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Developing a professional learning community : a first step

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DEVELOPING A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY:

A FIRST STEP

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I dedicate this work to

my family,

who were always there to offer their

encouragement and support;

and the staff in this school

whose dedication to improving

student learning is phenomenal!

Abstract

The purpose of this project was to capture a holistic picture of how one rural school community in Southern Alberta, over the course of one year, explored and experienced the journey toward becoming a Professional Learning Community (PLC). Specifically, it inquired into the critical enabling steps a professional teaching staff engaged in to support the development of a PLC. The primary focus was on school mission, vision, values, goals, level of collaboration, and orientation towards results. Data was collected through journal writing, interview, artifacts, and survey. Two factors contributed significantly to the school's development in becoming a professional learning community: first, teachers having the opportunity for regular, during-the-school-day time to meet with each other and, secondly, their use of time to focus collectively on teaching and learning in a way that develops trust but also requires accountability (goals with commitments and timelines). Other study findings indicate that establishing a PLC begins by collectively establishing a school vision, mission, and goals, followed with deliberate steps for implementation. This process also requires at least one school administrator who can facilitate and support the process by having clear vision of what it means to become a PLC.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Rationale

The journey of my interest in the idea of professional learning communities is

summed up well with the words attributed to French author Marcel Proust, "The real art

of discovery consists not in finding new lands, but in seeing with new eyes." It began in

1996, my fourth year of teaching. Although my initial goal of being an excellent teacher

still held true, I began to look beyond my own classroom door to the bigger picture of

what characterized *excellent schools*. My egocentricity was challenged as I began to

think more about the need for children to have a quality school experience -- throughout

all their years, not just during their time with me.

My understanding of the factors that influence and lead to the creation of effective

schools increased when I was invited to participate in a school district-initiated

improvement project. I began to observe administrators and became appreciative of a

new perspective about facilitating positive change in school environments. That same

year I attended a conference in which a group of primary teachers presented a project

involving a collaborative approach to early literacy designed specifically for their school

out of concern for their students' low levels of academic achievement. While listening, I

thought critically that the strategies they were promoting were simply good teaching

practice. Then, upon further reflection, I began to understand what was unique about their

work. Together these teachers had studied how children learn. They had created a vision

for their school, worked collaboratively in a spirit of inquiry to solve a problem, collected

data, developed and refined teaching strategies and, now, had evidence of how their

learning and teaching was impacting student learning. They were a *learning community*.

With that realization I opened my classroom door and began to pursue my vision of what it meant to be an educator, not just in my classroom but in my school.

This journey has led me to a vice-principalship, a graduate studies program, and a principal position, all of which have continually challenged me to be an effective leader. While reading the current literature on professional learning communities and thinking back on my experiences related to effective schools, I felt compelled to pursue the development of a learning community in my own school environment as a key to improving student learning. However, while the theory may be readily available, the practicalities of school improvement and effective leadership are not always so clear. Knowing that experience can often be the best teacher, I undertook this research project as a first step in understanding and experiencing the creation and growth of a professional learning community.

Background

School reform based on strategies such as the effective school movement, back to basics, and site-based management has been evolving for decades, but has been unevenly implemented. Criticisms of efforts to change schools often centre around the reality that many reforms appear to be just one more fad; they are business models that do not really fit in the school setting; or are simply unsustainable.

The literature of the last few years suggests that a very effective way to promote positive student outcomes is to foster a more collaborative and collegial workplace, where everyone in the building, children and adults alike, becomes responsible for learning. Lambert (1998) indicates that "collaborative work is directly linked to school improvement and to children's and adult's learning" (p. 18). In schools that have a high

capacity for student learning, King and Newman (2000) found "strong individual staff competence directed toward focused and sustained collective purposes and supported through reflective collaboration and empowerment of the full staff" (p. 578). Fullan (Association for Curriculum Development, 1999) claims that schools managing change best are those with a collaborative work culture. Sergiovanni (2000) states that "developing a community of practice may be the single most important way to improve a school" (p. 139). These same contentions are supported by DuFour and Eaker (1998) who suggest that the "most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is developing the ability of school personnel to function as professional learning communities" (p. xi). Mitchell and Sackney (2001), in their review of school reform efforts, also conclude that "the notion of the learning community appears to be the preferred strategy for school improvement" (p. 1). Darling-Hammond (1996) has written extensively about teacher professional development in relationship to higher achievement for students, and suggests that, "Policy makers increasingly realize that regulations cannot transform schools, only teachers in collaboration with parents and administrators can do that" (p. 1). The consistent message is that programs, materials, rules, and regulations will not bring about lasting change; people *working together* will.

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to describe the ways in which one rural school community in Southern Alberta, over the course of a school year, explored and experienced the journey of becoming a Professional Learning Community (PLC). Specifically, it sought to answer the primary research question: What are the critical enabling steps engaged in by professional teaching staff in a rural K-8 school that support

the development of a professional learning community? Related guiding questions included: What are the school's mission, vision, values, beliefs and goals and how do these influence the school learning community? What support systems and practices does the school have that facilitate collaborative work among professionals, and in what way do they impact the school learning community? What evidence indicates the level and type of the professional teaching staff's commitment to continuous improvement by a focus on results?

Significance

The intended significance of this research was three-fold, with potential benefit to the particular school community being researched, to myself as researcher and the researched, and to other schools that wish to embark on a similar journey.

Sergiovanni (2000) writes that "good schools improve one at a time...they improve on their own terms... [and] are unique because they reflect the communities they serve" (pp. 22-23). Similarly, O'Neil (1995) contends school reform can only happen "school-by-school-by-school". If, as the literature suggests, professional learning communities are the key to school improvement, then the process that took place at this school over the year had the potential to impact school effectiveness and, ultimately, student learning. One school improving; many students gaining!

As both researcher and the Vice-Principal in this school, I hoped to engage in critical ethnography that Creswell (1994) describes as "invoking a call to action that potentially can lead to change" (p. 12). I anticipated my leadership capacity could be enhanced as I explored with a school staff a concept that educational leaders say is the key to school effectiveness. This was my second year as Vice-Principal and I, like most

of my colleagues, wanted to be part of a successful and effective school. By completing this research, I hoped some of the elusiveness of *how to get there* would be diminished – and that would be significant for me!

I believe one school's journey can be an inspiration to others. By documenting this research I hoped to contribute more detail to the understanding of Professional Learning Communities currently being described in the literature. When reading about the experiences of one school, educators in other schools may get a sense of how to begin their own journey.

This three-fold significance is consistent with the direction given by Mitchell and Sackney (2001) who say that the "capacity for a learning community needs deliberately and explicitly to be built among educators and within schools and school systems" (p. 1).

Definition of Terms

Developing is defined in Webster's College Dictionary as to cause to grow or expand. As stated earlier, I hoped that by engaging in the process of ethnographic research, the participants would experience an expansion of their understanding and experience of professional learning communities.

Glickman (2002) describes *profession* as the "work of persons who possess a body of knowledge, skills, and practice that must be continually tested and upgraded with colleagues" (p. 4). He also states that true *professionals* are committed to "continually improving themselves and their students and their faculty members" (p. 89). *Professionalism* is also about "competence and caring joined together in a seamless practice of teaching" (Sergiovanni, 2000, p. 57).

Learning is defined as the *acquisition of skills or mental attitudes. Learning* in Chinese is two symbols: to study (take in new information or new ideas) and to practice constantly. Senge et al. (2000) combine these two ideas and indicate that learning should mean "mastery of the way of self-improvement" (p. 11). DuFour and Eaker (1998) write that learning suggests ongoing action and perpetual curiosity and, to paraphrase Vince Lombardi, a well-known football coach, in schools, learning isn't the most important thing; it's the only thing.

Community suggests a group linked by common interests. These groups are organized around relationships and ideas, and can provide the needed conditions for creating a sense of *we* from the *I* of each individual (Sergiovanni, 2000, p. 65). In a community there will be "recognition that everyone in that place is responsible for and accountable to one another, because the lives of all are interdependent" (Senge et al., 2000, p. 461).

The term learning communities must also take into consideration that the classroom, the school, and the community are all interacting systems and are interdependent with one another. Senge et al. (2000) state that in "any effort to foster schools that learn, changes will make a difference only if they take place at all three levels" (p. 11).

First step recognizes "that no school has ever made progress toward becoming a professional learning community until some of its members took steps to make it happen" (Eaker, DuFour & Burnette, 2002, p. 7).

In summary, *Developing Professional Learning Communities: A First Step* is about educators creating an environment that fosters collegiality, collaboration, inquiry,

increased learning, and growth as they work together to achieve what cannot be

accomplished alone.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Historical Development

The elements that constitute a learning community are a matter of debate and form a theme that resonates throughout much of today's educational literature. Although Senge (1990) first popularized the concept of learning organizations in his book *The Fifth Discipline*, there is earlier writing that sets the stage for such a transforming idea.

John Dewey (1859-1952) continues to be one of America's most influential educators and philosophers. His pragmatic educational philosophy and experimentalism "sought to integrate the larger context of a changing world with the smaller settings of changing communities, neighborhoods, and schools" (Gutek, 2001, p. 302). Throughout his extensive body of writings, the themes of community, togetherness, collaboration, inquiry, and sharing were ever-present. These same themes reverberate throughout the twenty-first century literature on learning communities.

A defining contribution towards the theory and practice of learning is made by Donald Schön (1973). He provides a theoretical framework that links the experience of living in situations of increased change with the need for learning. He states that:

> We must learn to understand, guide, influence and manage these transformations.
> We must make the capacity for undertaking them integral to ourselves and to our
> institutions. We must, in other words, become adept at learning. We must
> become able not only to transform our institutions, in response to changing
> situations and requirements; we must invent and develop institutions which are
> 'learning systems', that is to say, systems capable of bringing about their own
> continuing transformation. (p. 28)

In addition, Schön was also influential in providing a focus for the process and development of *reflective practitioners*, which was quickly taken up by those involved in the professional development of educators. He suggests that a fundamental part of an educator's task is to develop the ability of reflection-in-action.

Another author who contributed to the process of organizational theory is Chris Argyris, in collaboration with Donald Schön. Argyris has written extensively about the relationship of people and organizations, organizational learning and action research (Argyris & Schön, 1974, 1978). He explores how people and organizations can increase their capacity for learning that will enable them to make informed decisions in rapidly changing contexts (Smith, 2001). Argyris greatly influenced Senge's understanding of mental models and the patterns of reasoning that underlay our behavior.

Senge's (1990) original book on learning organizations is devoted to improving performance and profitability in a corporate context, but many of his ideas are transferable to a school setting. His focus is to decentralize the "role of leadership in organizations so as to enhance the capacity of all people to work productively toward common goals" (Smith, 2001, p. 2). His ideas were so well received beyond the corporate world that Senge et al. wrote a second book, *Schools That Learn* (2000) which focuses specifically on how his five disciplines can be used to strengthen and rebuild today's schools. Barth's book *Improving Schools from Within*, also published in 1990, introduces "the concept of the school as a community of learners, where everyone is actively engaged in the most important means of reform -- learning" (p. xvi).

Newman and Wehlage (1995) in their research on effective schools and student achievement concluded that:

The most successful schools were those that used restructuring tools to help them function as professional communities … they found a way to channel staff and student efforts toward a clear, commonly shared purpose for student learning; they created opportunities for teachers to collaborate and help one another achieve the purpose; and teachers in these schools took collective – not just individual – responsibility for student learning. (p. 3)

Lambert (1998, 2003) has also written extensively about increasing leadership capacity in schools and the ways in which this connects to learning communities through shared vision, reflective practice and collective responsibility.

Change is inevitable and most educators would agree with the assertion, offered by Franklin D. Roosevelt, that "Never before have we had so little time in which to do so much." The establishment of learning communities is being promoted as the best way to sustain positive growth in schools in this current era of rapid change and uncertainty.

Characteristics of Learning Communities

There are many commonalties to be found in the literature about learning communities. Learning organizations, learning communities, professional learning communities, professional schools, problem-solving schools or communities of continuous inquiry and improvement all involve environments characterized by shared vision and values, a spirit of collective inquiry, continuous improvement and collaborative teams.

However, before schools embark on a journey of change, their leaders and staffs need to be reminded that "really profound change can't be imposed; it has to be nurtured. We must unleash the forces of innovation and the passions of individuals" (Sparks, 2001, p. 1). It is also important that any reconstruction process emanates from a capacity-building view of learning as opposed to a deficit model, or from a perspective of creating as opposed to fixing (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001; Sparks, 2001).

Sergiovanni (2000) describes learning communities as places where the school community is "committed to thinking, growing, and inquiring and where learning is an attitude as well as an activity, a way of life as well as a process" (p. 59). This emphasis on learning is consistent in all of the literature. For example, Mitchell and Sackney (2001) state that "the learning of the teachers is as important as the learning of the children" (p. 2). According to Fullan (1997), "nothing motivates a child more than when learning is valued by school, family and community working in partnership" (p. 22). Covey (1996) adds that "only the organizations that have a passion for learning will have an enduring influence" (p. 149). Barth (2001) challenges educators "to examine every school policy, practice, and decision and ask of it the question, 'What, if anything, of importance is anyone learning as a consequence of doing *that*?' " (p. 13).

A collaborative culture is also a crucial attribute of professional learning communities. Hargreaves (1995) discusses the reculturing of schools to create collaborative cultures in which teachers act collectively to deal with complex problems and celebrate successes. Wald and Castlebury (2000) add that collaborative learning "represents the potential for growth and capacity building" (p. 4) in schools. In a learning

organization, Senge (1990) suggests, "collective aspiration is set free, and people are continually learning how to learn together" (p. 3).

A focus on shared vision and values is equally important (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). This is what steers people in a common direction and transforms schools into unique, vibrant and successful learning communities (Sergiovanni, 2000). Moreover, a professional learning community engages its members in ongoing study. They are committed to continuous improvement, and are action and results-oriented (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

All of these attributes are repeatedly addressed in the literature and, together, they form a framework to support a journey of inquiry into professional learning communities. Table 1 consolidates the views of several current authors.

Table 1

Characteristics and/or attributes ascribed to learning communities by DuFour &

Eaker, Senge, Barth and Hord.

DuFour & Eaker (1998) pp. 25 - 29	Senge (2000) pp. 59 – 98	Barth (2001) pp. 7 - 85	Hord (SEDL, 1997) pp. 2-5
1. Shared mission, vision, and values – a collective commitment to guiding principles. 2. Collective inquiry – relentless questioning of the status quo, seeking new methods, testing those methods, and then reflecting on the results. 3. Collaborative teams – building schools' capacity to learn from one another and work together in continuous improvement. 4. Action orientation and experimentation – turning aspirations into action and visions into reality. 5. Continuous improvement – a constant search for a better way. 6. Results orientation – focus on continuous improvement must be assessed on the basis of results rather than intentions.	1. Personal mastery – cultivating individual aspiration and awareness. 2. Mental models – becoming more aware of the sources of our thinking, helps us see the metaphorical pane of glass we look through, essential skills are reflection and inquiry. 3. Shared vision – fostering commitment to common purpose; What do we want to create together? 4. Team Learning – transforming our skills of collective thinking, getting people to think and act effectively together. 5. Systems Thinking – developing an awareness of complexity, interdependencies, change and leverage.	1. Building community – every member of the community holds responsibility for others and the community as a whole. 2. Developing leadership – developing a community of leaders – unlocking the extraordinary leadership capabilities in the school. 3. Encouraging risk-taking – learning is transformative ... "you cannot discover new oceans unless you risk losing sight of the shore". 4. Inspiring a lifelong love of learning – building a culture where children and adults are discovering the joy, the difficulty, and the excitement of learning together. 5. Reflecting on practice – intentional learning from experience through observation, writing, conversing about practice. 6. Celebrating craft knowledge – finding ways to honor, reveal, exchange, and celebrate the massive collection of experiences and learnings of teachers.	1. Supportive and shared leadership - principals foster a collegial relationship with teachers in order to share leadership, power and decision making. 2. Collective learning – people from all levels are collaboratively and continually working together. 3. Shared values and vision – deciding what is important and using this as a guide post in making decisions about teaching and learning in the school. 4. Supportive conditions – the factors that determine when, where, and how the staff can regularly come together to do the learning, decision making, problem solving and creative work. 5. Shared personal practice – peers helping peers, deprivatization of teaching practice.

From Theory to Practice

As learning communities are more fully understood and adopted educators may

ask, "How do I get started and what do we do?" Several cautions should be

acknowledged. First, Sergiovanni (2000) reminds us that "good schools improve ... on

their own terms...[and]are unique because they reflect the communities they serve" (p.

22-23). Secondly, a simple solution would drastically undermine the real complexity and

theoretical framework of the learning community. However, the literature does suggest

some specific strategies that will help educators begin forging a path towards the

development of a learning community.

Peter Senge's book, *Schools That Learn* (2000), is a field book that looks at all

levels of learning communities – classroom, school, school districts and communities. It

includes many stories that help the reader to understand how learning communities are

developing. Figure 1 demonstrates the learning cycle of how school cultures change

(Senge et al., pp. 325 – 338). By very purposefully making changes in the domain of

action, educators can begin the cycle of creating sustainable change towards learning

communities. As indicated in *Getting Started: Reculturing Schools to Become*

Professional Learning Communities (Eaker, DuFour & Burnette, 2002), "no school has

ever made progress toward becoming a professional learning community until some of its

members took steps to make it happen" (p. 7). These same authors present some of the

key principles for the development of learning communities: development of goals,

values, vision and mission that focus on students learning; creating a collaborative

Guiding Ideas
- Mission
- Vision
- Values & Beliefs
- Goals

Attitudes and beliefs

Skills and Abilities

Domain of
Enduring Change

Domain
Of Action

**Culture,
Professional learning
Community**

**Policies, deliberate
practices, rules,
channels of authority
deliberately designed**

**DEEP
LEARNING
CYCLE**

Awareness and values

Organizational Arrangements
Support for innovations and learning
- Scheduled time to meet and talk
- Interdependent teaching structures
- Physical proximity
- Allocation of space
- Communication structures
- Planning processes
- Decision making structures
- Teacher empowerment and school autonomy
- Rotating Roles

Theory, Methods and Tools
- Strategies
- Skills
- Designs for learning
- Compelling Conversations
  (using provocative articles,
  videos and student work as
  starting points) : learning

- Reflective Dialogue
- Unity of Purpose
- Collective focus on student learning
- Collaboration and norms of sharing
- Openness to improvement
- Deprivitization of practice and critical review
- Trust and respect
- Celebration and ceremony
- Supportive and knowledgeable leadership
- Focus on results

Figure 1. A framework for building culture. Developed by Peter Senge (2000), revised by Margaret Arbuckle with further adaptations by Marina Schoon

culture that is embedded in every aspect of the school culture; assessing school effectiveness on the basis of results rather than intentions.

Throughout North America many school districts are also creating projects that can assist schools in their quest for improvement and increased student achievement. For example, in Alberta, the Alberta Teachers' Association has developed "Schools as Professional Learning Communities Model Project", a set of workshop materials related to learning communities (Podlosky, 2002). Foothills School Division (2003) has initiated an Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) plan that will facilitate the development of school learning communities by focusing on learning and quality teaching, shared leadership, coherent staff development and integrated school improvement planning. Townsend and Adams (2003), together with Chinook's Edge School Division, have also developed materials to explore learning communities in schools.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Method and Design

The approach utilized for this project was primarily qualitative, resulting in

"evidence that will reveal qualities of life, reflecting the 'multiple realities' of a specific

educational setting from participant's perspectives" (Burns, 2000, p. 388). Emphasis was

placed on naturalistic investigative strategies so that the research could focus on the

complexities and qualities of professional learning communities. The method selected for

this research was a technique of *writing about people* referred to as critical ethnography.

Critical ethnography is a way of providing dynamic descriptions of what actually happens

in a school. Its purpose in this project was to uncover social, cultural, or normative

patterns in relationship to the development of professional learning communities. This

method was also chosen as an attempt to raise the consciousness of the participants

regarding a 'learning community' approach to school effectiveness. According to Burns

(2000), ethnography provides particular orientations to research that were applied to this

project as shown in Table 2.

Data was collected using participant observation recorded in a journal, field

interview, survey, and collection of artifacts. The combined use of these various

methodological techniques usually referred to as triangulation, was intended to add to the

quality, richness, diversity and completeness of the collected data (Neuman, 1997, p.

236). Consistent with ethnographic research, the process was planned to " be flexible and

evolve contextually in response to the lived realities encountered in the field setting"

(Creswell, 1994, p. 11).

Table 2

Application of Ethnographic Research to Research Project

Ethnographic research	Research project
Focuses on understanding social action.	The project asked the "how" questions as they relate to collective understandings and working relationships in a school.
Emphasizes process.	The project was designed to acknowledge and study the interactions and understanding as they change over time. The study took place over an entire school year so that "process" could be observed.
Investigates 'natural' settings.	School life was studied as it occurred, in the school.
Studies social phenomena in context (holism).	A school reflects the neighbourhood in which student and teacher live. This influenced the interpretations that staffs ascribed to the school.
Assumes that there are always multiple perspectives.	The project focused on how different people define their actions, perceptions, interpretations and beliefs in relation to school goals and activities.
Uses multiple techniques.	The research used a variety of techniques including participant observation, field interview, survey and collection of artifacts.

Research Participants

The research for this project took place in a Kindergarten to Grade Eight, 220-student school in southern Alberta with the data being collected during one school year, from September 2002 to June 2003.

As a participant observer I directly observed and, to a great extent, took part in the everyday life of the chosen setting. An effort was made to keep in mind Fetterman's advice as quoted by Creswell that "the ethnographer enters the field with an open mind, not an empty head" (1994, p. 44). As a participant observer, my involvement in the study was made clear from the onset. I was guided by the words of Calhoun (1994) who implores us to "study what's happening at our school, decide if we can make it a better place by changing what and how we teach and how we relate to students and the community; study the effects: and then begin again" (p. 1).

As the research question focused specifically on the development of the professional teaching staff as a learning community, they were all fully informed of the project and agreed to participate by giving their written consent. Six teachers also volunteered to participate in the field interview. The teachers in this school varied from first year teachers to those who have taught for more than twenty years. Also, for some it was their first year in the school, while others had taught there for more than ten years.

The project was also given approval by the school principal and school district superintendent.

Data Collection

As participant observer I completed field notes that consisted of twenty-eight journal entries throughout the year to describe the professional activities and events that took place in the school. An example of these notes is provided in Appendix A.

Throughout the year I also collected artifacts as they related to the purpose of this project. These included the professional development schedule, minutes of team meetings, the annual report, and goal setting charts. An example of the documentation used for team meetings is provided in Appendix B. Appendix C pictures part of the process that teachers used to set school goals.

The field interview took place from 3:30 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. in a school conference room in January with six of the teaching staff. This involved "asking questions, listening, expressing interest, and recording what was said" (Neuman, 1997, p. 371). It had the explicit purpose of learning about how the teachers understood the school's development as a professional learning community. The descriptive and structural questions used to lead the interview were based on the purpose and guiding questions for this project and can be found in Appendix D. The interview was transcribed and the participants were given a copy for their review.

Combining qualitative research with quantitative data is often used to verify and assist in the interpretation of field observations. A survey was administered to all professional teaching staff in June, 2003. The survey was developed by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory and was designed to "determine if the development of a school staff resulted in a community of professional learners" (Hord, 1999, p. 2). It purports to reveal progress along a continuum of development, and serves as a diagnostic

tool for professional development decision making, or for leaders, to evaluate the effectiveness of their efforts on teacher collaboration and efficacy. The instrument is titled *School Professional Staff as Learning Community*, and consists of seventeen descriptors grouped into five major areas: shared leadership and decision making; shared vision; collective learning; peer review and visitation; supportive physical conditions and human capacities. The survey was field tested, analyzed for reliability and validity, evaluated externally and was concluded to be a "useful screening, filtering or measuring device to assess the maturity of a school's professional staff as a learning community" (Hord, 1999, p. 8). A copy of the survey can be found in Appendix E.

Analysis

The illustrative method of analysis, in which a researcher organizes the data based on prior theory, was deployed as a technique to scan, identify and code the concepts and themes, related to the key questions, from the journal, interviews and artifacts (Neuman, 1997). Preexisting theory, in this case the literature review of PLC's, provided the *empty boxes* for gathering evidence. The three main themes were derived from the following guiding questions:

- What are the school's mission, vision, values, beliefs and goals and how do these influence the school learning community?

- What support systems and practices does the school have that facilitate collaborative work among professionals, and in what way do they impact the school learning community?

- What evidence indicates the level and type of the professional teaching staff's commitment to continuous improvement by a focus on results?

Thematic coding was then deployed to scan, identify and code the concepts and themes in the journal, artifacts and interview transcription as they related to the *empty boxes.*

The survey information was tabulated in raw form and then reorganized to be presented in charts. It was primarily summarized using the mean, the most widely used measure of central tendency (Neuman, 1997). However, distribution was also considered and the range of the responses was used to assist in analyzing the data.

As Neuman (1997) indicates, the evidence was then used to interpret and discuss, in this case the development of the professional staff as a learning community. In one variation of the illustrative method, the theoretical model can also illuminate or clarify a specific case, and that was true for this research project.

Chapter 4: Research Findings

Building Foundations: Mission, Vision, Values and Goals

During the first staff meeting in August, the teaching staff was informed of the

project with a brief explanation about learning communities and my interest in this topic,

and asked for their participation. As participant (Vice-Principal) and observer

(researcher) I had many opportunities throughout the year for discussions with the

principal and this did allow me to influence some of the activities that took place

throughout the year. I was also able to extend my own learning in the area of Professional

Learning Communities (PLC) through participation in a Divisional Administrators' study

group on PLCs, attendance at three workshops on PLC's through the Calgary Regional

Consortium and attendance at the Effective Schools Conference. Throughout the year the

teachers seldom made reference to this project and appeared to proceed through the

school year without altering their way of working because they were being "watched".

The school year begins. The school district has a newly developed mission

statement that is frequently referred to and the expectation is clear that administrators and

schools function in a way that supports this mission. The school itself also has a mission

statement that was previously developed. A discussion about mission was generated at

the first regular staff meeting. The purpose of a mission statement was introduced by the

administrators and a discussion was initiated with the question, "If someone came to you

and asked what this school was about, what would the response be and is that reflected in

our mission statement?" There was a quick agreement that the mission statement was still

reflective of the school and, in particular, the fact that it is, and intends to continue being,

a safe and caring place for students to learn. However, a comment was also made that "if

at 2:30 someone were to ask me about our mission I wouldn't be able to tell them anything."

The school did not have a vision statement so, at the same meeting, teachers were given some quotes from *Learning by Heart* (2000) by Roland Barth as a springboard for considering and developing a school vision. Other than one person who questioned the need for all these "mission vision statements" the teaching staff agreed to adopt a vision statement. This was accomplished immediately when one of the teachers took the ideas and worded them in a way that reflected the discussion. The vision for the school was *to become* a *community of uniquely gifted individuals who care about, look after, and encourage one another, and who work together to support the lifelong learning of all.* After the meeting the statement was sent out by email to all of the staff.

The school had a set of belief statements that had been previously developed and can be found in the annual report. However, when teachers were asked about the school beliefs in the group interview they were not aware of them. The school did not have written expectations of how the school beliefs might be translated into values.

Setting Goals. Several conversations with teachers indicated that when the current principal arrived three years ago many of the staff were discouraged, swearing and fights among students were not uncommon, and the parent community was withdrawing its support. One of the teachers also felt that the lack of resources in our school was a result of division office disinterest. When I asked one of our teachers about developing a school song the response was as follows: "We used to have a song but things got kind of bad and kids behaved so badly during assemblies that we just wanted to stay in our own classrooms and didn't feel much like singing."

Several teachers reported that changes were initiated quickly as the new principal listened to staff concerns. A three year Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) project was developed and implemented to focus on school climate and student academic success. The project was titled *Culture Building and the Elimination of Threat and Stress* and, along with a focus, it also brought into the school a significant amount of money. Staff members were divided into teams and each group took responsibility for developing and implementing activities and learning opportunities related to the project. One example was the purchase of the Safe and Caring curriculum which was immediately implemented in all classrooms. As well, a school wide intramural program was developed, the school was divided into colour coded teams for spirit building, and student behavior was tracked through an early behavior intervention program.

This study was conducted during the third year of this AISI project. The goals were revised by the administrators to reflect the year's activities in rough draft format that included the goal, desired results, performance measures, strategies and their correlation with the district mission statement. They were distributed just prior to school start and discussed at the first regular staff meeting.

The discussion was very limited and the goals were agreed to as written, with minimal revision. Included in these goals were two district-wide and one area-wide AISI project in which teachers were expected to participate although the school did not have an option of involvement. One computer technology project was new for the year and, although enthusiasm was not high, the teachers indicated they were pleased the goal of the project was not make-work but something connected to curriculum they were already implementing. A second project was a Fine Arts initiative that provided some funding for

the band program and a spring art celebration. The third AISI project was related to math problem-solving and was in the second year of implementation. This last project was not at all connected to any school or even individual teacher goals.

Teachers were invited by the principal to connect their individual professional growth goals with the school goals and, in particular, the AISI projects that were taking place. These goals were submitted by the staff but were not revisited throughout the school year.

In the December staff meeting the division's mission, the school's mission and the newly developed vision were written on chart paper and staff took time to examine and write on all of the things taking place in the school that were reflective of these statements. The chart papers were quickly filled and the staff appeared pleased with their accomplishments. The charts were posted in the staff room for the remainder of the school year. Markers were placed with the charts and the staff was invited to add to the list throughout the remainder of the school year but no additions were made.

One teacher indicated in the interviews that the school goals were used as "guidelines in every aspect of our culture here, they're used as guides in our staff and professional development days, staff/student relations, culture building, intramurals, fine arts and overall atmosphere of the school." Another added "… it puts everyone on the same wavelength too … people come a little closer together and they will be a lot more caring about their job and will actually achieve the outcomes."

In reference to creating mission and vision statements the following comment was made: "We've been doing this for a long time … but I think we're the most organized now… as far as actually carrying through and actually making a difference in the feeling

of the school and the goals we all carry out." Another teacher added, "We took the time to do it, not just one shot and never looking at it again."

Collaboration

The retreat. The September retreat was an overnight event in which all the staff participated. In one of the activities they were asked to share their strengths and subsequently made many comments similar to the following: "We don't usually share at this level but it worked good ... it is difficult to receive affirmations of our strengths from others ... others could see things in us that we didn't know about ourselves." During the retreat I witnessed many instances of personal sharing taking place among people who did not normally socialize together.

The physical structure of the school is such that the Grade One to Four classrooms are on one side of the building, the Five to Eights on another side and the Kindergarten in its own corner. A teacher new to the school indicated that "the retreat was a really good opportunity to get to know people, to talk to people and just to feel like you were part of something bigger." Two veteran teachers added that without these opportunities they wouldn't get to know the new staff except at meetings. Still another commented that the retreats made a "big difference in the feeling of the school."

School atmosphere. In conversations with teachers a very significant influence in keeping everyone unified and motivated towards school improvement was the "safe and caring" culture that was being nurtured in the school. A veteran teacher on our staff talked about how the principal had come out while she was on supervision and told her to take a break. In her words, "I was shocked, in all my 17 years here that had never happened before." Another explained how in these last few years they have felt that they

can bring any question or request to the administration: "I feel like our opinions are heard and valued." When describing the school atmosphere one teacher commented, "We all collaborate to come up with things, not a top-down approach." Another added that there is a feeling of support and appreciation for what they do. A veteran teacher noted that now "you can approach anybody with any kind of question. Before you just waited to see how things turned out."

Team meetings. As I reflected on the learning cycle described by Senge (2000) and illustrated on page 14 of this project, I decided that deliberate changes regarding the organizational arrangements for learning had the potential of creating a profound and positive effect on a school's culture. With this in mind I asked the principal and was granted the opportunity to divide the teaching staff into three teams and once a month they were given an opportunity to meet together for two periods during the school day. While teachers met in their teams, students were looked after by their colleagues or an administrator. There were chaotic moments in this arrangement as sometimes this resulted in four classes together in the gym for some team building activities, or a class would get stranded for a short while. However, the commitment to give it a try was kept for the entire year.

Teachers received a schedule of all the team meetings and school wide professional development plans at the start of the school year. This advance planning was received with immediate appreciation, which could be summed up in the comment, "Thanks for giving us the time to work with each other, no one has ever done that before…I like having all the dates and topics at the beginning, that way I know exactly what were doing." The following questions were repeatedly asked throughout the school

year and could be found on all of the team meeting documentation: What do we want students to learn? How will we know if they have learned it? What are we going to do if they do not learn it?" (DuFour, 2002).

The monthly team meetings began in September and continued to the end of the school year. Each group met nine times throughout the year. They were given a template on which they were to submit in written form what their purpose as a group would be, the tasks/goals they planned to complete and a timeline. The Kindergarten to Grade Three teachers chose to continue developing the Guided Reading program, the Grade Four to Six teachers wanted to work on developing a Guided Reading program and the Grade Seven to Eight teachers who were just beginning their careers decided to focus on assessment and evaluation strategies. Minutes were kept and plans were always made for the next meeting. A wide variety of activities took place throughout the year: teachers practiced how to take and evaluate a running record, writing rubrics were developed for Grade Four to Six students to assess their writing, writing samples were brought and discussed, several chapters of *Guiding Readers and Writers (Grades 3 – 6)* by Fountas and Pinnel (2001) were read and discussed, a 100th day celebration was planned, whether or not to continue to teach handwriting was discussed, strategies for dealing with incomplete homework were developed, and discussions took place on how to manage time during the first years of teaching.

The positive responses to having this working time together were frequent. One teacher commented that as soon as she sat down in one of these meetings she could "feel herself letting go." The teachers often reported how good it was to discuss things together and be consistent in their approach to teaching such things as handwriting, or how to

write a story. By January the discussions included sharing frustrations with trying to teach particular concepts, or dealing with difficult student behaviors. The primary teachers agreed to practice their new skills by completing a reading running record on all of their students by December. One teacher relayed to me that she had taken the materials to her colleague and said, "Here, you need to get started, it's not that hard." Another teacher who had some experience working with writing rubrics in her classroom had her students connect with students from two other grades in a leadership capacity for a combined story-writing activity. When I came to teach this class later that day the students were noticeably excited, very serious about this opportunity, and eager to share how they had helped the younger students develop writing skills.

When reflecting on the team meetings in the interview, a teacher said, "We can actually get things done and know what we're doing and not just guessing…we can see what works and get ideas from others." A teacher who had been at the school for many years said, "I feel like we are more like a team now than ever before."

AISI funding. Another factor that often discouraged the teachers was the limited amount of funding available to implement school initiatives. The AISI funding provided by Alberta Learning made a huge impact in this school by supporting teachers with substitute time and resources without impacting the regular school budget. This meant anytime teachers met together to work on an AISI project, substitute teachers were provided, lunch was included, and if resources were required they could also be purchased. In the interview several comments were made related to the acquisition of resources. They included, "I can't say enough about having materials." "We have books everywhere you look." "We used to hide stuff in our rooms so no one knew you had it."

"There was never any paint." "Now we have money to spend for our classrooms." When the materials were purchased to support the Virtues Program, appreciation was again expressed that the school would actually purchase the material to implement the program.

AISI Projects. My own knowledge about the importance of job-embedded professional development created a dilemma for me when I took over the leadership for the Math AISI project in which teachers were also expected to participate but were feeling very negative and uninterested. They were already involved in three other projects and were feeling stretched in both time and interest to participate in yet another project, especially one they had not chosen. The project was district-wide and we could not openly bow out. An initial meeting took place in which teachers were able to vent. However, they were also asked to share what they had completed the previous year and what still needed to happen to fulfill the requirements set out by the Divisional Coordinator. As the school-based leader of this project for this second year I made a decision that the most favorable outcome I would strive for was that teachers would use the allocated time to work together to foster collaboration – any finished projects would be bonus. With that in mind, a respected teacher from another school was invited to join us for three days throughout the school year to help us understand the expectations. The teachers split into two groups and met for a half day each time in our own building with our own staff. I declined any invitations to meet at a district level with other school teachers. Each of these Math AISI days was "celebrated" with treats and lunch for all the staff. The first working half-day took place in November and, by the end of the morning, one teacher's parting words were, "I'm pumped." The curriculum guide was resurrected;

teachers agreed on a common objective to design their unique problem-based activity and actively spent the morning sharing ideas with each other. By May, many of the teacher-designed units had been tested with students, sent in for publishing, and shared at a celebration of accomplishment in the school. At this last meeting, the seven teachers involved in the project met for two and half hours and talked together about the way they teach, some of the struggles that occur when children are not learning the concepts, and ideas for addressing some of their concerns in next year's school goals. The conversations were non-judgmental and demonstrated a genuine problem-solving approach to teaching and learning.

Team teaching. The school had some flexibility regarding teacher hiring and placement. This resulted in two other opportunities that facilitated the development of a collaborative culture. The expectation for the Learning Support Teacher was that thirty percent of her time was to be spent supporting teachers in their work, and this was used to team teach in several classrooms. Also, when increased enrollment resulted in the school being able to hire an additional teacher, the new appointee was a person who had experience working in a team environment. Accordingly, and in consultation with the other teachers, a time table for that person was created that allotted team teaching time in three classrooms and learning support in two others. This included an arrangement whereby the new teacher provided instruction in one particular subject area for the majority of students in several of the primary classrooms. The homeroom teacher could then provide learning support to small groups of students who were struggling academically, in their own classrooms. However, this became a source of frustration as now the expectation for helping these children learn could not be deferred to the Learning

Support Teacher. Classroom teachers were concerned that they did not have the expertise to assist their children who were experiencing learning difficulties.

As Learning Support Teacher I had committed to working with a small group of Grade One children four times a week for this school year. The teacher could choose the group and, previously that meant the struggling readers. This year the teacher suggested that I work with a different *guided reading* group each month, including all ability levels. This resulted in a collective responsibility for teaching reading and also allowed for numerous collegial discussions on student progress, often based on the data we were both collecting.

Several additional team teaching situations unfolded throughout the year. I was able to team-teach a unit with three different teachers in three different subject areas. The unit was planned together and then we would take turns teaching the lessons. The lessons were often concluded with discussion related to teaching methods, student responses and progress. During the interview teachers indicated that in the past another person in the classroom meant "someone was here to watch you ... they had something on their mind ...judgment." Another teacher indicated that, with the new arrangements teachers were "just there to help". One teacher related that when she was team teaching this year it worked out really well. She said, "We have a really good relationship where if she can't get something across or I can't we switch our student groups so the other person can try. It's not a threat." For another teacher a conversation about deprivatization of practice resulted in this comment: "I like it when we team-teach, I pick up so much from that. Not like when somebody sits and watches a lesson, then I get paranoid." One situation in the school did lead to some tension when what was expected to be a team-teaching

arrangement had turned into one teacher taking the entire class while the other received extra planning time and then the arrangement was reversed the following week. A follow- up discussion revealed the teachers' belief that "team teaching is more work" and not as helpful as having extra time for classroom preparation. The two teachers did continue to work together as planned, but later in the school year one of them commented that "I'm just not much of a team-type person."

Developing a Results-Orientated Culture

Student assessment. Each team meeting required participants to set goals for what they hoped to accomplish, including a commitment to how and when they would complete the agreed upon tasks. Being specific about the results of teacher and student learning was new for many of the teachers. For example, one teacher questioned the need for running records to assess student reading levels. Another replied that it would be helpful to have this information to share with parents and for deciding on report card grades. Over time, teachers practiced how to use this type of assessment, first with each other and then in the classroom. After the running records had been completed, the four primary teachers agreed they had learned a great deal about the reading abilities of their students and had met with some surprises as well. Near the end of the year one of the teachers shared a graph demonstrating each student's reading progress throughout the year based on the running records.

As the first reporting period drew near, an informal conversation among teachers resulted in a discovery that the criteria for giving an "A" or "B" on a report card can vary widely from teacher to teacher. It was agreed that some time would be needed to devote to create a better understanding of report card assessment.

The use of rubrics to guide students through assignment expectations and to give teachers a more accurate way to assess written work was also new to many of the staff. However, by June all teachers, during team meeting time, had collaboratively developed a rubric they could use to assess student writing in their classroom.

Provincial Achievement Tests (PATs). Classroom assessment at this school has traditionally been a private endeavor, other than an administrative review of report cards prior to their distribution to parents, and requests for formal testing from the Learning Support Teachers. In previous years published achievement test results were not discussed other than with individual teachers. Two teachers came to me individually and expressed their concern at how poorly the school's students had faired on the PATs.

In the fall, one of the school-based professional development days was spent disaggregating the Provincial Achievement Test (PAT) results for the school. The morning began by reading and discussing *The Real Causes of Higher Achievement* (2002) by Mike Schmoker. A divisional learning consultant with some expertise in this area was invited to lead the staff through a process that would increase understanding of what strategies might be employed to increase student learning and also result in a better PAT rating. The morning culminated with a decision to focus on particular areas of the curriculum in which students were struggling at *all* grade levels. One teacher stated, "It's everyone's responsibility now." The morning was summed up well with these words from a teacher, "We have actually gotten together and teachers are now more aware of what actually happens in the achievement test and what they have to do to help. That's never happened before."

Setting new goals. In March, when we as a school were participating in the designing of the next three year AISI project, division office required the establishment of a leadership team that would include teachers and solicit input from parent council members. Five out of ten teachers volunteered to be part of this team. One primary and one middle school teacher, both of whom have been at the school for several years were chosen. The team was expected to create SMART goals as described by Conzemius and O'Neill (2002) related to three prescribed areas: student learning, quality teaching and shared leadership/learning communities. The goals had to be strategic, measurable, attainable, results-orientated and time-bound. The leadership team met on three occasions and also consulted twice with the entire staff. One of these meetings started with a teacher-led activity in the gym when a parachute and balloons were used to represent the school team and the constructs under which the new goals would be developed. Then, on chart paper the staff wrote what they believed to be evidence of the four constructs in the school: coherent staff development; integrated school planning and reporting; focus on learning and quality teaching; and shared leadership. The leadership team took the ideas from these meetings and by May had completed a document outlining school goals for the next three years. This was subsequently approved through the district office and has resulted in further AISI funding for the school.

During the last set of team meetings each group of teachers agreed on what common assessments would be consistently used, and developed if necessary to improve student learning at each grade level. Several of these assessments were also to be used to measure school wide improvement over the next three years.

In May an announcement was made that the current principal would be transferring to a new school. Three teachers came to me immediately and asked what would happen to our school goals. An interview process took place and I was granted the principal position for the next year. The teachers were unanimously pleased that the school could "continue on its current journey".

One teacher summed up the year by saying that "we had a goal to make our school caring and safe with a great atmosphere. We've done that and now we're getting down to specifics."

Survey Results. During the last team meeting the professional teaching staff completed the survey, *School Professional Staff as Learning Community* (see Appendix E). The raw data collected from the survey is displayed in Appendix F. Figure 2 consolidates this data and displays the results for each individual question. Overall, the results indicate that, on average, the teachers are very positive about their school as a learning community. Only three questions resulted in an average under 4.
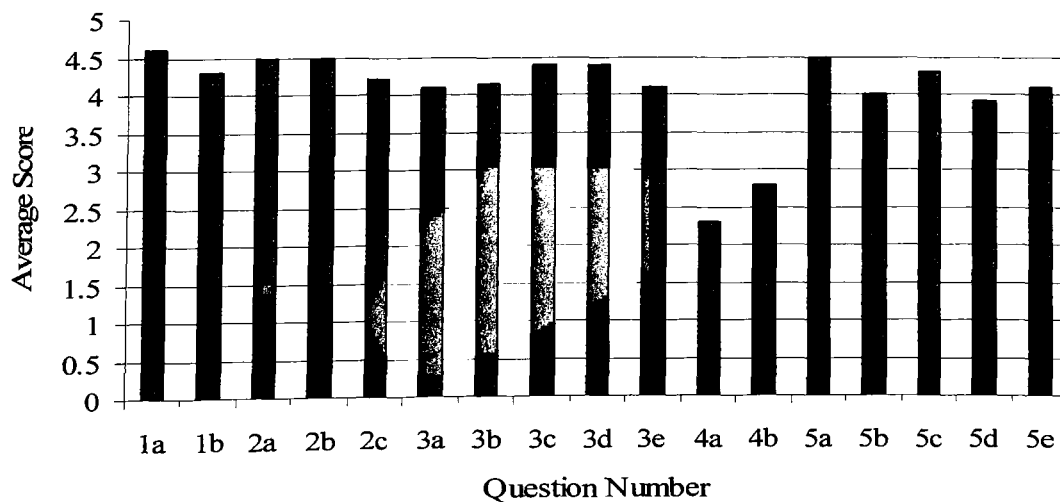
Figure 2. Survey results by question number.

Responses to Questions 4a and 4b, relating to peer review and observation, had

the lowest numerical average with question 4b having the widest range of response, as

shown in Figure 3. The data indicated that teachers visited other classrooms very

occasionally. However, when these visits happened, a number of teachers believed these

experiences provided them with useful feedback about their teaching and learning.
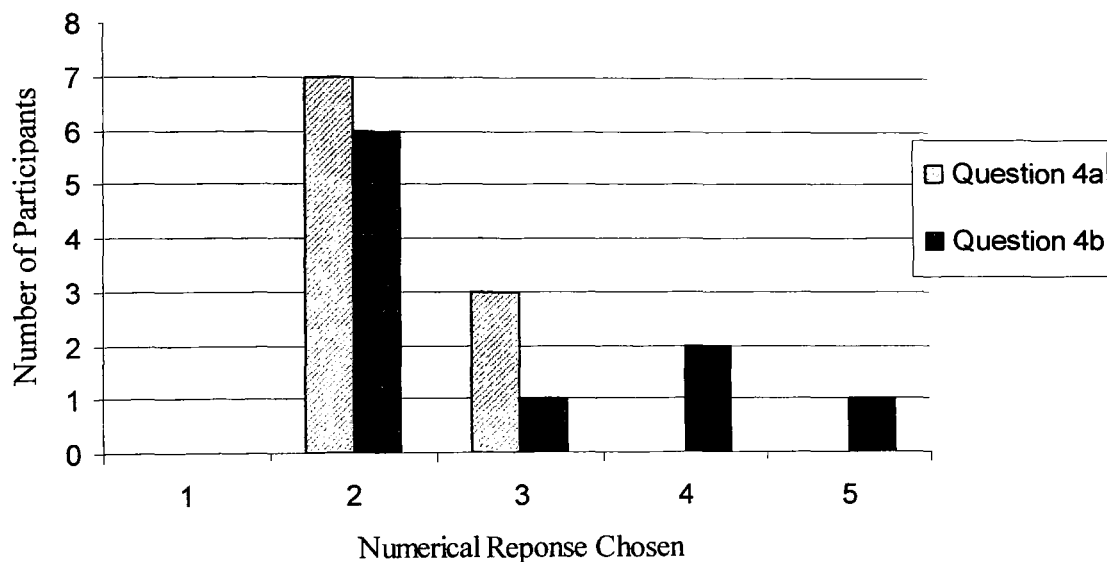
Figure 3. Survey results for question 4a and 4b.

For question 1a, 2a, 5a, and 5c, all of the teaching staff responded with either a 4

or 5, indicating their belief that power, authority and decision-making were generally

shared between teachers and administrators. They also agreed that the school had specific

structures in place, including time, to encourage staff interaction and communication.

Figure 4 consolidates the teachers' responses into the five categories of this particular

survey. It also shows that peer review and observation were rated lowest by the

respondents in this school.

Average Score

5
4.5
4
3.5
3
2.5
2
1.5
1
0.5
0

School administrators participate demoncratically with teachers sharing power, authority, and decision making.

Staff shares vision for school improvement that have an undeviating focus on student learning, and are consistently referenced for staff's work.

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

Peers review and give feedback on observing each other's classroom behaviours in order to increase individual and organizational capactiy.

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

Figure 4. Survey results for each category.

The average numerical response for each teacher participant is shown in Figure 5. The range is not large, indicating that teachers generally experience and/or perceive the school as a learning community. Six out of ten of the teachers had an average response of over 4 with none falling below 3.5.

Average Response

5
4.5
4
3.5
3
2.5
2
1.5
1
0.5
0

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

Individual Teachers
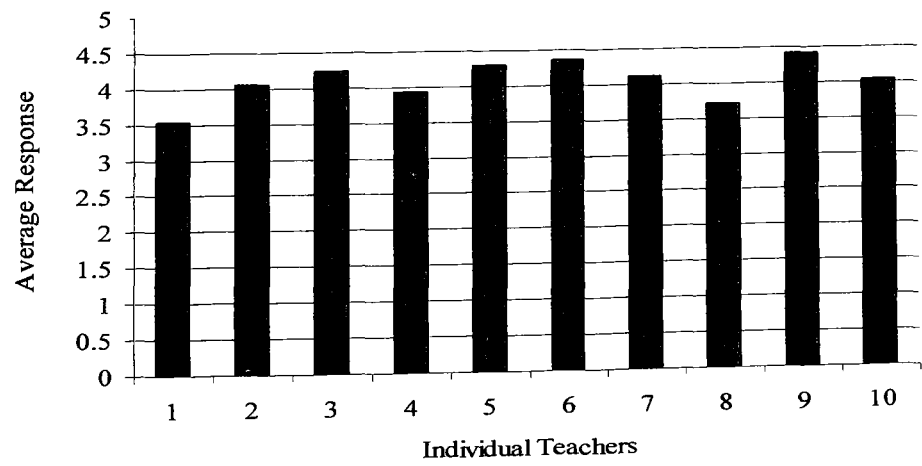
Figure 5. Average survey response for each teacher.

Chapter 5: Discussion

In this chapter, I will present a synthesis of study findings, relevant literature, and personal perceptions under three broad themes of analysis that were generated by the research questions:

- What are the school's mission, vision, values, beliefs and goals and how do these influence the school learning community?

- What support systems and practices does the school have that facilitate collaborative work among professionals, and in what way do they impact the school learning community?

- What evidence indicates the level and type of the professional teaching staff's commitment to continuous improvement by a focus on results?

Building Foundations: Mission, Vision, Values and Goals

For schools to function as Professional Learning Communities, staff members must have a widely shared understanding of and commitment to the school's mission, vision, values and goals. Each of these areas was explored in the school that was the focus of the study.

DuFour and Eaker (1998) suggest that "the mission question challenges members of a group to reflect on the fundamental purpose of the organization" (p. 58). The school has its own mission statement that was developed over time and the teachers were in solid agreement as to its current relevancy. The mission statement has two main components: providing *quality education* and a *safe and caring* environment. The staff, along with parents and students all agree that the school is a *safe and caring* place for students to learn. This was a fundamental purpose and focus for the last three years and is

now a genuine lived reality for the school. Providing a *quality education* has not had the same emphasis and, until this year, little has been done to develop an understanding of what that term means.

Sharing a common "vision is not just agreeing with a good idea, it is a particular mental image of what is important to an individual and to an organization" (Hord, 1997, p. 12). The school now has a vision statement that was quickly designed in an initial staff meeting. However, DuFour and Eaker (1998) advise that the most important question to ask in guiding the process is, "Will this strategy foster widespread ownership?" (p. 66). Even though references to the mission and vision statement were infrequent throughout the school year, the June survey resulted in a 4.5 out of 5 average when staff members were asked about the level of consensus regarding shared vision in the school. There was similar agreement that the vision was focused on students, learning and teaching and a slightly lower perception (4.2/5) that this vision targets *high* quality learning experiences. Ideally missions and visions "act as a filter for every decision made" (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2001, p. 27). In this school the mission and vision statements were primarily used to affirm what was already taking place in the school rather than being used to guide decision making.

In order to make shared vision a school reality, DuFour and Eaker (1998) argue that value statements articulate the "attitudes, behaviors and commitments that must exist to create that future" (p. 89). Values are "the link between emotion and behavior, the connection between what we feel and what we do" (Champy, 1995, p. 78). This study found little evidence of publicly held beliefs and no written value statements to which staff members were strongly committed, other than the mission and vision statements.

It was in the area of goals that the development of staff towards functioning as a learning community was most easily observed. In the past three years there was a "widely shared understanding of the problems" (Leithwood et al. 1999, p. 49) that had allowed for a natural development of goals. A three year Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI) project titled *Culture Building and the Elimination of Threat and Stress* gave the school direction and a significant amount of resources to focus on school climate and academic success. Positive changes in school climate were noticed quickly and, as a result, staff became encouraged to work even harder towards achieving their goal. The surveys and documentation completed by all stakeholders during the past two years clearly demonstrated their belief that the goal of building school climate was meeting with success. Qualitative evidence of this success was also abundant. For example, most visitors were quick to comment on the positive atmosphere they sensed when walking in the school building, and the associate superintendent concluded after a school visit that the climate in the school was "phenomenal".

Although a goal of providing a learning environment that focused on improved growth and success in academic areas was not new for this year, the staff, as evidenced through their many informal conversations, was more ready this year to address this goal. Until this year, if asked "What does this school care most about?" (Lezotte & McKee, 2002, p. 17), most staff members would probably have replied, "To create a safe and caring environment." This year discussions indicate that student learning was now becoming more important. Achievement test results, over time, indicated that the school was not meeting provincial averages and those students displaying academic excellence

had been fewer than expected. When teachers began asking "Why?", a new goal promoting lifelong learning was included in the school plan.

Darling-Hammond (1999) suggests that "professional development should be sustained and ongoing, embedded in teachers' daily activities, connected to their work with students and needs to be seen as integral to the act of teaching" (p. 2). A concerted effort was made throughout the year to ensure that all of the professional development activities would support the pursuit of school goals. However, because the school was involved in four different AISI projects there was a definite dissonance between the intent of each of these endeavors and the ability of a small staff to connect and actually make their own learning an integral part of their teaching. The administration was aware of this. Teachers were encouraged to do their best and, above all, to remain focused on student learning. If they said "No" to some professional activities, and they had consulted with the administration, they were supported in their decision.

Although specific processes designed to collaboratively develop school goals were limited, the teachers who participated in the interviews felt that decisions and goals were made as a result of discussion and consensus. They also indicated that school goals were meaningful and attainable.

However, a major shift took place in March when a school leadership team was formed to develop an AISI proposal for the next three years. Although the collaboration that had taken place over this year resulted in an easy identification of areas to work on, the creating of SMART goals as described by Conzemius and O'Neill (2002) was a challenge. The staff was now expected to design goals that were very specific and had very clear measurable outcomes – something that was not evident in previous goals and

something that the teachers had not experienced in the past. DuFour and Eaker (1998) indicate that "visions may inspire, but goals foster ongoing accountability" (p. 100). The experience of goal setting that modeled shared leadership and had very specific goals with clear targets related to student and teacher learning was made more easy in the school's *learning community journey* largely because of the collaborative work that had already taken place through out the year.

During the year, the school could be seen to be growing in its development of mission, vision, values and goals as described in the literature on PLC's. Fullan (1997), in *What's Worth Fighting For in the Principalship* states that "the challenge is to improve education in the only way it can be – through the day-to-day actions of empowered individuals" (p. 47). The teachers in this study saw their school as improving and were actively participating and taking ownership of the process. Although the foundation for improvement was not equally developed in each area, it was being laid.

Collaboration

A collaborative culture is an integral part of any school that claims to be professional learning community. In this environment teachers are expected to be "contributing members of a collective effort to improve the school's capacity to help all students learn at high levels" (Eaker, DuFour & Burnette, 2002, p. 5). Newmann and Wehlage (1995) in their study of 1400 schools discovered that:

> The most successful schools ...found a way to channel staff and student efforts
>
> toward a clear, commonly shared purpose for student learning; they created
>
> opportunities for teachers to collaborate and help one another achieve the

purpose; and teachers in these schools took collective – not just individual

responsibility for student learning. (p. 3)

Two aspects of a collaborative environment were investigated: supportive organizational

arrangements and collegiality, including the deprivatization of practice.

Supportive organizational arrangements . As indicated in the learning cycle

described by Senge et al. (2000) and illustrated on page 14 of this project, deliberate

changes regarding the organizational arrangements for learning can have a profound and

positive effect on a school's culture. One of the frequently stated obstacles for initiating

collaboration is having the time for teachers to work together. Busy schedules and

supervision expectations often allow for little more than passing conversations among

staff members. In addition, the recent labour strike in Alberta limited teachers'

willingness to commit even more than the already-required time for before and after

school meetings. Yet, educators such as Eaker, DuFour and Burnette (2002) indicate that

the "driving engine of the collaborative culture of a PLC is the team" (p. 5).

The teachers in this school were given only a small token of tangible support for

teacher collaboration but it became a very significant step in the development of the

school as a learning community. Giving teachers time, during the day, to meet together

may be a *time-tabling* challenge but, as evidenced in this school, it was a key factor in

getting teachers to work together. The scheduled team meetings that took place once a

month were a treasured part of school life.

The physical structure of this school was also not conducive to informal

collaboration between primary and middle school teachers but many social and

professional opportunities were planned to bridge this gap. They included a retreat in

September in which all staff participated, school professional development days planned around AISI projects, a review of Achievement Test results, and the collaborative development of school goals.

The fact that limited funding is generally available for schools to implement programs can have significant impact on school climate, as was evidenced by the teacher comments this year. Most staff members felt the initiatives in this school would have been more difficult to implement in the same way without the resources and substitute time purchased with AISI funding provided by Alberta Learning. Teachers felt more valued because they had additional materials to support their work, and time to reflect on, develop and practice new ideas. They were not being expected to support school activities using their personal finances and time. Because this school had its own AISI project, as well as the district-wide projects, funding was never an issue.

According to Louis and Krause (1995), another physical or structural factor that influences school development as a learning community is school autonomy and the ability to select teachers. In this study, autonomy and flexibility were used to facilitate the development of a collaborative culture and create further opportunities for teachers to share their practice and learning. As well, such things as the advance planning and scheduling for professional development that had taken place in consultation with teachers, were also helpful in conveying a message that a concerted effort was being made to facilitate the school's journey towards its mission and goals.

Collegiality. Judith Warren Little (1981) provides a definition of collegiality that, if observed in a school, would be very demonstrative of a collaborative culture. It entails the presence of four specific behaviors: adults in schools talk and reflect about practice;

they observe each other engaged in the practice of teaching; they are engaged together in work on curriculum; and they teach each other what they know about teaching, learning and leading.

For collegiality to develop in a school a certain level of respect and trust is needed. This is far more than getting along and being friendly, or *congeniality*. In fact, collegiality can be risky business as teachers step out of their isolated classrooms and begin to share what it is they actually do - their successes and frustrations, their methodology, how they evaluate, how they plan, how they teach.

The September retreat and other social activities throughout the year were conducive to building trust and developing cohesiveness amongst the staff. However, the monthly team meetings provided the forum for teachers to begin talking and reflecting about their practice. The positive responses to having this working time together were frequent. By January, the level of trust had increased so that discussions often included sharing frustrations with trying to teach particular concepts or dealing with difficult student behaviors. As teachers made commitments to try new things, they developed among themselves a greater accountability. Schmoker (1999) tells how these kind of conversations "not only eliminate fear, but also promote team spirit and the uninhibited, continuous knowledge-sharing that are the chief benefits of collective effort" (p. 35). Such outcomes were witnessed in this school. An ethos of shared leadership was also beginning to develop as discussions and plans were more frequently being generated by the teachers rather than the administrator.

The type of learning teachers were experiencing is what Leithwood, Jantzi and Steinbach (1999) refer to as situated cognition which requires "teachers to be immersed

in authentic, non-routine professional activity embedded in a supportive school culture"
(p. 151). Peter Senge emphasizes that "learning is always an on-the-job phenomenon ...
it occurs in a context where you are taking action" (O'Neil, 1995, p.1). These teachers
would definitely affirm the value of job-embedded professional development that is
connected to their teaching and subsequently results in improved student learning. Even
the AISI project to which there was considerable initial resistance became part of a
valuable learning experience that positively exemplified teacher learning and
collaboration.

Some team-teaching ventures also provided opportunities for learning. However,
as indicated by the survey, this did not happen often and the teachers were not confident
in their ability to provide professional feedback. For some, there were many fears and
uncertainties around this process, and the logistical reality of teaching time in a school
also meant that opportunities for teachers to double-up in a classroom were difficult to
create. It was also evident that the possibility of conflict occurring in these arrangements
was very real. Moreover, the findings demonstrated that agreement to a plan does not
necessarily mean follow through. Working with another teacher as opposed to an
educational assistant is not always easy for those who prefer to work on their own and are
perhaps not prepared for the additional level of organization that is required.

Developing a Results-Orientated Culture.

How does a school determine its effectiveness? In a professional learning
community, "attempts at school improvement are judged on the basis of how student
learning is affected" (Eaker, DuFour & Burnette, 2002, p. 6). Throughout this school year
there were increasingly frequent observations of teachers collectively grappling with

student achievement and coming to grips with the questions of: What do we want students to learn? How will we know if they've learned it? What will we do when they haven't learned it? The questioning that took place as the year unfolded resulted in the establishment of very clear goals for next year that are centered on student learning and reflective of all of the professional teachers concerns. Although the PAT results are of concern to the teachers they did not limit their focus just to this assessment. During this school year they created writing rubrics for each grade level. They committed to developing math assessments for each strand in the Alberta Learning Program of Studies, and agreed on what additional assessments would be completed at each grade level. The data collected from these assessments will be used to further develop their own learning and teaching practice.

Lezotte (2002) discusses the importance of focusing on the leading indicators of student performance rather than waiting for trailing indicator results when trying to positively impact student learning (p. 23). The teachers in this school have come to understand that ongoing reflection and assessment can provide leading indicators that can help them on the journey of continuous improvement.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

Michael Fullan (2000) in *The Three Stories of Educational Reform* discusses the dilemma of understanding precisely how schools go about becoming professional learning communities. He explains that restructuring and reculturing make a difference, with the latter being far more significant as it involves "going from a situation of limited attention to assessment and pedagogy to a situation in which teachers and others routinely focus on these matters and make associated improvements" (p. 582). However, he adds that to some extent "each group must build its own model and develop local ownership through its own process" (p. 582). The purpose of this research project was to discover what critical enabling steps engaged in by professional teaching staff in a rural K-8 school supported the development of a professional learning community.

The professional teaching staff in this school assessed themselves as having many of the attributes of a professional learning community. One of next year's goals related to shared leadership was first written as "to develop and implement a learning community that will ...". A second look brought out the eraser and its new wording became: "Our learning community will ...", a definite sense of confidence in how things are done at the school.

The school has a mission, and a newly developed vision that is supported by teachers but not frequently referred to when decisions are being made. A set of beliefs exists but they are not well known and have not been translated into values. Goals have been established and have become more specific, measurable and results-orientated. There is also increased involvement by teachers in determining the content of these goals and, therefore, the focus of the school.

Teachers are working together more frequently and spend more time talking about their practice, planning, problem-solving, learning, practicing and evaluating. However, they are still hesitant about observing each other in the classroom and providing feedback that will increase individual and organizational capacity.

They have set in place the building blocks to become more results-orientated and will begin collecting data that will help them assess improvement in student learning. Writing and overall math competency have been targeted for initial attention. As Achievement Tests were being written in June, each teacher was checking last year's results hoping that this year's efforts would already produce increased scores – and preliminary data is promising.

This research project also reinforced the value of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement through Alberta Learning as a way to support schools financially in their journey towards enhancing students learning and achievement.

In revisiting Fullan's (2000) words about restructuring and reculturing, two things were especially significant in this school's process towards becoming a professional learning community: first, teachers having regular, during-the-school-day time to meet with each other and, secondly, using this time to focus collectively on teaching and learning in a way that develops trust but also requires accountability (goals with commitments and timelines).

In the position of both Vice-Principal and researcher in a school, the staff members of which were willing to be observed, I was provided with many opportunities to learn. As the journal and interview transcripts were read, surveys analyzed, and literature reviewed it was clear that ideas taken from the literature about PLC's and

implemented in the school environment resulted in an increasingly collaborative culture focused on student learning. Senge's comment that "learning always occurs in a context where you are taking action" (O'Neil', 1995, p. 1) was instructive for me as this was my opportunity to bring theory to practice. Throughout this project, I remained convinced that building a school's capacity to function as a professional learning community that is, above all, focused on student learning is key to sustainable school improvement. As I move into the principal role next year, I can take with me some valuable insights for the ongoing development of the school. Many of this year's initiatives were administratively driven and I am especially excited to see teachers taking the step not only towards collective responsibility but also shared leadership.

Chapter 7: Recommendations

I began this project anticipating it would result in benefit for me, the school and other educators. I believe that happened. What follows are some learnings and recommendations that may be helpful to others who travel a similar road, wanting the children in our schools to experience every possible learning advantage, and their teachers to be supported and valued.

The words of Sergiovanni (2000) are worth repeating: "Good schools improve one at a time...they improve on their own terms...[and] are unique because they reflect the communities they serve" (pp. 22-23). This study described the journey of one school; others will have their own unique journey. Through it, I learned that change can be daunting, fearful and even subverted by staff if not approached from a *capacity building* point of view. Each school has its strengths; they provide a starting place from which all teachers can be drawn into the process. Change decisions cannot be made without due consideration of the community in which the school lives. In this study, the existing safe and caring culture was a firm foundation that helped create a school environment ready to focus on learning.

Figure 1 provided me with a wonderful way to think about where to start. I began with the question: "What are some deliberate steps that can be taken by a school staff to begin the learning cycle?" Systems theory teaches that our schools are perfectly designed to get exactly the results they are currently getting. However, are they the ones we want? I learned through this project that just by choosing a few specific places to start, I could help changes begin to unfold. By selecting a *smaller* place to start, I was able to honor the teachers' own learning processes, and provide time for collective responsibility to

develop. I learned that not all schools are staffed with teacher leaders, so the process of developing a learning community can be administratively-led as a way of getting started. Then, small, deliberate steps can be taken to work towards models of shared or distributed leadership such as those described by Linda Lambert (1998) and Richard Elmore (2000).

Once the process starts, Senge's (1990) words can come to life ... collective aspiration will be set free and people will be "continually learning how to learn together" (p. 3).

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Appendix A

Sample of Field Notes

September 22, 2002

This was a very special week in our school. We went on our second annual

retreat. This retreat was planned by four of our staff (two teachers and two support

staff). All of the staff participated, including a new teacher who had been hired just this

week as well (in fact this was her first introduction to the staff). We left on Thursday

right after school and went to Canmore. Due to our AISI project there is no cost to the

teachers for this trip and staff even received a free vest along with some others goodies

all packed into a back pack.

There are some very interesting things that happen on this trip. It is the most

effective way to assimilate our new staff. In our school building is easy for the primary

teachers and middle years teachers to be somewhat separated since they are on different

sides of the building. By observing the laughter and conversation, two of our new

teachers at the upper level seemed to fit in very well. Even the ride up provided an hour

and a half of conversation. There were eight of us in my vehicle and the conversations

and sharing was amazing (such as stories of a younger brother's suicide, growing up in a

Mennonite family which led to comparing of other backgrounds). In this retreat setting

they really get a chance to mingle with each other ... and they do. The only people who

do seem to sit with each other more consistently are our educational assistants. Our

newest teacher was also welcomed and although she sat in the same place at meals –

other people came to her. She had many opportunities to talk and she even indicated that

she felt ready for Monday (she will be working in a team position with three of our

teachers and in a LST role with two others!)

The "educational" portion of our retreat was a presentation on the Virtues

Project – a character education resource. Throughout the morning we were required on

several occasions to work in small groups. One of the activities required identifying and

sharing character traits that we thought were our strengths and those we wanted to

strengthen. This required a level of sharing that is not always common among staff.

When we were finished there were several comments how "we don't usually share at this

level but it worked good", "It is difficult to receive affirmations of our strengths from

others" and others could see things in us that we didn't know about ourselves."

A decision was made that we would like to use this material in our school and

staff was very excited that they could actually buy the material. One teacher came to me

and indicated how in the past they could never have resources, there appeared to be no

money. She really appreciated being able to get the materials so you can actually

implement a program. AISI is certainly helping with this.
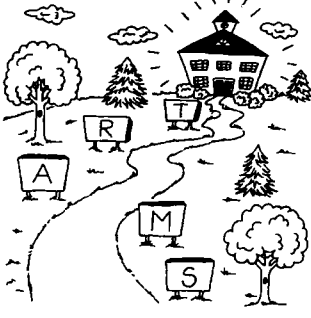
As administrators, we sat back on several occasions for just a few minutes, and

enjoyed witnessing the camaraderie among all the participants!

Appendix B

Sample of Team Meeting Minutes

Learning Team 2002/2003
Date: September 11

Team Members:	Specific & Strategic
(Names have been deleted)	Measurable Attainable Results-based Time-bound

Mission/Purpose:

To enhance and develop effective assessment and evaluation strategies.

> When you start on your journey to Ithaca, Then pray the road is long, full of adventure, full of knowledge ...
> -from *Journey to Ithaca*

Tasks/Goals to complete:	Timeline:
Discussion - decide on assessment strategy portfolios? student led conferences? rubrics? Decision: rubrics. Our professional growth plans will refer to using rubrics in our classrooms. General discussion – classroom management.	Next meeting: we will come up with rubrics used in the classroom, include lesson plans (How did this rubric work? Was it effective? Share rubrics. Portfolios: Make a unit plan that uses portfolios (begin sometime after Christmas) How do we integrate our portfolios with our use of rubrics?

1. What do we want students to learn?
2. How will we know if they have learned it?
3. What are we going to do if they do not learn it?

Appendix C

Example of Constructs used for goal development.

What does this look like at our school?

Construct #3:
→ coherent staff development

- Teacher collaboration on instructional (choose the best comments and put them here)
tch. needs.

School Mission Team Meetings
& Vision
Staff Retreat

Relevant P.D.

Guided Reading

IPP Meetings

Safe & Caring & Virtues
BER Conferences
Retreat

collaborative teaching

BER / GR CX
EBS
Caring
Teachers coding in Meetings
Conventions
IGA
School Vision

Case Conferences
how will this resource replace or enhance what we already us
Workshops + convent s sc
IPP meetin
Relevant PD a rel
Team teachin
Math ATSI un completed
MAD
100 Hundred day cele
teacher collabor on instructions individual need

Construct #4:
→ "shared" leadership

(choose the best comments and put them here)

→ students, staff & parents
When the whole community works collaboratively to fulfill the mission and vision of T.V.S.

of staff'
Professional Learning Communities
Shared responsibility
Good communication
Different leaders different times
Guided Reading
Team Meetings

* we are teachers in our school not just our own classroom

Good oh one.
Mentorship Program
D.O. Visits
team atmosphere.
* if some let go of the "parachute" it goes off course

school?
Buddies
Kater
* we can't be passive; everyone has a responsibility to speak up
safe/caring staff

* when "have to" becomes "want to" WE'RE THERE

* leader or not, every staff membe has value and valuable contribution to make.

Community Atmosphere
Leadership program
school goals

Appendix D

Interview Questions

Here are some questions that will guide our discussion on Wednesday. Thanks again for

being part of this !

1. How does our school's mission, vision, goals and beliefs influence our school
   community?

   How aware are we of the statements? Mission? Vision? Goals? Beliefs?

   Do you think these kinds of statements are important? How and or who decides what
   they are? Who was involved in setting up these goals and beliefs?

   Do they serve as guide posts?

2. How are decisions made at this school? Are teachers part of the decision making? Is
   there a process for reaching consensus? When decisions are made is there support for
   the plan – resources, time, recognition and celebration?

3. What arrangements do we have that support collaborative work among professionals?
   Much of the literature talks about "deprivatizing" teaching practice. What are your
   thoughts about this?

4. What evidence, if any, can be found at this school that shows a commitment to
   continuous improvement? What are some examples of school improvement that you
   have observed?

School Professional Staff as Learning Community

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

Date: _____

Name: _____

School: _____

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

1a
```
5          4          3          2          1
|----------|----------|----------|----------|
```
Although there are some legal and fiscal decisions required of the principal, school administrators consistently involve the staff in discussing and making decisions about most school issues.

Administrators invite advice and counsel from the staff and then make decisions themselves.

Administrators never share information with the staff nor provide opportunities to be involved in decision making.

1b
```
5          4          3          2          1
|----------|----------|----------|----------|
```
Administrators involve the entire staff.

Administrators involve a small committee, council, or team of staff.

Administrators do not involve any staff.

- -

2. Staff shares visions for school improvement that have an undeviating focus on student learning, and are consistently referenced for the staff's work.

2a
```
5          4          3          2          1
|----------|----------|----------|----------|
```
Visions for improvement are discussed by the entire staff such that consensus and a shared vision results.

Visions for improvement are not thoroughly explored; some staff agree and others do not.

Visions for improvement held by the staff are widely divergent.

2b
```
5          4          3          2          1
|----------|----------|----------|----------|
```
Visions for improvement are always focused on students, and learning and teaching.

Visions for improvement are sometimes focused on students and teaching and learning.

Visions for improvement do not target students and teaching and learning.

2c
```
5          4          3          2          1
|----------|----------|----------|----------|
```
Visions for improvement target high quality learning experiences for all students.

Visions for improvement address quality learning experiences in terms of students' abilities.

Visions for improvement do not include concerns about the quality of learning experiences.

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

3a

5	4	3	2	1
The entire staff meets to discuss issues, share information, and learn with and from each other.		Subgroups of the staff meet to discuss issues, share information, and learn with and from each other.		Individuals randomly discuss issues, share information, and learn with and from each other.

3b

5	4	3	2	1
The staff meets regularly and frequently on substantive student-centered educational issues.		The staff meets occasionally on substantive student-centered educational issues.		The staff never meets to consider substantive educational issues.

3c

5	4	3	2	1
The staff discusses the quality of their teaching and students' learning.		The staff does not often discuss their instructional practices nor its influence on student learning.		The staff basically discusses non-teaching and non-learning issues.

3d

5	4	3	2	1
The staff, based on their learnings, makes and implements plans that address students' needs, more effective teaching, and more successful student learning.		The staff occasionally acts on their learnings and makes and implements plans to improve teaching and learning.		The staff does not act on their learning.

3e

5	4	3	2	1
The staff debriefs and assesses the impact of their actions and makes revisions.		The staff infrequently assesses their actions and seldom makes revisions based on the results.		The staff does not assess their work.

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

4a

5	4	3	2	1
Staff regularly and frequently visit and observe each other's classroom teaching.		Staff occasionally visit and observe each other's teaching.		Staff never visit their peers' classrooms.

4b

5	4	3	2	1
Staff provide feedback to each other about teaching and learning based on their classroom observations.		Staff discuss non-teaching issues after classroom observations.		Staff do not interact after classroom observations.

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

5a

5	4	3	2	1

Time is arranged and committed for whole staff interactions.

Time is arranged but frequently the staff fails to meet.

Staff cannot arrange time for interacting.

5b

5	4	3	2	1

The size, structure, and arrangements of the school facilitate staff proximity and interaction.

Considering the size, structure, and arrangements of the school, the staff are working to maximize interaction.

The staff takes no action to manage the facility and personnel for interaction.

5c

5	4	3	2	1

A variety of processes and procedures are used to encourage staff communication.

A single communication method exists and is sometimes used to share information.

Communication devices are not give attention.

5d

5	4	3	2	1

Trust and openness characterize all the staff.

Some of the staff are trusting and open.

Trust and openness do not exist among the staff.

5e

5	4	3	2	1

Caring, collaborative, and productive relationships exist among all the staff.

Caring and collaboration are inconsistently demonstrated among the staff.

Staff are isolated and work alone at their task.

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*Hord, Shirley M. (1996). Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

Appendix F

Survey Results – Numerical Responses

Survey Question ↓	Numerical responses selected by teachers for each survey question. Survey #										Average
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
1a	4	5	5	5	5	4	4	5	4	5	4.6
1b	4	5	4	4	5	4	5	4	5	3	4.3
2a	4	4	5	4	5	5	4	5	5	4	4.5
2b	4	4	5	4	5	5	5	3	5	5	4.5
2c	4	4	5	3	5	5	4	3	4	5	4.2
3a	4	5	4	4	5	4	4	3	5	3	4.1
3b	4	4	5	5	5	5	3	3	4	3.5	4.15
3c	4	3	5	5	5	5	4	4	4	5	4.4
3d	3	5	5	4	4	4	5	4	5	5	4.4
3e	4	4	4	5	5	4	4	3	4	4	4.1
4a	2	2	2	2	2	2	3	3	3	2	2.3
4b	2	2	2	4	2	2	4	3	5	2	2.8
5a	4	5	5	4	4	5	5	4	5	4	4.5
5b	3	4	3	3	4	5	4	5	4	5	4.0
5c	4	5	5	4	4	5	4	4	4	4	4.3
5d	3	4	4	4	4	5	4	3	4	4	3.9
5e	3	4	4	3	4	5	4	4	5	5	4.1