning to their work.	0	0	0	0
22.	Collegial relationships exist among staff members that reflect commitment to school improvement efforts.	0	0	0	0
23.	Staff members plan and work together to search for solutions to address diverse student needs.	0	0	0	0
24.	A variety of opportunities and structures exist for collective learning through open dialogue.	0	0	0	0
25.	Staff members engage in dialogue that reflects a respect for diverse ideas that lead to continued inquiry.	0	0	0	0
26.	Professional development focuses on teaching and learning.	0	0	0	0

27.	School staff members and stakeholders learn together and apply new knowledge to solve problems.	0	0	0	0

28.	School staff members are committed to programs that enhance learning.	0	0	0	0
29.	Staff members collaboratively analyze multiple sources of data to assess the effectiveness of instructional practices.	0	0	0	0
30.	Staff members collaboratively analyze student work to improve teaching and learning.	0	0	0	0
COMMENTS:					
	STATEMENTS	SCALE			
	Shared Personal Practice	SD	D	A	SA
31.	Opportunities exist for staff members to observe peers and offer encouragement.	0	0	0	0
32.	Staff members provide feedback to peers related to instructional practices.	0	0	0	0
33.	Staff members informally share ideas and suggestions for improving student learning.	0	0	0	0
34.	Staff members collaboratively review student work to share and improve instructional practices.	0	0	0	0
35.	Opportunities exist for coaching and mentoring.	0	0	0	0
36.	Individuals and teams have the opportunity to apply learning and share the results of their practices.	0	0	0	0
37.	Staff members regularly share student work to guide overall school improvement.	0	0	0	0
COMMENTS:					
	Supportive Conditions – Relationships	SD	D	A	SA
38.	Caring relationships exist among staff and students that are built on trust and respect.	0	0	0	0
39.	A culture of trust and respect exists for taking risks.	0	0	0	0
40.	Outstanding achievement is recognized and celebrated regularly in our school.	0	0	0	0
41.	School staff and stakeholders exhibit a sustained and unified effort to embed change into the culture of the school.	0	0	0	0
42.	Relationships among staff members support honest and respectful examination of data to enhance teaching and learning.	0	0	0	0
COMMENTS:					

	Supportive Conditions – Structures	SD	D	A	SA
43.	Time is provided to facilitate collaborative work.	0	0	0	0
44.	The school schedule promotes collective learning and shared practice.	0	0	0	0
45.	Fiscal resources are available for professional development.	0	0	0	0
46.	Appropriate technology and instructional materials are available to staff.	0	0	0	0
	STATEMENTS	SCALE			
		SD	D	A	SA
47.	Resource people provide expertise and support for continuous learning.	0	0	0	0
48.	The school facility is clean, attractive and inviting.	0	0	0	0
49.	The proximity of grade level and department personnel allows for ease in collaborating with colleagues.	0	0	0	0
50.	Communication systems promote a flow of information among staff members.	0	0	0	0
51.	Communication systems promote a flow of information across the entire school community including: central office personnel, parents, and community members.	0	0	0	0
52.	Data are organized and made available to provide easy access to staff members.	0	0	0	0
COMMENTS:					

Source: Olivier, D. F., Hipp, K. K., & Huffman, J. B. (2010). Assessing and analyzing schools as PLCs. In K. K. Hipp & J. B. Huffman (Eds.). *Demystifying professional learning communities: School leadership at its best.* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Participant ID#: _____Date:_____

Appendix F: Permission to Use PLCA-R and My Request Sent

Department of Educational Foundations and Leadership
P.O. Box 43091
Lafayette, LA 70504-3091

October 13, 2014

Catina Stewart
[address redacted]

Dear Ms. Stewart:

This correspondence is to grant permission to utilize the *Professional Learning Community Assessment-Revised* (PLCA-R) as your instrument for data collection for your doctoral study through Walden University. I believe your research *exploring secondary teachers' perceptions of the professional learning community process* will contribute to the PLC literature, as well as inform high schools in effective practices and strategies within the PLC process. I am pleased you are interested in using the PLCA-R measure in your research.

This permission letter allows use of the PLCA-R through paper/pencil administration, as well as permission for the PLCA-R online version. For administration of the PLCA-R online version, services must be secured through our online host, SEDL in Austin, TX; online access may not be utilized through any other survey services. Additional information for online administration can be found at www.sedl.org. While this letter provides permission to use the measure in your study, authorship of the measure will remain as Olivier, Hipp, and Huffman (exact citation on the following page). This permission does not allow renaming the measure or claiming authorship.
Upon completion of your study, I would be interested in learning about your entire study and would welcome the opportunity to receive an electronic version of your completed dissertation research.

Thank you for your interest in our research and measure for assessing professional learning community attributes within schools. Should you require any additional information, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

Dianne F. Olivier
Dianne F. Olivier, Ph. D.
Associate Professor and Interim Department Head
Joan D. and Alexander S. Haig/BORSF Professor
Department of Educational Foundations and Leadership
College of Education
University of Louisiana at Lafayette
P.O. Box 43091
Lafayette, LA 70504-3091
[Telephone number and email address redacted]

Reference Citation for Professional Learning Community Assessment-Revised measure:

Source: Olivier, D. F., Hipp, K. K., & Huffman, J. B. (2010). Assessing and analyzing schools. In K. K. Hipp & J. B. Huffman (Eds.). *Demystifying professional learning communities: School leadership at its Best.* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

----- Original Message -----
From: "Catina Stewart" <redacted>
To: redacted
Sent: Sunday, September 14, 2014 1:53:13 AM
Subject: Doctoral Study

Greetings Dr. Olivier, my name is Catina Stewart and I am currently researching questionnaires for my doctoral study. I initially reviewed the original version of the Professional Learning Communities Assessment in Huffman and Hipps (2003), Reculturing Schools as Professional Learning Communities. While researching, I came across your revised version (PLCA-R, 2010). I am in the proposal stage of my doctoral study at Walden University, and I had a few questions about your questionnaire. My study is entitled, Secondary Teachers' Perceptions of Effectiveness of a Professional Learning Community. I will be conducting research at my school and it's about 8-11 participants. Also my study is a qualitative study. My data collection will include interviews, a questionnaire, and review of documents.

My research questions are:
1) What do the teachers at ABC school perceive to be the impact of professional learning communities on instructional practices?
2) How might the current PLC be refined to maximize overall effectiveness in instructional practices and student achievement?

My interview questions focus on supportive structures, training, collaboration, and relationships within the current PLC.
My questionnaire of choice is your PLCA-R.

As I previously mentioned, I have a few questions for you. My questions are 1) Is your version beneficial for qualitative studies? 2) what is the process for obtaining permission from you if I decide to use your version? 3) If and once permission has been granted, would it be possible to use a paper copy since my population is small instead of the online version on SEDL website?

Thanks for your time and assistance. It is greatly appreciated as I anticipate transitioning to the next phase of my study