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Are Characteristics Of A Professional Learning Community Guiding Student Achievement

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ARE CHARACTERISTICS OF A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

GUIDING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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"My first bit of advice to those about to implement the PLC process is to focus less on what educators in high-performing PLCs *do* and more on how the members of the organization *think*--the mindset of those educators."

- Dr. Richard DuFour

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Professional Learning Communities

I did not have to look for a Capstone topic; my topic found me. I ran across a quote from

one of DuFour's books while reading an article. DuFour stated, "In the end, creating a

learning-focused culture requires an organization to answer this question: Are we here to

ensure students are *taught*, or are we here to ensure that our students *learn?*" (2015, p.

103). My thinking was immediately and permanently challenged and changed.

I found myself wanting to take this challenge to my team. I was unfortunately

stuck in my tracks. At my primary school, where I teach on a large grade-level team, we

did not use a professional learning community process at that time. We met, we worked

as grade-level teams, we did whole-school book studies and we collaborated on

committees. In some circles these activities may be erroneously referred to as a

professional learning community. We were driven, as a district, toward coverage of

supplied curriculum. Most districts and teachers I have encountered do have the same

type of coverage-driven focus. As a coverage-driven district we were expected to cover

the entire curriculum laid out in the teacher's manuals for each grade level. The

understandable intent is to avoid leaving any gaps in the curriculum so that each

consecutive year the next grade-level teacher knows exactly what was taught, or more

correctly defined, *what was covered*, and teachers are then free to begin their coverage of

their material. A coverage-style focus is directly contrary to DuFour's (2015) insights

about focusing on learning. There is a big difference between *what is covered* and *what is learned* by students. I understand that avoiding gaps for the next year's teacher is helpful in theory. It is not effective in a coverage-based focus, in my opinion. The gaps in student learning could be potentially larger than in a learning-focused environment. Given this roadblock, I knew there was a tough road ahead but I saw a light and I knew even an uphill path toward a professional learning community, a "PLC", was worth investigating.

So, I wondered, to promote an effective and sustained PLC in our district, what are the most important characteristics of a PLC? What are the understandings that have to happen first and what are the roadblocks? Why do some PLC groups see tremendous success and others face challenge after challenge with just launching the process itself? I had found my burning question: *Are characteristics of a professional learning community guiding student achievement?* To find the answer I would analyze two grade-level teams from two separate elementary buildings in my district. I would also look at changes in data and trends in student demographics and achievement from school to school to see which characteristics of a PLC have already been effectively implemented and were already in place. One of our elementary schools, "School A", has experienced consistently higher MCA achievement scores over the other school, "School B", for several years. Both schools had the same training, same curriculum, same technology, and the same budgets. The student socioeconomics seemed to favor the lower-performing School B with less students of color and less students receiving lunch subsidies. So what was going on? It made no obvious sense. Was there something different in the educators' approaches or thinking that was causing the achievement difference? I hoped to find some recurring and common PLC characteristics already in place that might explain the

achievement. Neither school was functioning as a formal PLC environment. Both schools had just started using a PLC format. It was to be a search for effective PLC practice outside a formal PLC. Most PLCs are not formal PLCs at all but the success could come from PLC characteristics. I wanted to share my findings with my administration to help introduce and guide formal PLC staff training toward ensuring future academic success for all students in both schools and all grade levels.

It was exciting to think that this question that had puzzled and frustrated administrators and educators for some time had an answer potentially hidden within their group functioning. I felt assured I could approach the research from an unbiased perspective as I am not on either of the teams in question and I also am vested in finding success for my own team and ultimately my school and district.

Perspective of a Corporate Educator

I came late to education. I moved out of state and my new, smaller, community no longer supported my business degree and background in corporate marketing and management. I was faced with a very good problem. I was able to choose whatever I wanted to do, anything. I started substitute teaching at the local elementary school while I weighed my options. Substitute teaching was allowed with a four-year degree due to a shortage of teachers. I really loved being in a classroom but I never thought of being an actual teacher. Then, my principal talked to me. He said he had a teacher leaving for maternity leave and not returning. He wanted me to take her spot, as a teacher! I was excited but also knew that the teaching position was wanted by many traditionally-licensed teachers and it was going to be a tough transition. I think my principal and I were both shocked. My principal had never dreamed of choosing a staff member who had

an alternate degree and I had never dreamed of becoming an alternatively-licensed *real*

teacher. So we went through the steps together and a few short months later (I was

allowed to teach, within a time limit, while earning my license) over spring break, I got

the call that changed my life. The teacher I was to replace had her baby; my new position

started the next Monday. I had never been more scared and excited simultaneously in my

life. I was leaving a corporate environment and I was going to be an educator; my career

had found me. I have never looked back.

Now, eleven years later and back in Minnesota, I have loved everything about

being in the classroom. I have not loved everything about education. I soon realized that

my prior experiences had given me a different perspective. I felt very open to learning

from others but I realized that not everyone in education reciprocated openness to change

or welcomed new challenges. In my experience, there seemed to be comfort in the status

quo. The tendency is to look at one's own data, or not, at the end of the year and make

adjustments if demanded. All too often, any amount of growth seemed accepted as

successful and no changes in teaching methods were actively sought by individual

teachers. The teacher job-accountability and/or year-end incentive was missing. It also

seems common that lackluster gains are dismissed and blamed on the type of class or

students the teacher had that year. Sometimes, the curriculum was blamed as well, but

again no specific, by teacher, changes were sought because the teacher had "done their

job." The curriculum was "covered". The curriculum director and administration did

compare data across years and teachers but there is not a system in place to exemplify the

most effective teaching or to encourage open discussion or change in practice as a group

of educators. This was a lost opportunity to grow and learn as professionals. Everyone,

no matter how effective, could learn something from someone else's practice and discussion, and comparison should be encouraged. Discomfort and tough discussions were avoided and the trends continue year after year.

Was personal and sustained teacher growth stagnant? Failure to develop teacher performance was not due to a lack of new curriculum, new best practice, new trends, or wanting to do the best job possible. Pieces were missing. This same attitude was present at all three elementary schools where I had taught. Something needed to change on a sweeping level to ensure educators were doing what was best for students, even if it challenged educators out of our comfort zones and humbled us as people. I wanted to affect change on a large level and be part of a solution.

Educator and Student

I continued to look for ways to improve my own teaching and promote more collaboration from my team. I did the research and eventually proposed a team-taught classroom. My proposal was accepted and my co-teacher and I began to teach forty-two students in our one large classroom. My co-teacher and I specialized our teaching. My focus was literacy and my co-teacher focused on math. As co-teachers we were able to refine our teaching and learn from each other. We gained perspective from watching and from mutual-constructive feedback. Together we were forced to discuss teaching decisions and because of that we were more explicit in our methods and our lessons were purposeful and authentic. Both of us are committed to best practice and research-based learning. We virtually eliminated all worksheets, with the exception of some math practice sheets, and moved to authentic activities that proved mastery of skills and crossed curricular boundaries in application. Both of us experienced many benefits from

the countless open, honest, and judgment-free discussions we would have about our students every day, often multiple times each day. With ten years experience or more, we both said it was the best we had ever taught. As co-teachers, we constantly challenged each other and even asked the hard questions when necessary about whether an activity met our students learning goals or was just cute, or fun, or busy work.

I was aware that there was still quite a way to go toward ensuring all our students' needs were met. We could not just focus on what happened in our classroom. Some things were still out of our, co-educating, hands. Our classroom needed to share interventionists with our grade-level team and also be part of that bigger picture and larger pool of students in our grade level and school. Our close working relationship seemed to bother other teachers in our grade level, which was surprising and enlightening at the same time. My principal witnessed this behavior. My co-teacher and I were excluded or left out of grade-level discussions and decisions. Continuing to this day, the team trust was missing so we were not able to share our successes and failures or learn from others' classroom success. It seemed that our different, co-taught, setting challenged what the other grade-level teachers were doing, although it was never meant to be anything more than a different way - not better or worse. The challenge should have been positive. Yet, nothing our co-taught classroom did affected anyone else's methods even though we were always happy to share. We wanted to do things in a way that made sense to student learning for us and according to research. It became evident that any change to what had always been was seen as challenging. How would a PLC ever work? We needed training.

My co-teacher and I found other teachers in our school, district, and other districts, to be curious and excited. We had many observers, within and outside our district, but our own grade level never visited or even asked about our format. There have been other requests within our district to expand co-teaching and that is exciting. One other classroom was approved last year. As co-teachers, we continue to see improvements in our teaching and I absolutely see the connection to characteristics of a mini PLC within our classroom. It made me even more aware of a sense that something was definitely missing in our school's professional learning community. We, as a community, needed to be explicit in sharing what all our students needed to learn and how to ensure it was successfully learned. A PLC requires intent, collaboration, and purposeful action.

Our staff meeting topics supported the sense that there was a disconnect. Our school was implementing changes to our interventions. As a school, we were implementing mandatory grade-level PLC time with our administrator present. Everyone seemed to agree that there had to be better ways to handle student learning. There was not a consensus on how exactly to do it. I felt a large disconnect within our different instruction, curriculum, and interventions throughout our building. We were missing a common goal, accountability, and most importantly we were missing a valuable shared tool to ensure timely and accurate measurement for whole grade-level learning and intervention. As teachers, in my opinion, we were *focused on our own teaching*. Our focus was not on the students and their learning school wide. Teaching and learning was still not understood to be two different things. As a team of educators, we were missing

ownership of every student in our building. We, as a potential professional learning

community, needed a change.

Then I started to work on my graduate degree. Now I was also a student. I was

excited to be learning about new approaches to teaching and learning. This is where I was

introduced to the DuFour article that discussed professional learning communities. My

education world was rocked. My entire teaching perspective was forever changed from

that moment forward. I began to research the researcher, DuFour, to see what else he had

to say. DuFour's article was an "aha moment" that changed my energy toward education;

I was enlightened and excited again. It was then that I recognized my co-taught

classroom as a true PLC environment, albeit small. I felt like schools and education now

had a chance to become what I had been looking for all along. I had not known the

terminology to name the missing link. I am referring to DuFour's most profound and

simple thoughts, "Are we here to ensure students are *taught*, or are we here to ensure that

our students *learn*?" (2015, p. 103).

The Divide

The divide in education was embedded in the quote. In my opinion and

experience, many educators believe that their job is to go in their room, close the door,

and cover the curriculum.

Educators listen in staff meetings. Educators want to do the right thing for

students but time is so precious and time to practice implementing with our team

regularly is not easy to give. So, instead, teachers generally feel good knowing they had a

scope and sequence, they stuck to it, they taught it all. That is a big problem. All the

major components of a true professional learning community are absent. In my

experience, there had not been collaboration to refine teaching methods. There was no direct comparison of student data. It may have been uncomfortable to have these discussions but without them we had no honest questioning of ideas. In our meetings, no one asked what is the learning goal of that game (even though it often burned in my brain)? How will we measure if students mastered the skill? What will you do if they do not master the skill or even worse, if they learn it incorrectly? What do we all expect from this unit? What is our procedure to identify and intervene immediately for students who need more time?

The focus has not been on what the students were learning. There were no teacher created assessments forcing discussions on goals and measures. The emphasis on covering the curriculum was ever-present. Many staff members took it personally if the curriculum they helped select was questioned. There was also a problem with letting go of old habits and activities, so the expensive and research-based curriculum was diluted with created games and added worksheets that did not follow the most current research, which drove the reason behind the curriculum change. No one was asking the honest and tough questions. As a group of educators, we had missed the point. Now, the educators needed the education. We needed professional development on a school level so we could implement a professional learning community with fidelity. I saw this and wanted to be active in identifying the greatest areas of need and helping the administration recognize the many recurring roadblocks I had already noticed. As a school, were we even on the right path?

PLCs by Definition

There are many views and definitions of a professional learning community. For my research I am going to align with DuFour's idea. According to DuFour (2015), there are six essential or core elements that are necessary for a successful PLC. First, educators must work collaboratively with a planned and communicated commitment to each other about *how* they will work together. Trust is a huge factor in success. Second, the entire school must work interdependently to form a fundamental structure of collaboration toward their common goal with equal accountability. This includes fast and relevant interventions. Third, the team agrees to deliver a guaranteed curriculum that they created together so every student is getting the same opportunity to learn. Creating assessments is essential. Fourth, the team frequently gathers data using created and agreed upon assessments. Fifth, the entire school launches a school-wide intervention process that systematically and regularly identifies and supports students who have not met the learning targets. And last, the team looks at every teacher's data to improve the team's practices as individuals and as a grade-level unit. Everyone being open and accountable is essential. Interventions being school-wide and timely are also critical. There needs to be an urgency from every educator to improve their own practice, which requires open and honest exchanges about best practices according to student performance.

I think that within these essential characteristics of a successful PLC could lie the answer to guaranteed student achievement. I also see that mindset and perception regarding the PLC is a critical component. This is why paying attention to what the most effective members of a team or community are thinking, rather than doing, to drive their action (DuFour, 2015), is where most of my research will focus. Thoughts and beliefs

drive action. I think if a grade-level team is going through the motions without honest and complete collaboration and not believing in the potential of the PLC, effectiveness is lost.

My PLC Quest

As our new school year started my principal announced a new PLC format would be used at our school starting immediately. It was unbelievable timing. This was it! The light was growing and the path was clearing. I was excited and ready to go. Unfortunately, my next grade-level team meeting was a rude awakening. I could immediately tell that there was a complete lack of understanding of what a PLC was and lack of interest in how it was meant to operate. I think that people already had an idea in their head about what a PLC was and, just like with many over-used terms, the real meaning fell flat. According to Schmoker (2006) this misunderstanding of a PLC is very common. Schmoker (2006) stated, "Though most schools today claim to embrace professional learning communities (PLCs) and may even adopt their trappings, they usually fail to establish what ought to be every PLC's highest initial priorities" (p. 110). I witnessed this as my team had a definite gap between perceptions, beliefs, and values amongst us as well. My team was failing, although not intentionally, to establish the correct PLC priorities. There was also almost a palpable dislike toward the change and being told what to do when the administrator was not present to witness the interactions. The point was missed. My team wanted to focus on the bottom quartile of students (as was the past habit) and was angry or confused that those concerns were now placed with a school-wide endeavor. I suggested that we discuss what a PLC was so we could clarify our roles. There were a couple cursory nods and comments but my team was not with me.

As educators they did not seem fully vested in the change and it occurred to me how profound and correct DuFour's (2015) insights were on implementing a PLC:

> But my first bit of advice to those about to implement the PLC process is to focus less on what the educators in high-performing PLCs *do* and more on how the members of the organization *think*--the mindset of those educators. (p. 100)

I was now more determined than ever to understand how the effective members of a PLC think, as thoughts drive actions. How do effective teachers function and can they function on a PLC level without a maintained consensus toward a school-wide model as needed in a true PLC? It seemed possible in my classroom. Were successful grade-level teams also implementing some of the essential characteristics? I felt that finding the answer could help any grade-level team in any district.

Why a PLC Study

I believe that by looking at the two different schools' and then collecting data on teams of the same grade-level in different buildings I could detect patterns of repeated success for specific schools. I hope to interview members of two teams with 3 or more years experience to gather full insight of the team functioning. I see the importance in allowing the participants to tell their unique stories. According to Lather (1992) if I understand the participants stories and views in a case study, I will better be able to understand their actions which is my goal. Especially important will be my comparison of those interviews to current PLC research. I want to be able to rule out things that everyone believes, thinks, or does in their practice. I am looking for the characteristics that align with current research and appear similar in either or neither Building A or Building B's classrooms and meetings. I am looking for thoughts and actions that might

be absent in either building or how the thinking fits in with the classic PLC process. I want to measure the extent of professional trust and openness from one team compared to the other. I am interested whether members understand the actual role of a PLC and can recognize the main characteristics.

I will then analyze all the data and share my research, while maintaining confidentiality for all the subjects. I hope that this will lead my own increased understanding and findings that are transferable to any district for improved staff development that can help implement school-wide training and change to increase student achievement.

I am hopeful and driven in my research. I came to education because I love the possibility of affecting positive change for students every day. My corporate background gave me a different perspective through which to view school operations and personnel. I was lucky enough to be believed in and I believe in schools. I see room for change but after being inside several schools I also recognize the challenges in change.

Are characteristics of a professional learning community guiding student achievement? My research question aligns with Dufour's (2015) message, "A learning-focused culture understands that the school was not built so that the teachers have a place to teach--it was built so that the children of the community have a place to learn" (p. 104). These important ideas will be in my thoughts as I move forward with my research.

My literature review in chapter two will focus on several different areas of a professional learning community. I will start with literature explaining the history and evolution of a professional learning community. The historical literature review will include education reform and many founding and early researchers that lead to the

development of the PLC model. Research on the misconceptions of PLCs naturally leads

into literature defining the critical characteristics of a professional learning community.

While reviewing literature that discusses the critical characteristics of professional

learning communities, the research must acknowledge the roadblocks and struggles faced

as PLCs are initially implemented. My final large area of literature research will focus on

the importance of fidelity to the critical components of a PLC in order to sustain a

successful PLC to experience and ensure future student achievement. This literature

review will also discuss the role educator influence plays in a professional learning

community's success or lack of success.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

My PLC research is based on my personal quest to enhance and refine my own teaching practice. There have been many failed reforms and trends in education. I believe that a sustained PLC holds the key to growth in educators and student achievement and can endure the test of time if implemented with fidelity and awareness.

The district I researched experienced a trend in data between their two elementary schools that has yet to be explained. I hoped to identify, through interviews, any outlying tendencies that align with effective PLC characteristics that could explain the achievement at each school.

The following literature review seeks to answer the question: *Are characteristics of a professional learning community guiding student achievement?* The research explores the history of education reform and the evolution toward the characteristics of a professional learning community including literature of the early and founding PLC researchers. The literature review will then cover the most critical characteristics of a professional learning community. This area of literature review research could not be complete without including the roadblocks and struggles of initially implementing a PLC structure. The literature review explains the misconceptions of PLCs. The final area of literature review will discuss the educator's influence on fidelity in implementing a PLC as well as the role educators and administrators take in ensuring sustainability of a professional learning community to foster student achievement. The literature review

incorporates information from many field experts who explain how and why effective professional learning communities ensure student achievement.

History of Education Reform and Evolution Toward PLCs

Education and reform have been synonymous for decades, particularly in the second half of the twentieth century (Johnson, 2016). Increasing public concern over the future of education pushes most education reform. DuFour and Eaker (1998) explained the public concern by pointing to articles such as "Crisis in Education" published by *Life Magazine* (1958) and "What Went Wrong with U.S. Schools" published by *US News and World Report* (1958). The education reforms gained renewed momentum over time until a new movement, the Excellence Movement, surged toward change after the publication of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform* in 1983 by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. The report suggested that national security was at risk because student achievement was not on pace to protect the future. The focus of the movements held heavy accountability on teacher qualifications and practice driving the reforms (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). The report prompted nearly 300 state and national task forces to investigate public schools. The outcomes of all the investigations were not anything new, but did offer a consistent push toward more of everything, an intensification of what existed. Sadly, five years later, the summation of the education reforms was that there was nothing much accomplished or sustained.

The next movement involved a two-sided approach to improving education. According to DuFour and Eaker (1998), one side of the reform would look at establishing national education goals and standards. The other side would add balance by securing local autonomy to reach the goals. This site-based reform became known as the

Restructuring Movement. The restructuring reform gained popularity and optimism for

school reform heading into the 1990s with the promise that educators would jump on the

bandwagon (DuFour and Eaker, 1998). Educators and administrators responded in

general with a more purposeful examination of their professional practices and

heightened awareness that quality teaching impacts student achievement. Marzano,

Waters, and McNulty (2005) stated for successful 21st century learning, "The effective

school administrator must help staff members think of old problems in new ways" (p.

15).

Then another educational shift happened, an important shift introducing the

professional learning community, but not yet by name. Fullan (2014) discussed an

"instructional period" starting in the late '80s. Fullan stated, "it was in this period that

schools began to shift from a focus on the individual autonomy of the classroom and the

isolation of the school toward a focus on specific instructional practices that directly

affected student learning and achievement" (p. 11). Stewart (2014) supported this view

and moved the reforms even closer to professional learning communities. Stewart stated,

"Teacher learning has gone through a "reform" movement over the past decade as

prevailing belief links high-quality professional development (PD) to higher-quality

teaching and high-quality teaching to student achievement" (2014, p. 28). This

understanding of professional development is what led to a change in teaching practice

that was more active with improvements based in the teacher environment. Along with

those changes and adding the consistent support of peers, the professional learning

community structure was introduced (Stewart, 2014). McLaughlin and Talbert (1993)

furthered this idea by suggesting that veteran teachers will share their experience toward

mutual improvement of teaching practices for everyone in their collaborative team if given the appropriate opportunity to share. Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton, and Kleiner (2009) refined the definition and eventually the learning community concept became known as the professional learning community. According to DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker:

> The idea of improving schools by developing *professional learning communities* is currently in vogue. People use this term to describe every imaginable combination of individuals with an interest in education--a grade-level teaching team, a school committee, a high school department, an entire school district, a state department of education, a national professional organization, and so on. In fact, the term has been used so ubiquitously that it is in danger of losing all meaning. (2006, p. 2)

> Therefore, DuFour and associates (2006) believed, the PLC had now reached the

same critical juncture faced by other education reforms. The originating enthusiasm had given way to confusion about what fundamentally is necessary for the professional learning community to thrive and survive. The typical cycle of implementing any reform involves enthusiasm toward the change, confusion about the necessary actions of the initiative, implementation roadblocks, failure to see enough results quickly, abandonment of the reform, search for the next promising reform, and back through the cycle (DuFour et al., 2006). DuFour et al. (2006) believed that the education reform cycle for professional learning communities could be avoided if educators recognized and adhered to the most critical characteristics of the professional learning community. Extensive

training and guidance toward implementation and vital understandings are necessary for a successful PLC. So what is a true professional learning community?

Characteristics and Vital Understandings of a PLC

DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many's idea that "Inherent to a PLC are a persistent disquiet with the status quo and a constant search for a better way to achieve goals and accomplish the purpose of the organization" (2006, p. 13) exemplified their understanding of education and reform. The earlier review of the history of education reform has expressed persistent disquiet in education fueling a seemingly never-ending search for improvement. DuFour et al. (2006) expressed that a PLC structure could help to stop the cycle of reform failure.

PLC characteristics. DuFour and colleagues stressed collaboration and accountability in their PLC definition, "A PLC is composed of collaborative teams whose members work interdependently to achieve common goals for which members are mutually accountable" (DuFour et al., 2006, p. 11).

Reeves (2010) also believed in a PLC structure but had a little different definition. He focused on actions of educators as opposed to gained knowledge of educators and noted the importance of sustained change for PLC success:

> The greatest frustration for school leaders and classroom educators is the difference between what we know and what we do. We know what effective professional learning looks like. It is intensive and sustained, it is directly relevant to the needs of teachers and students, and it provides opportunities for application, practice, reflection, and reinforcement. (p. 23)

Owen (2014) combined aspects of both DuFour's team (2006) and Reeves' (2010) definitions when she explained her vision of PLC success as "Participants working together regularly over an extended timeline, shared values and vision, practical activities focused on student learning, taking an inquiry stance, being reflective and collaboration and sharing experiences" (p. 55). Owen (2014) saw Reeves' (2010) point about sustained timeline and she also saw DuFour et al.'s (2006) need for common goals and collaboration.

Moirao, Morris, Klein, and Jackson (2012) took a slightly different approach as their PLC definition focused more on the development of the teacher than on student achievement. Moirao et al. said, "Professional learning communities are key to the development, nourishment, and continued success of effective educators" (p. 3). DuFour certainly agreed. DuFour (2015) stated, "There has never been a greater worldwide consensus on how to improve student achievement. The key to improving schools is developing the capacity of educators to function as members of high-performing teams" (p. 98).

Professional learning community research goes beyond definitions to explain core or essential characteristics of effective PLCs. It is important to look at the varied ideals and recognize similarities and pay attention to potentially important differences if you want to truly understand effective PLC structures. DuFour (2015) recognized six essential aspects of the school culture for a PLC to be effective and successful:

1. Educators work collaboratively rather than in isolation and have clarified the commitments they have made to each other about how they will work together.

2. The fundamental structure of the school becomes the collaborative team in which members work interdependently to achieve common goals for which all members are mutually accountable.

3. The team establishes a guaranteed curriculum, unit by unit, so all students have access to the same knowledge and skills, regardless of which teacher they are assigned.

4. The team develops common formative assessments to frequently gather evidence of student learning.

5. The school creates systems of intervention to ensure students who struggle receive additional time and support for learning in a way that is timely, directive, diagnostic, and systematic.

6. The team uses evidence of student learning to inform and improve the individual and collective practices of its members. (p. 230)

Reeves' (2010), whose research preceded DuFour's research (2015), indicated that his ideal high-impact PLCs have only three essential characteristics:

1. High-impact professional learning is directly linked to student learning.

2. High-impact professional learning balances student results with a rigorous observation of adult practices, not merely a measurement of student results.

3. High-impact professional learning focuses on people and practices, not the programs. (p. 22)

Owens' (2014) findings, dating between Reeves (2010) and DuFour (2015), indicated many vital PLC elements such as "shared vision and values, collegiality, joint

practical activities and student learning data, teacher inquiry and leadership support and opportunities" (p. 54). There are common pieces present in each researcher's findings.

Moirao et al. (2012) also comprised a list of broad, and similar, characteristics that professional learning communities could use to assess their effectiveness:

1. Culture: Does the culture support teachers through the learning process? Are there forums for teachers to have meaningful conversations about teaching and learning?

2. Knowledge: Does the staff have a collective knowledge of research-based practices? Is there a common language for talking about teaching and learning?

3. Practice: Do teachers have opportunities to observe, talk about, and help refine each other's practice?

4. Achievement: Is the work having a positive impact on teacher performance and student learning? (p. 32)

All of the definitions and characteristics vary slightly in verbiage, order of importance, how to combine ideas, or which characteristics to stress as most critical. But there are definitely overriding and similar characteristics among all the researchers. It seems that all the researchers would agree with DuFour et al.'s (2006) general summation that PLCs are an "ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve" (p. 11).

PLC misconceptions. The research exposed that many researchers are frustrated with the overuse or misuse of the term professional learning community. Owen (2014)

said that the term PLC "is a current 'buzz' term in business and education contexts, seemingly referring to anything from decision-making committees to regular meeting groups or collegial learning teams" (p 54).

The research of DuFour et al. (2006) supported Owen's concern:

It has been interesting to observe the growing popularity of the term *professional learning community*. In fact, the term has become so commonplace and has been used so ambiguously to describe virtually any loose coupling of individuals who share a common interest in education that it is in danger of losing all meaning. (p. 10)

Watson also suggested the term PLC was in danger of losing meaning. According to Watson (2014) "Professional learning communities (PLCs) have become almost *de rigueur* in schools as a means to overcome the shortcomings associated with episodic, decontextualized professional development conducted in isolation from practice" (p. 18).

DuFour (2015) stated another concern that extends from misunderstanding in many schools, which claim to be functioning as a PLC structure, "They have avoided the real work necessary to implement the process because they assign a higher priority to preserving their traditional structure and culture" (p. 99).

The general feel of the literature expresses a mixture of misunderstanding, assumptions, existing beliefs, and individual expectations unfortunately faced by transitioning schools. All of these characteristics play roles in the transition process to a PLC. DuFour (2015) expressed many of the difficulties of the transition to a PLC in his statement that PLCs require, "Teachers to work together to research, try, and share best practices, analyze and constantly aim for high, internationally benchmarked standards,

analyze student data and plan instruction, map and articulate curriculum, and observe and coach each other" (p. 81).

The literature suggests that the transition requirements, necessary understandings, and vital elements of the researched PLC definitions and essential characteristics introduce many potential roadblocks for school cultures trying to implement a PLC structure.

Roadblocks to PLCs. Roadblocks to successfully implementing PLCs are numerous. Things that affect or are contrary to the main characteristics and definitions of a PLC are most dangerous to PLC success. The literature shared considerations regarding educator comfort, collaboration time, focus on what students are learning rather than what teachers are teaching, and clarity about what a PLC entails as essential to a PLC.

DuFour (2015) acknowledged "The cultural change necessary to promote high levels of learning for all students are certain to create anxiety for educators as they move from the comfort zone of traditional practice to a fundamentally different way of approaching their work" (p. 186). DuFour and Reeves (2016) stated that adult discomfort tends to lead to schools settling for a "PLC lite." The discomfort stems from being expected to facilitate sometimes-difficult conversations including peer critiques. The discomfort can also come from having to share assessment data or being observed and critiqued by peers. DuFour (2015) stated that the primary challenge in the transition to a PLC is change itself. DuFour stressed that schools cannot just tweak their existing cultures. The whole school must change its climate and function.

According to DuFour and Reeves (2016) there are four questions that are an excellent test to distinguish between a PLC Lite and an actual PLC:

1. What do we want students to learn?

2. How will we know when they have learned it?

3. What will we do if they have not learned it?

4. How will we provide extended learning opportunities for students who have mastered the content? (p. 70)

The literature review of the vital PLC characteristics necessitated a school-wide timely response to students needing help, as stated in number three above. According to DuFour (2015), this process requires "schools to develop highly effective, systematic interventions to provide students with additional time and support" (p. 190). Developing the system, creating time, and acquiring school-wide acceptance of a program are roadblocks.

The literature review of the essential characteristics also supported questions number one and two. What *do* we want students to learn and how will we know if they have *learned* it? DuFour (2015) stated, "When teams of teachers become more effective in creating high-quality assessments, it helps them to become more effective in their instruction (p. 186). DuFour (2015) went on to say, "It is not the product--the actual test--that leads to greater adult learning, it is the process of exploring together the question of how to gather the best evidence of student learning that leads to greater insights (p. 186). This process of developing new assessments takes time. This process also expects teachers to abandon existing curriculum supplied assessments, in whole or part, and create new assessments. This process also expects teachers to share their data and compare it against other teachers' data, which can be uncomfortable.

The common factor in all the literature regarding the essential characteristics of a PLC is collaboration. The common roadblock to collaboration is time to collaborate. According to DuFour (2015), the "lack of time for educators to work with colleagues is a distinctly American problem" (p. 79). DuFour (2015) pointed out that in the United States, teachers spend much more time delivering instruction than other countries. DuFour (2015) referred to statistics from the OECD, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, stating "Teachers in the United States devote approximately 1,051 hours to classroom instruction each year compared to OECD averages of 792 hours for elementary schools and 658 hours for secondary schools" (p. 78). DuFour (2015) went on to mention that the number of workday hours are similar for both groups. The OECD educators are collaborating and preparing for instruction as part of their scheduled routines. DuFour et al. (2006) strongly emphasized the importance of collaboration and avoiding the mistake of confusing motion with action. They stated:

It is the *process* of team members collaboratively building shared knowledge and collectively making decisions about curriculum and assessment that results in adult learning and improved professional practice. Beware of any action that removes teachers from the process or minimizes their role because in every instance the impact of the process will be diminished." (p. 92)

DuFour et al. (2006) identified these dangerous detours and shortcuts to avoid when implementing a PLC:

- Distributing state and district guidelines to individual teachers as a substitute for team dialogue

- Assigning a committee of teachers to establish the curriculum and present it to their colleagues

- Purchasing the curriculum

- Allowing the textbook to determine the curriculum

- Substituting district benchmark assessments, textbook assessments, or commercially prepared assessments for team-developed common assessments

- Failing to include team dialogue based on evidence of student learning as part of the curriculum and assessment process

DuFour and Reeves (2016) discussed real PLCs and discourage schools from calling their structure a PLC if they have not invested the hard work that is necessary to become a PLC. Removing the roadblocks to achieving a true PLC falls then to educators. DuFour and Reeves (2016) stated:

Educators must focus on the four questions of PLCs as an integral part of their meetings, use common formative assessments in a way that has a specific effect on teaching and learning, and analyze the data not as a way to humiliate teachers but rather as a way to elevate the learning of students and faculty members. Finally, real PLCs include specific interventions that lead to measurable improvements in student performance. When the PLC process is implemented deeply and sustained over time, schools can experience dramatic improvements in learning by both students and adults. PLC Lite is an exercise in futility that helps neither students nor the educational systems that serve them. (p. 71)

Lujan and Day (2010) agreed that there are perceived roadblocks to collaboration during the implementation process of a PLC but believe that the roadblocks can be alleviated by addressing teacher and staff perceptions. The literature review must transition to looking at the role of the individual teacher in the PLC process and the teacher's role in PLC effectiveness.

The Contributors to PLC Effectiveness

Literature by Lujan and Day (2010) and DuFour and Eaker (1998) agreed that, if established correctly, PLCs should be able to address roadblocks to collaboration by insisting that allocated time be required and included in the school day and school year.

Time to collaborate. Time to collaborate is important because learning is a social process. Caine and Caine (2010) explained "not all conversations lead to useful learning. The point, however, is that although people vary in how much they like to learn and work together, the brain/mind is social. Learning in the real world has always been a partially social process." (p. 21) This is true for students and professional educators alike, for all learners.

Garmston and Wellman concurred, saying, "a collection of superstar teachers working in isolation cannot produce the same results as interdependent colleagues who share and develop professional practices together" (as cited in Moirao et al., 2012, p. 32). It is important for team members to not settle for coordination but to insist on and seek true collaboration (DuFour, 2015).

Teachers need clarity in what is expected to adapt to a new PLC culture. DuFour (2015) explained, "Educators who actually engage in the right work in their collaborative teams find it exceptionally valuable" (p. 135). DuFour's (2015) literature reminds us of

the "fundamental purpose of a PLC is to ensure high levels of learning for students, the goals that team members establish should specifically call for evidence of improved learning for the students they serve" (p. 125). DuFour (2015) discussed the need for the team goals to be results-oriented rather than activity oriented which supports DuFour's (2015) overarching idea that schools are a place for focus on student learning not on teachers teaching. But as Reeves (2010) explained "most educators have little experience collaborating with their colleagues to determine their learning needs" (p. 24).

Educators are key. Educators are key to effective PLC implementation but often are ill prepared or stuck in the existing system. Reeves (2010) stated:

The greatest frustration for school teachers and classroom educators is the difference between what we know and what we do. We know what effective professional learning looks like. It is intensive and sustained, it is directly relevant to the needs of teachers and students, and it provides opportunities for application, practice, reflection, and reinforcement. (p 23)

DuFour (2015) supported Reeves (2010), "Members of a PLC realize that all of their efforts must be assessed on the basis of results rather than intentions" (p. 13). DuFour (2015) explained that team members must share accountability, "A PLC is composed of collaborative teams whose members work interdependently to achieve common goals for which members are mutually accountable" (p. 11). Being mutually accountable means that the whole team is accountable for all student learning and they work together to design assessments then refine and deliver effective curriculum for all students, not just the students in their specific classroom.

DuFour et al. (2006) acknowledged the "disruptive change" a new culture or structure that requires mutual accountability could foster. The mutually accountable role is new and potentially a source of extreme conflict in PLC teams. DuFour's team (2006) even suggested that the absence of conflict might be indicative of teams only implementing superficial changes to their structure and thinking. They also insisted on that the best way to handle poor attitudes and resistors to changes is to not "focus on the attitude--focus on the behavior" (DuFour et al., 2006, p 237). DuFour's team continued on and suggested that changes in attitude will actually follow changes in behavior rather than precede the behavior. They argued, "Work that is designed to require people to *act* in new ways creates the possibility of new experiences. These new experiences, in turn, can lead to new attitudes over time" (p. 237).

DuFour et al. (2006) emphasized the teacher's importance and the teacher's role by stating, "The challenge then, is not to avoid conflict… The challenge is to learn how to manage conflict productively" (p. 237). Conflict management largely falls to teachers within their teams. Most school cultures and past teacher experiences tend toward avoiding conflict. Iqbal (2014) confirmed the perceived necessity for conflict avoidance when she referred to the high stakes nature of teachers seeking tenure and the resulting artificiality of peer reviews. Iqbal (2014) stated "elements of academic culture, especially the value placed on collegiality, shape feedback practices in important ways" (p 108). Collegiality can result in useless feedback and wasted time. Time is perceived as wasted if there is not growth for the education process. This can happen when teammates aim to protect the collegial atmosphere rather than ask tough questions or give critical feedback of peers.

Stewart (2014) offered a valid concern about trust and honesty among PLC teams and their impact on PLC success. Steward said, "If members of a learning group do not feel comfortable together, they may not be able to offer or receive feedback in a constructive manner" (2014, p. 28). The failure of teams to become cohesive and share constructive feedback results in a cycle of failed improvement, which undermines the success of the PLC (Stewart, 2014). Stewart (2014) created a list of six Partnership Principles to help groups establish honest feedback and successful group work:

1. Equity: Teachers have input in the planning of the professional learning activities rather than being required to attend professional development

2. Choice: Teachers choose what and how they learn

3. Voice: Professional learning empowers and respects teacher voices

4. Reflection: Reflection is recognized as an integral part of learning and authentic dialogue is enabled

5. Praxis: Learning is applied to real-life practice

6. Reciprocity: Participation is an expectation so all offer and receive feedback. (p 29)

Hallam, Smith, Hite, Hite, and Wilcox (2015) acknowledged trust as critical for implementing a successful PLC model as well. Teachers will need to compare data in PLCs. "The use of data in these interactions initially creates a sense of vulnerability with team members, which necessitates the development of trust" (p. 195). Hallam et al. (2015) supported other literature when the team expressed "without a high degree of trust, teachers may not share this critical information, thus limiting their growth as

teachers and impairing individual and team's effectiveness" (p. 195). Hallam et al. (2015) defined five facets of trust:

1. Benevolence: Caring, extending good will, having positive intentions, supporting teachers, expressing appreciation, being fair, guarding confidential information

2. Honesty: Having integrity, telling the truth, keeping promises, honoring agreements, having authenticity, accepting responsibility, avoiding manipulation, being true to oneself

3. Openness: Engaging in open communication, sharing important information, delegating, sharing decision making, sharing power

4. Reliability: Having consistency, being dependable, demonstrating commitment, having dedication, being diligent

5. Competence: Setting an example, engaging in problem solving, fostering conflict resolution, working hard, pressing for results, setting standards, handling difficult situations, being flexible. (p. 196)

Hallam et al. (2015) referred to their above facets when they expressed "even the best and brightest teachers cannot accomplish high-quality teaching if school environments lack trust" (p. 196). Teachers must fulfill their roles and encourage their team members to also fulfill their responsibilities. "Collaborative team trust develops when participants fulfill their assignments and responsibilities and when they show mutual kindness and patience" (Hallam et al., 2015, p. 209).

DuFour's (2015) literature explained the need to focus on developing teacher-collaborate groups:

A study of districts that implemented the PLC process for a minimum of three years attempted to ascertain why some districts experienced dramatic gains in student achievement while in others achievement remained flat. The study reveals that both high- and low-yield districts provide time for teachers to collaborate. The difference is achievement in those districts was a function of what occurred during the team meetings. (p. 134)

DuFour (2015) also went on to clearly stated the role teachers must take in their own development and the success of their students:

When professionals become aware that there are better ways to meet the needs of those seeking their services, they have an obligation to apply new practices. The great majority of American educators know better. It is time for them to do better. They must acknowledge that it is within their sphere of influence to create conditions that lead to higher levels of student and adult learning, and they must accept responsibility for doing so. (p. 99)

With the understanding of the literature and existing research, I examined what the teachers on two separate teams (same grade level), at two different elementary buildings within the same district, thought were the most important or effective characteristics of teaching and how they, therefore, function. I examined the trust levels within the teams and perceived cohesiveness. I hoped to identify which, if any, characteristics of a PLC were guiding their success toward effecting student achievement.

Summary

We learned that education reform is not new. Education reform has trended toward cyclical failures encouraged by public opinion and enabled by legislation. PLCs

have the potential to stop the cycle of failure and sustain a learning environment focused on student learning rather than on teachers teaching. PLC success is dependent on purposeful action by collaborative teams that possess attributes critical to honesty and trust for professional adult and student learning to advance. The literature clearly outlined that for a PLC to be successful the teachers need to adhere to the vital characteristics of a PLC and avoid PLC Lites and short cuts by actually doing the work and facing the changes and conflict expected when a new structure challenges old habits and beliefs. Can attributes of successful PLCs exist outside the functioning successful community environment of a PLC that could explain bolstered success?

I used this reviewed research to guide the construction of my interview tool as I prepared to collect data for my own learning and research and to eventually share toward the advance my own district's understanding of how PLC characteristics can affect student achievement.

CHAPTER THREE

Methods

My literature review provided research in the history of education reform and the

development of the professional learning community in an education setting, including

the roadblocks and the educators' role. The research explained the most essential

characteristics of a professional learning community and the misconceptions that lead to

failed or incomplete professional learning community environments. The literature

further outlined the role of educator influence in PLC success. It discussed the

importance of educator understanding, fidelity to the PLC characteristics, the importance

of trust in the PLC team, and allowing regular time to collaborate. A successful PLC

requires collaborative action with a mutually accountable goal on student learning.

In this chapter I discuss my case study methodology in which, following Yin's

case study methods (2003) I will focus my study to answer a "why" question without

manipulating my participants behavior and while looking to understand their actions and

beliefs in the context of their work. I believed a case study method was appropriate

because the boundaries between the phenomenon and context were not yet clear (Yin,

2003.) I interviewed teachers from the same grade level but working at two different

schools. I wanted to determine if any essential characteristics of a PLC were in place as I

review the practices of two schools that have experienced different outcomes on high-

stakes tests. I used a multiple-case study method because it allows a researcher to analyze

both within and across settings, which I needed to do. School A had achieved higher

scores than School B, within the same district, on high-stakes tests. Success was defined by public high-stakes testing data comparing the two different elementary schools within the same district. This data was shared at school board meetings and showed a trend of success at School A. The multiple-case study allowed me to understand the similarities and differences between the schools. The discrepancy between schools had not been explained up to this point by district staff or administration. According to Yin (2003) this type of multiple-case study allows the researcher to predict similar results or contrasting results but for predictable reasons which speaks to the question of this research. This case study was designed to address the following research question: *are characteristics of a professional learning community guiding student achievement?*

Research Setting and Subjects

The following case study took place in a larger rural district with two elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school, in the midwest. Table 1 shows the specific student demographics for each elementary building being researched.

Table 1.

Demographic Data of District Elementary Populations

School A Percentile	Demographic Detail	School B Percentile
85	White	90
4	Black	3
9	Hispanic	6
0	Native American	1
2	Asian	1
4	English Learner	2
13	Special Education	11

| 30.2 | Free/Reduced Lunch | 29.5 |
| 5 Students | Homeless | 4 Students |

Table 2 shows the percent proficiency over the past three years of MCA testing from the Minnesota School Report Card Section on the Minnesota Department of Education Website. Both schools have the same student to teacher ratios. Support staff ratios are also equal at each school.

Table 2.

Percent Proficiency on High-Stakes Tests

School A Percentage	Testing Year	School B Percentage
83.1	2015	71.9
84.9	2014	72.6
88.5	2013	76.3

The schools serve students in grades kindergarten through fifth; this particular research was done focusing on one grade level in particular to control the size of the research data pool. The same grade level was researched in both schools for consistency. Only teachers with three or more years of experience were interviewed. I chose three years because I wanted to interview teachers who were working during the time the MCA data was collected whom also had some teaching experience. I wanted enough teachers to show potential patterns of behavior. I interviewed six teachers, split nearly evenly between the two schools. Using multiple points of view and experiences allowed me to follow procedures for a rigorous qualitative case study (Baxter & Jack, 2008) to explore or describe a phenomenon in context using a variety of data sources.

Rationale and Relevance of Case Study

Based on the research in chapter two, it is clear that professional learning communities are an education reform with the ability to sustain long-term student success (DuFour et al., 2006). Considering that neither administration nor educators have been able to isolate any specific reason for the long-term success at School A, the reason for their continued student achievement may lie in the way the team thinks and functions. Characteristics of a PLC could be present and effectively implemented without the team realizing that it is functioning in part as a PLC. According to Mills (2014) research should enhance the lives of children and also enhance the lives of professionals. I believed this research will accomplish both goals as well as expand and define the potential characteristics of a PLC. Using a multiple-case study approach allowed me to analyze the difference between organizations and then compare the findings to the existing research on professional learning community characteristics.

The literature stated that teachers' thinking and feelings regarding their roles in a team community affect their action. Part of the interviews will also discuss trust among the team. The literature also stated that PLC success is dependent on action and collaboration. I hope to isolate any difference in how and when the teams collaborate. Johnson (2016) used a similar survey tool to research superintendents regarding PLC implementation in Minnesota Public Schools. Sims and Penny (2014) did similar research and interviewed teachers but they were examining a failed PLC. I wanted to use the same approach to find and share successful actions and characteristics of a PLC.

By taking a closer look at what caused teachers to take action and what the action looked like, combined with what the teacher understood to be important and effective teaching, we could identify motivation and explain some of the teacher's role in a PLC.

Research Design and Methods

In the summer of 2016 I conducted interviews of six teachers, all with English as their first language, in the same district. The interviews were held in various comfortable and private settings and lasted approximately ninety minutes to one hundred twenty minutes. Each participant was contacted by email to arrange the interview and given a brief explanation so they could decide if they were interested. Each participant signed a letter of consent acknowledging that I was seeking information for action research and assuring confidentiality.

I explained that the research is published and that because of the public exposure and to protect them, as subjects, my research had to clear Human Subjects at my university and was also approved by their district administration. I addressed any questions and offered an opportunity for them to read my completed research and included where to find my project once it was completed as well. I refused to disclose any information shared by any other teachers or disclose who else was being or had already been interviewed. All subjects were given the opportunity to withdraw as a subject. I also explained that their name would not appear anywhere on the interview form. I listed them as Interview A through F. I also did not keep a list of their names or emails within my research.

The interviews were structured and formal, with scripted open-ended questions, to ensure that all the same questions were asked in the same order for each participant (see

Figures below). The interview question categories follow the research interviews completed by Johnson (2016) in his dissertation researching PLCs. The participant was always given extended time to respond. The interviews were recorded when possible but everything was also written down. The participants also had the opportunity to add more open-ended information when and where they wanted during the interview. Immediately, or as soon as possible, following each interview I transcribed the responses and coded them so I would not forget anything. Coding is important to identify themes and connections within the answers. The interviewee was given an opportunity to review the transcriptions to assure I had a clear understanding of all their ideas and conversation and to remove any potential of my personal bias in recording or understanding. I then scanned the interviews and saved them on a disk which is kept locked in a safe deposit box and unlabeled. I shredded all the paper copies of the interviews and deleted the recordings as soon as transcriptions were complete.

Figures. The figures include the interviewers' responses following each question in random order to protect anonymity. The same interviewee's responses do not fall on the same letter each time. If the interviewee offered more than one answer I included both. If the interviewee refrained from answering it is not noted. My interview topic categories were modeled after the dissertation work of Johnson (2016) who studied Minnesota PLCs using these same interview categories with district superintendents. The questions are not necessarily the same due to relevance of audience.

In all answers, I am withholding specifics if necessary to protect identities as some answers could identify my interviewees. I have removed names and inserted positions or pronouns as needed as well.

Figure 1.

Demographics

1. How many years have you been teaching?

    a. Ranged from 4 years to 29 years

2. Which grade levels have you taught?

    a. Ranged from Kindergarten through 5th grade

3. Have you taught in other districts?

    a. Yes

    b. no

4. How many students are in your class? Is that typical of prior years?

    a. 24 or 25 this year but may have ranged from 23 to 27 on list at one point

    b. Student counts were typical of prior years

5. Do you have any extra training or degrees?

    a. Ranged from reading certificates to master's degrees and administrative

       training

Figure 2.

Focus on Learning

1. Do you believe all students can learn?

    a. Yes

    b. Not the severely handicapped

    c. Absolutely

    d. At some level

2. Do you post learning targets?

a. Not consistently

b. Better when we could use them year after year, premade

c. Yes but i don't use them as administration would expect

d. Yes

e. We have to

3. How do you use them?

a. Talk about them at the beginning and during the lesson

b. Talk about them in the morning message

c. Post by gathering spot

d. Try to refer to them at the end of the lesson too, about 75% of time

e. Not referred back to during other lessons or post lesson

f. Ask how can you share this with your family or friends

g. What can I do for you tomorrow to help with this target

4. Do students understand and use the targets?

a. If written in language they can understand

b. Students don't seem to use the targets

c. Some students, higher students will refer to targets while working with peers

d. To some extent but they don't use them

e. Possibly a quarter of class understand and really use the targets

f. Making them age appropriate is accused of dumbing down targets but it makes them useful to students

g. Not sure they ever really use them

      h. They know where they are if asked

5. How do you decide, as a teacher, when to move on to the next skill or lesson? (Student mastery, coverage model, etc.)

      a. Unfortunately we are pushed as a district to move each day by curriculum demands

      b. I have to move on but if possible I try to reteach in strategy groups or during activities/centers

      c. A lesson a day, combine and cut Fridays lessons in the teacher's manual

      d. Move on during most lessons, skip most of reader's theatre week activities keeping only the fluency work to catch up

      e. Cut week 3 activities to do MCA prep

      f. Skip social and science block to extend math centers/activities so I can reteach small groups

      g. Informal assessment but mostly by curriculum demands

      h. During math practice work I call small groups that need help

6. What is your procedure or system to ensure additional time for interventions and re-teaching?

      a. Used all available help, this year a math corp helper volunteered 7 hours a week

      b. Left on your own to figure it out, no district help

      c. One-on-one during recess

      d. Cafe or Daily 5 groups so I can work on skills with students

      e. Use the Fluency week (reader's theatre week) or math centers

f. Very hard because you are locked into a schedule with block I/E times

g. Daily 5 can allow for interventions if the groupings are fluid which is hard

h. Have to move on no matter what and figure it out, need to finish curriculum

i. Skip extra recess for study hall or instruction

j. Parent volunteers

k. Homework

7. What do you do when students already know the material?

a. Enrichment for some math concepts if center time

b. This is a challenge, we can only do so much and the students that need help have to demand your first attention

c. Let leaders lead small groups

d. Move on

e. Usually nothing, I wish it were different but that is the reality

f. Math is easier than reading but daily 5 helps

g. Challenge worksheets if I have them from other years or old curriculum

8. How long is a typical lesson?

a. Varies by topic and how new the material is to the students

b. 7 minutes for some or up to 55 for others, social and science run long

c. Longer for introductory lessons or hard concepts

d. 10 to 15 minutes

e. Longer than they should be

f. Hard to get whole class together so the lessons are long when I get everyone in one place, I have to use the time

g. Curriculum does help with daily 5 now, seems to make sense if you use it

h. Theme teaching would help but it's hard to fit in, always have to cut out something to make it work

Figure 3.

Collaborative Culture

1. How often do you meet as a team?

    a. Way too often with not much getting done

    b. More often than necessary because it takes all our prep

    c. One to three times a week

    d. Once for planning, once for PLC, usually again to finish planning

    e. 2-3 times a week organized

    f. We meet together and then in smaller groups to finish

    g. Not everyone comes all the time

    h. Very often

    i. Usually once and then as needed or alternating weeks for PLCs

2. When do you meet? How long do the meetings last?

    a. Mornings

    b. Prep

    c. After school

    d. Entire time of prep

    e. 45 minutes or longer

    f. 40-50 minutes

    g. 40 minutes

    h. Every other week sometimes

3. Do you have enough time to collaborate fully? What is missed, if anything?

    a. No

    b. Very dysfunctional

    c. Yes because we do it when available in smaller groups like after school but then not everyone can come and decisions still have to be made

    d. Never seems like enough time, lack training and organization for teams

    e. No, often deterred by other staff or committee meetings

    f. Meetings are dominated by other committee updates or news

    g. No, they do not keep us on the same page for our students

    h. Often turns into gossip

4. Who attends the meetings?

    a. Just the team usually

    b. Team

    c. Anyone who can come

    d. PLCs we have an administrative rep present but not active usually or reading specialist or title teacher as invited

    e. Principal and team for PLCs

    f. Title teachers can be invited if a student is being discussed

5. Does your team have a clear goal for your meetings?

    a. Not clearly communicated

b. Not really

c. No

d. Planning

e. Sometimes if a student is brought forward

f. Usually not sure what to bring

g. Usually ends in frustration, Title teacher trumps classroom teacher with little exposure to students

h. In the beginning it seemed like our Administrator had a script but later they were quiet and more of an observer

i. Not sure exactly what is supposed to be done

6. Which students are focused on during the meetings?

a. Struggling students

b. Any one brought forward by a teacher

c. Kids not getting services they need

d. At risk kids

e. Nominated students do not get equal time if someone is very demanding about their student

f. Title teacher makes decision based on their limited exposure to student

g. Classroom teachers do not get much say

7. Do you write assessments as a team?

a. No

b. District curriculum director wants us to use the assessments provided

c. We might tweak them afterwards for next year

      d. Nope

      e. Not really, we modify assessments if we think it didn't work

8. Do you discuss the desired outcomes of a unit before teaching the unit? Do you decide how to measure the outcomes?

      a. No, we used to years ago

      b. Might tweak them to exclude non-tested items on the MCA

      c. State standards and MCA tests determine the goals

      d. We might point out weird words which is basically teaching to the test

      e. No, not really

      f. Individual planning mostly

Figure 4.

Collective Inquiry

1. Do you learn together as a team? Can you give me an example?

      a. No

      b. Not outside of staff meetings or workshops

2. When you get a new curriculum, what is your approach? (Completely vested or keep old trusted items) Does your whole team share the same approach?

      a. Completely vested at first and modify as we see fit in following years

      b. I hold onto old resources and treasured projects

      c. I add some things to make it fun like games or activities I find

      d. Vested, I trust the research behind the program

      e. Vested

      f. It's hard to eliminate things that have always worked

3. What causes a shift in your thinking or practice?

    a. Research if interesting

    b. A student may force a shift

    c. Training supported by research or an excited co-worker

    d. District expectations

    e. Passion in certain subjects

    f. Compulsion to keep up with my team mates

4. Do you have a system for regularly sharing any data across the team?

    a. No system or regularity

    b. Not technically, based on MCA data for the NEXT teacher

    c. No system, no consistent sharing

    d. Some people are too uncomfortable with it

    e. Nothing organized

5. Do you compare data as a team? Which data is used? How often do you compare?

    a. Can't think of a time when it was discussed

    b. Not everyone is open minded

    c. Younger staff seem to roll eyes

    d. Maybe if a teacher notices a bad test question

    e. Veteran teachers resistant to new ideas

6. What happens after the data is compared or a test is taken?

    a. Individualized by teacher

    b. Might discuss a change for next year as a team

    c. Reteach problem areas

     d. Let parents know that practice is needed at home

7. Does the data drive instruction? How?

     a. MCA data - no, never see any growth measured so it means nothing

     b. Not really, I'm not sure I understand exactly how to apply the data

     c. There's always the push to keep moving so it's limited

     d. MCA practice tests drive instruction and teaching toward test areas because it's so pounded into our heads

     e. We use MCA practice tests to create practice packets around January

     f. Not for everyone

     g. I'd say not outside of MCA practice data

Figure 5.

Action Orientation

1. Do you change your professional practice based on data or learning from colleagues?

     a. I would try but I don't ever get the data and I've asked for it

     b. I could be motivated by data because I'm competitive

     c. Sometimes I'm driven by colleagues sharing from other districts or workshops

     d. If I feel lousy about how a lesson or unit went, I motivate myself, so data

     e. Student based mainly, too many curriculums and ideas come and go

     f. Not MCA or district data, it's always arbitrary

2. How, do you believe, you affect change in your students' results?

     a. I'm not sure

    b.   Sharing their strengths

    c.   Knowing kids and having a connection with them

    d.   It can depend on the class but making sure they understand what is taught

    e.   Parent communication

3. How do you decide, as a team, if an activity is to be used (research based, measurable outcomes, used it in the past, busy work, looks fun)?

    a.   Usually it is just presented and you circle your name if you want copies

    b.   Use it if you want it

    c.   Theme packets are already available

    d.   Creating can get out of control and competitive

    e.   We try to stick to the curriculum

    f.   There's not a lot of time for extra items with these curriculums

    g.   You'd have to cut something to do activities and there's not time

    h.   People need to stop trying to reinvent the wheel

4. Who determines which students get interventions? How is it determined?

    a.   Lead title teacher

    b.   Very disconnected from classroom teacher so no idea

    c.   Title told us

    d.   Positions for students were determined based on staffing, Dibels was used but old data and no input from classrooms

5. How often are intervention results revisited? How quick after assessment can a change be made to intervention groups?

    a.   Maybe a trimester but it was hard to tell

b.   No follow up so I had no idea if the student was successful

c.   Exited positions were not always filled with new students

d.   We had no control or input so it was meaningless

e.   Each trimester, so not timely

f.   Not based on skill or success, more by trimesters

g.   Lots of classes were cancelled on short days for data but it was never shared with us

h.   Only revisited if we asked and then it was still very hush hush

i.   Towards the end of the year, nothing happened at all

j.   We felt it wasn't working and our voice didn't matter

k.   Seemed like a pet project for administrators to protect

l.   Very hard to share with parents because data was not shared

m. It was not fluid enough to serve the students as skills were changing

n.   No one spoke up at district title meeting so it sounded like each school was not having problems with the system in the meeting but that wasn't the case

6.   How do you ensure that all students learn? How do you ensure the right students get enrichment or intervention as needed?

a.   On my own, I focused on my own room and what I could get to or manage

b.   Study hall in place of extra recess and I used it for checking in with students

c.   As I see a problem or pattern but it was as time permitted during IE or recess

    d. Gut feeling mostly, no reassessing or pre or post testing

    e. It wasn't up to us because we never saw the data so the PLCs failed

    f. During practice time in math

    g. Ultimately it is my responsibility so I communicate to parents and intervene when and where I can during the school day, it is very stressful and challenging

Figure 6.

Continuous Improvement

1. Do you discuss, as a team, how to improve instruction? How often? What does this sound or look like?

    a. A little, never talked about small groups and that's where we needed help

    b. Sometimes during planning but not everyone comes

    c. Some will share, some won't or at least not there in a meeting

    d. Some teachers share if they had a really successful lesson or project but it wasn't often well received and it was the SAME teacher over and over with gifted kids

    e. We don't and I would challenge anyone to come up with an example if they say we do

    f. We could at PLC and planning meetings if you were that type

    g. It was more talk of success than instruction or "how-to" help students

2. Do you discuss how to improve student achievement?

    a. All the time, very frustrating to meet MCA demands

    b. Lack of flexibility, not enough time to intervene as needed

   c. There's more bragging about results than discussing or sharing how it was taught

   d. Not as much as we should, we compare the two schools more than anything

   e. No one knows where they stand, it could be eye opening as a professional in both a good and bad light

   f. The motivation isn't there because there's no real accountability except for whole schools or grade levels, teachers aren't accountable

   g. We need data that measures growth from beginning of the year to the end of the year, then you are accountable. Year to year doesn't measure anything for the staff. Even better if it gave us a mid-year growth as well.

   h. We tried to stick to the curriculum and best practices to eliminate busy work or pet projects, this is always hard with new curriculum

3. Do you reflect on your own practice based on these discussions and/or data?

   a. We did weekly reflections for non-tenured staff but they became very repetitive and they weren't discussed for growth or to change practice

   b. Yes, tried to be mindful to incorporate more fun activities using the MCAs most challenging concepts and find activities to address problems

   c. I write detailed sub plans each night so I am forced to reflect and it helps me teach the next day with purpose and intent

   d. I try to avoid games and gimmicks even though they are tempting and attractive to parents and community members sometimes

   e. I think we always reflect in one way or another

    f.   Not formally

4. Do you see improved instruction as a workshop exercise or a daily goal?

    a.   Daily goal

    b.   Never a workshop exercise

    c.   Need to change every day and every year, can't rely on the old even if it's easier

5. Is there anything else that could help your team improve?

    a.   New eyes, need to look at standards and remove the clutter

    b.   Reduce time spent on old units or old curriculum, stop reinventing the wheel

    c.   Teachers need to move to avoid becoming complacent

    d.   More time to work on theme units and social sciences with less stress on MCAs

    e.   Extra recess

    f.   Admin needs to put their foot down on created games and activities, I shouldn't have to fight constantly to insist we use curricular items as researched

    g.   Flexibility in our day or schedule

    h.   Less committee meetings

    i.   Assigned team leaders with leadership skills and training that keep accountability

    j.   Less wasted time

Figure 7.

Results Oriented

1. How do you measure your effectiveness as a teacher?

    a. I struggle with this because I have asked for my data to know where I stand and I cannot get it, it could be informative

    b. I don't, not my job, I do my best with what I have

    c. Year to year is not anything, I'd like growth measurements for my students

    d. There's so little data that is not subjective, sometimes MCA's but only who didn't pass and that doesn't help me overall

    e. When you can see kids use a concept or transfer a skill

    f. Gauge it on the kids or I take the blame if not successful

    g. Sometimes it's about a student coming back to you years later and remembering a lesson or activity

2. What evidence do you use?

    a. Informal assessments

    b. If I have to bring students up at PLC or not

    c. If students don't know something I just recently taught or introduced

    d. Data plots

    e. Own judgment with Cafe strategies

    f. Confident judgment if a veteran, could be a lot of guessing if new because no useful data to promote professional change

3. What do students do when they are done with an assignment in class?

    a. Activity packets, like a Thanksgiving theme, etc.

b. Authentic reading or writing

c. Finish incomplete or missing work

d. Worksheets or activities that are created or kept from prior years

e. Drawing in a notebook that they may later write about

f. Silent reading

4. Thoughts on homework?

a. There are a lot of skills that need to be practiced with the MCA demands

b. They need math and reading every night

c. I'm not a fan, it doesn't tie to student success

d. I think most students can finish or get a great start during our study hall with guided help

e. We correct as a group, I don't worry about their score but the practice as we review the problems and ideas

f. Parents expect homework

g. It needs to be scored

h. It's just practice and should be limited

Figure 8.

Other Factors

1. Who leads meetings?

a. The squeakiest wheel

b. Sometimes we have an agenda so whoever sends it

c. The loudest always leads and controls the meetings with her buddy

d. Goes back and forth between two

e. Reading rep lately or administrator if they are there

f. We may just pass the clipboard

2. Do you feel like you have a say in decisions?

a. Quietly I do, when in my own room I decide what I will or will not do

b. I feel less and less respected

c. Enough to do my own thing

d. May not share opinion but I always listen

e. Not completely

3. Is anyone's opinion given more weight than others?

a. Definitely, some people listen more to some than others

b. It would help if there was a designated leader or hierarchy

c. They sure think so but it works against them

d. Depends

e. Squeaky wheel

f. Maybe

4. How is conflict handled?

a. Sometimes we have had to involve the administrator

b. Usually there is hurt feelings that really linger

c. We have had many conflicts over special projects or opportunities

d. It's incredibly awkward and we try to avoid conflict at the cost of opinions

e. Usually the issue is just dropped when tension arises

f. It has caused division in the team

g. We try to talk it through using a clipboard to pass and voice concerns

h. Everyone is just so passionate that you have to remember to step back

5. How would you describe the trust factor on your team?

    a. We have had assigned jobs not completed as expected and that is tough

    b. Pretty trusting

    c. All good people but too competitive as professionals

    d. It's divided but everyone seems to have someone to talk to

    e. Not great

6. Are you comfortable enough to ask tough questions and deep discussions? Will everyone share their data when they feel like they need help with their practice?

    a. No

    b. It's easier to just take a copy and throw it out

    c. I share but it's hard to tell if people are listening

    d. Yes, I think we all will

    e. Yeah, if it's for a student that needs help or to get title

    f. Not with data

    g. Yes, but comfortable enough to just do my own thing so I don't care

    h. Enough of us seem to be willing to talk and listen

7. Do you view your team as above, typical, or below in this area? What would help? What might be the problem areas?

    a. Above average in working together

    b. Above average as people but below average as professionals

    c. Typical I guess, every team has its issues

    d. Problem is related to people staying in grades too long

e. People need to be split up to avoid ganging up and being bullies

f. People become complacent

g. More guidance or training for PLC meetings

h. Personality testing or strength focus could help every team grow

8. What is your general view of high-stakes tests?

a. Not a fan, why should my performance be based on a two-hour window

b. Buzz kill for kiddos, if they fail, they think they ARE failures, so frustrating

c. Publicized and obsessed over but not authentic learning

d. We think the other school should have proctors because they help their students

e. We stop teaching to prepare while we say it's no big deal

f. Forces us to squish needed concepts up and move too quickly, no mastery

9. What could help promote PLC success for your team?

a. More guidance, we started with laminated posters that had to be super expensive but they never amounted to anything but to hold post-it notes

b. Administrator stepped in but didn't do anything, just called us all passionate

c. We waited 4-8 weeks without information or data after a student was brought up to the PLC team

d. Classroom teachers need a voice in the process, it is too passive for us

e. Too many people afraid of conflict because of lack of guidance

f. Avoid one person becoming too dominant and favoring ideas or students

g. The meetings need to go somewhere, something needs to come out of them

h. Teachers need data to share with students, brag about growth and share success

i. Teachers and students need goals

Outliers and Links to PLCs

The interviews were then reviewed looking for best practices of a PLC. I was looking for outliers in the interviews. I wanted to find things that the School B was doing that School A was not, and vice versa. Any common trait, even if it was a characteristic of a PLC, was not considered as I was looking to find the reason for the discrepancy in performance from School A to School B. I was specifically looking for the teacher's thoughts and understandings of PLC characteristics but I did not specifically care if they understood their actions were PLC actions at the time. I also wanted to get a general feeling for the teacher's attitude toward administrative personnel and team comfort and trust. I was also looking for the amount of collaborative time they have as a team and how it was used. I watched for other items or information that I might need to record even if it was counter to my research. The coding was essential, as I coded things to align with the PLC characteristics.

Conclusion

This qualitative multiple-case study methodology allowed the research to focus on the participants' thoughts and actions in the context of their work (Yin, 2003). It allowed the participants to tell their own stories and for the results to be analyzed between

organizations and compared to PLC characteristics to explain the phenomenon of student achievement.

In the next chapter, Chapter 4, I analyze the data and share my findings to determine: *Are characteristics of a professional learning community guiding student achievement?* I include the transcribed interviews and related research and coding (see Figures). I also discuss bias potential and reliability of the data collected.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

My PLC research was based on my personal dedication toward enhancing and refining my own teaching practice while also identifying some key characteristics of a PLC that could possibly flourish in a non-PLC environment. I believed that a sustained PLC held the key to growth in educators and student achievement. I was excited to find out what I could identify to answer my question: *Are characteristics of a professional learning community guiding student achievement?*

I looked at two separate elementary schools in a larger rural district and interviewed an equal amount of same-grade-level teachers from each building. The two buildings share the same budgets, curriculum, training, administration, and technology resources. The main difference between the buildings is in their basic socioeconomic data. School A has a slightly higher number of free and reduced lunch recipients as well as a little larger population of students of color and EL students (see Table 1, p. 43). School A has also earned the higher trend of MCA scores for the past several years (see Table 2, p. 44). I was looking for trends at both School A and School B that might explain the data trends and compared their answers to the success embedded in PLC characteristics.

The interviews covered eight areas of interest. The eight areas of interest are found in Figure 1 through Figure 8 showing the interview questions and followed by the interviewees' answers. The first area (Figure 1, see p. 48) was demographics and covered personal teaching background and training. The second area (Figure 2, see p. 48) focused

on learning and covered learning potential, using learning targets, and lesson delivery. The third area (Figure 3, see p. 52) focused on the collaborative culture and covered team meetings, focus and goals, assessments, and collaboration. The fourth area (Figure 4, see p. 55) focused on collective inquiry and covered team learning, curriculum, data sharing, and shifts in professional practice. The fifth area (Figure 5, see p. 57) of focus was action orientation and covered changes in professional practice, team decisions, and intervention procedures. The sixth area (Figure 6, see p. 60) of focus was continuous improvement and covered improving instruction, improving student achievement, and personal reflection. The seventh area (Figure 7, see p. 62) of focus was results orientation and covered teacher effectiveness and student work. The last area (Figure 8, see p. 64) of focus was a general discussion of other factors and covered decisions, leaders, conflict, trust and comfort, and high-stakes tests.

I transcribed and coded all interview answers from the eight focus areas. The focus areas are described in detail and shown in Figures 1 through 8 in chapter 3 of the research (p. 48) and can also be found in appendix 2 (p. 111). The 8 focus areas (figures) were then coded into the six essential aspects of the school PLC culture as recognized by DuFour (2015). Those essential aspects are:

1. Educators work collaboratively rather than in isolation and have clarified the commitments they have made to each other about how they will work together.

2. The fundamental structure of the school becomes the collaborative team in which members work interdependently to achieve common goals for which all members are mutually accountable.

3. The team establishes a guaranteed curriculum, unit by unit, so all students have access to the same knowledge and skills, regardless of which teacher they are assigned.

4. The team develops common formative assessments to frequently gather evidence of student learning.

5. The school creates systems of intervention to ensure students who struggle receive additional time and support for learning in a way that is timely, directive, diagnostic, and systematic.

6. The team uses evidence of student learning to inform and improve the individual and collective practices of its members. (p. 230)

I also added a seventh area to identify potential other factors for student achievement outside of a PLC. The coding and essential areas are shown in Table 3 and each aspect will be further discussed and synthesized in this chapter.

Table 3.

Six Essential Aspects of a PLC and Interview Coding

	Aspect 1 Team Commitment	Aspect 2 Collaboration Goals	Aspect 3 Curriculum	Aspect 4 Assessments	Aspect 5 Interventions	Aspect 6 Evidence	Area 7 Other Factors
Fig. 1 Question number							1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Fig. 2 Question number			2,3,4,5,8	7	6		1
Fig. 3 Question number	4,5	1,2,3,8		7	6		

Fig. 4 Question number	1,3		2			4,5,6,7	
Fig. 5 Question number	1		3		4,5	2,6	
Fig. 6 Question number	4					1,2,3	5
Fig. 7 Question number			3,4			1,2	
Fig. 8 Question number	2,3,4,5,7	1,6					8,9

I was surprised by my findings. I originally expected seeing the success at School A directly related to the presence of PLC characteristics for team collaboration, which were aspects 1 and 2 above. However, School B demonstrated more PLC characteristics in those areas of trust, commitment, teamwork, and common goals. There was a different trend at both schools that seemed to guide the achievement and student success: Curriculum fidelity (aspect 3) or lack thereof. It was not what I expected but according to DuFour (2015) a guaranteed curriculum is a main key to student achievement and PLC success. A PLC characteristic did drive student achievement, according to the data collected, but it was a different characteristic than I anticipated.

I will cover each PLC aspect, according to DuFour (2015), and synthesize the data collected to explain trends and answers that lead me to believe that curriculum seemed to be the strongest guiding PLC factor for School A's success after comparing all the data and coding it to the essential factors. I compared the two schools to look for

differences or outlying data, not in assumption that one school is more right than the other. The comparison helped me eliminate the similar aspects at each school. I felt it was something dissimilar that led to the student achievement trend. I felt the outlier reflect a PLC aspect.

It is important to remember that these two schools were not functioning as full PLC environments so many of the findings will be negative. This isn't a reflection of the school's performance; many negative answers merely reflect the absence of a PLC characteristic. The feel of the results is not reflective of the overall school success or teacher dedication. The findings are specific to PLC environments or characteristics.

Collaborative Commitment

DuFour (2015) described the first essential aspect: "Educators work collaboratively rather than in isolation and have clarified the commitments they have made to each other about how they will work together" (p. 230). In my research this aspect was touched on in Figures 3, 4, 5, 6, and 8 (appendix 2, p. 111). Do the teachers, team members, have a goal as a team and are they committed to the goal and each other?

The interviews revealed that at both schools there were not clarified commitments to teamwork or collaboration. Neither school had full regular attendance at team meetings due to team members having other meetings or commitments and lack of time during the structured school day to meet. The meetings did not have a clear goal or outcome and often resulted in personal conversations and reviews of other committee activity. There was never a direct discussion about how to function as a team or what they wanted to accomplish. None of the teachers believed that they learned together specifically as a team. Only one teacher felt a teammate had ever caused a shift in her thinking or practice.

The responses indicated that due to a lack of clarified-team commitment and missing essential team-skills training, conflict was not handled well and difficult situations were not resolved and sometimes even needed administrative involvement at both schools at different times. Both schools did describe their teams as mostly trusting which seemed contrary to their other answers. The interviewees felt their teams were mostly typical or above average in the trust area. Both schools seem to believe that a teacher staying in one grade level too long was the biggest problem because they become complacent and build alliances with favored teachers. They also tended to stick to old curriculum rather than move forward. The teachers expressed that without a named leader, the loudest or "squeakiest" person seemed to have the most say in decisions. Opinions did not seem to be given equal weight at either school so there was an imbalance on the teams. The teams did not know how to work together effectively.

The teachers suggested that perhaps more early guidance could have helped their PLC teams. Their administrators seemed to not be wholly familiar with what was expected and endeavors that were started did not last so there was no follow through during subsequent meetings. School B felt more directed in their PLCs than School A which deterred me from thinking that the team function led to either school's success. The PLC did not grow or strengthen its role. The teachers at both schools felt afraid of conflict and suffered a lack of action. The teachers needed a concrete goal to guide their future actions.

The teachers, team members, did not have a specific team goal at either school and were not committed to each other as professionals in a PLC. Would they have common goals for their students?

Common Goals

DuFour (2015) described the second aspect as, "The fundamental structure of the school becomes the collaborative team in which members work interdependently to achieve common goals for which all members are mutually accountable" (p. 230). In my research this aspect was touched on in Figures 3 and 8 (appendix 2, p. 111). Do the teachers and team members have common goals that transfer to mutual accountability for student achievement?

The interviews revealed a strong misunderstanding of PLC environments in this area at both schools. Both schools specifically separated team meetings from PLC meetings. So they had two or more meetings a week. The meetings were called by different names and functioned differently. Neither school had any idea that team planning should be handled as a PLC as well and that PLCs are an all-encompassing environment and structure. Everything was handled separately. I have limited my scope to the more PLC-oriented responses. School A held PLC meetings once every other week. School B held PLC meetings once a week. The meeting times were either in the morning or during prep periods while the students were at specials. This brought up another interesting misunderstanding that actually involved the teachers' union but only proved the larger lack of understanding of what a PLC actually is and how it functions. The problem was related to teachers' contracts. The contract apparently states that a prep period be given so the teachers who mentioned this concern felt that they, as a team, could not be required to meet during that time for a PLC. But those same teachers had no problem meeting to plan during that same prep period. It furthered the separation between the meeting functions and was critical in the failure of aspects one and two.

When the PLC meetings were held, they typically lasted about 40 to 50 minutes in each building. The grade-level team and the principal usually attended school B's PLC as well as any invited Title teachers as needed. The grade-level team and often an administrative representative (but not the principal) attended school A's PLC as well as any invited Title teachers as needed. The teachers were split, but not by school, on whether they felt they had enough time during their "PLC meetings." They did not feel that they were organized enough. Time was wasted and that they often left without any idea what was happening with their students. Some felt the meetings only wasted time or were micromanaged.

It became clear that both schools thought the PLC meetings were for "bringing up" students who were at risk, struggling, or facing learning difficulties due to any number of issues. The PLCs did not discuss the upper quartiles of students at all. Both schools focused on the students that needed interventions and turned their meetings into problem-solving sessions. These meetings lacked direction and control. If a specific teacher went on too long about their student, other students may not get any discussion or the discussion was rushed at a disservice to the last teacher or student. The teams did not discuss desired outcomes before units began nor did they discuss how to measure outcomes specifically. Data was not shared or discussed and no mutual goals for student achievement were set or discussed. The largest part of the student population was ignored because of misunderstood PLC meeting goals.

It was clear the team members did not have common goals that transferred to mutual accountability for student achievement at either school. Everyone was instead competing for time to get help for their students and the actual student achievement levels

were arbitrary because they were not based on mutual data or goals. The ownership of student achievement was still a competition; the goal of seeing all students succeed was not in place. However, both schools and all teachers did use the same curriculum.

Guaranteed Curriculum

DuFour (2015) described the third aspect as: "The team establishes a guaranteed curriculum, unit by unit, so all students have access to the same knowledge and skills, regardless of which teacher they are assigned" (p. 230). In my research this aspect was touched on in Figures 2, 4, 5, and 7 (appendix 2, p. 111). Do the team members have a guaranteed curriculum that all teachers follow to assure common mastery for student achievement?

This research revealed the largest divide and most separate trends at each of the two buildings. I was surprised that ultimately this aspect seemed to contribute the most strongly to the success at School A and identified a potential problem at School B. The two schools were mostly similar in their use of learning targets.

Both schools must post learning targets daily or weekly or by unit. The targets are mostly referred to at the beginning of the lessons or during morning meeting at the gathering spot. Many teachers also tried to refer back to the targets during the lesson. Very few teachers went back specifically to the targets at the end of the lesson. It was a mutual feeling that only the mid-high to highest achieving students understood the targets and even fewer students used the targets themselves. It was shared that target language needed to be at the student level for the students to use them at all.

Both schools used similar lesson lengths or at least acknowledged what lesson length should be for best practice. This is where the divide started to show between

schools. School A was more committed to suggested lesson length and prioritized the

reading and math curriculums. They were dedicated to trying to fit in the lessons as

presented with minor changes or deletions for timing. School B was more comfortable

with supplementing the curriculum with activities or created items as they felt it

beneficial for alternative learning styles or their teaching methods. School B teachers also

mentioned more flexibility with deleting curriculum items as presented or adjusting the

curriculum to allow time for projects or themed units in social sciences. I will address the

key responses at each school separately starting with School A, the higher achieving

school based on MCA data.

School A teachers were committed to the curriculum. They all responded that

upon receipt of a new curriculum they were vested in and trusted the research behind the

program. School A teachers were not eager to add created items or activities to the

curriculum inside the literacy or math blocks. They mentioned it was hard enough to fit in

everything they needed to and they wondered how anyone would find time to add extra

items without cutting curriculum as presented. School A teachers suggested reading or

writing if students completed an assignment, or finishing incomplete work from earlier in

the day. One teacher mentioned authentic work. The last main difference was homework.

School A has students start homework in a guided environment at school and homework

was not heavy or a huge focus.

School B teachers were not as committed to the curriculum as supplied. They all

responded that they tended to hold on to old and treasured resources and projects, that

they add things to make the curriculum fun like games and activities that they found on

Pinterest or had previously created, and that it was hard to eliminate things that had

always worked. School B teachers mentioned that many teachers had created theme packets or other worksheets not connected to the curriculum. At least one teacher did mention that the creation items can get out of control and competitive. They did not have a process for determining which items would be used based on standards or skill mastery or any expected outcomes. The added items were not research based or current best practice based on the data collected. School B teachers did not have a unified plan for what students should do when they completed an assignment. Activities ranged from drawing in a notebook, to finish other work, project or packet work, or reading. The last noticeable difference was homework all goes home to be completed. The amount of homework seemed to vary by teacher and could get heavy.

The decision of how or when to move on to the next lesson was similar at each school. Most teachers stated that they have to move on to complete every thing they are expected to cover. Typically that meant one math and one reading lesson a day with combined lessons and deletions on short weeks. All teachers mentioned using the third week of the reading series as a catch up week when needed or as a good time to implement in-class interventions where needed. There was a definite pressure felt by all the teachers to move forward with coverage of material as directed by their curriculum director. The grade-level committee leaders for math and reading also stressed coverage of curriculum.

There was a stronger feel of a guaranteed curriculum that was research-based at School A with all the teachers seeming to agree on its importance. This offered a more consistent classroom experience for students regardless of their teacher. Teachers at School B pointed out "pet projects" that other teachers had and stated that they felt a need

to have projects also because parents would take note and bring up certain teachers' fun activities and wonder why their student did not get to participate or felt they had miss out.

It was clear that the team members at each school took a different approach toward guaranteed curriculum, research, and authentic learning. At School A the teachers followed the presented curriculum with minimal adjustments to assure common mastery for student achievement. At School B the teachers followed the curriculum far more loosely and felt that adding old and reliable lessons or activities better met the students' needs. Both schools did try to maintain the curricular pace set by the teacher's manuals, which kept all students learning material at about the same time. School A was closer to a guaranteed curriculum for all students. School A was closer to best practice recommendations for lesson lengths. If curriculum were varied at each school, what would assessment look like? The research next looked at assessments and data and the role they played at each school.

Assessments

DuFour (2015) described the fourth aspect as, "The team develops common formative assessments to frequently gather evidence of student learning" (p. 230). In my research this aspect was touched on in Figures 2, and 3 (appendix 2, p. 111). Do the teachers, team members, write common assessments as a group? Do the assessments identify the specific outcomes for student learning for each unit?

The research revealed that neither school writes its own assessments. A couple of teachers mentioned that they felt their curriculum directed them to use the tests within the curriculum. Both schools did make minor adjustments to test questions for future years if a question was faulty. Both schools also suggested that they make note of difficult

vocabulary so it can be specifically presented prior to administering the test the next year. One teacher did mention that she realized doing so was teaching to the test. Neither school had decided to supplement any testing with their own common assessments. They felt additional testing would be allowed but time restraints and over-testing students kept them from being able to add assessments.

The schools did not administer pre-tests and did not have a common plan to handle students that already know the material. Most teachers suggested that Daily 5 allowed for enrichment in small groups. Teachers recognized the challenge of meeting their high-performing students' needs but they felt at-risk students were the higher priority. Some offered challenge worksheets if available for certain concepts. One teacher allowed her highest students to act as student leaders and lead smaller groups on projects or work.

The teachers, team members, did not write common assessments as a group. Therefore, they also did not identify the specific outcomes for student learning for each unit nor did they know in advance who already knew the material or which areas needed the most instruction. All the teachers shared a desire for their students to be successful. After assessments and as needed, teachers relied on interventions. Interventions were used after formative and summative assessments and were the next area of research.

Interventions

DuFour (2015) described the fifth aspect as, "The school creates systems of intervention to ensure students who struggle receive additional time and support for learning in a way that is timely, directive, diagnostic, and systematic" (p. 230). In my research this aspect was touched on in Figures 2, 3, and 5 (appendix 2, p. 111). Do the

teachers believe a system exists and have confidence in the intervention system? Is the system timely, directive, diagnostic, and systematic so the responsibility of student achievement is shared by everyone?

The research revealed that both schools have an intervention system in place. The systems were not identical but very similar in strength and flaws and can be discussed together. Both schools used their PLC meeting time to discuss their most at-risk students. The students were identified initially based on a Dibels test. Classroom teachers did not have a voice in student placement at either school. Later in the year, students were generally identified by their teacher and brought up during PLC meetings after the classroom teacher had tried their own interventions. The teachers felt that in most cases the Lead Title Teacher or Reading Specialist gave their opinion and the Title Teacher's decision often out-weighed the classroom teacher's input. The teachers suggested that the process was very disconnected from the classroom teacher.

The interventions were not timely at either school. Both schools' teachers mentioned long wait periods, sometimes exceeding 8 weeks to hear back about students and felt they never really knew what was happening with interventions. The interventions did not seem diagnostic and were not based on skills that needed attention; they were handled more on a trimester basis and were not as fluid as an intervention system should be for effectively moving students toward mastery. The teachers discussed frustrations with many cancelled service days and felt that toward the end of the year nothing happened to advance or help students at risk. The teachers felt left on their own to figure it out. Teachers at both schools mentioned that they were nervous to discuss or critique the program because administration was defensive of the program and protected the Title

staff. One teacher even mentioned that no one honestly spoke up or opened up at the district title meeting for the same reasons.

The teachers' comments pointed out a problem with the PLC understanding. PLC meetings were used as intervention meetings. The PLC environment should focus meetings on the larger quartile of students and the desired learning outcomes for all students. Trusting in the intervention system to handle the lower quartile of students is critical. The PLC meetings fail without the intervention system in place and trusted.

The teachers did not believe an effective system existed and they lacked confidence in the interventions contributing to student achievement. The system did not respond in a timely matter. It may have been directive and diagnostic but the teachers did not feel connected to the information. The entire process did not appear systematic and the responsibility of student achievement did not appeared to be shared by everyone. This was a major problem for the effectiveness or success of a full PLC environment. It was not the driving factor for achievement or the cause of deficit in either school singularly as it was similar at both schools, even with differing systems. The teachers had no evidence of student learning within the system. There needed to be evidence of student learning to support successful practice by all teachers.

Evidence and Data

DuFour (2015) described the sixth aspect as, "The team uses evidence of student learning to inform and improve the individual and collective practices of its members" (p. 230). In my research this aspect was touched on in Figures 4, 5, 6, and 7 (appendix 2, p. 111). Do the teachers, team members, regularly collect data as evidence of student

learning? Do the teachers use the data to improve their professional practice and do they share their strengths to help team members grow professionally?

The interviews revealed that neither school had a system in place or a procedure to systematically collect or look at data. Most teachers mentioned MCA data but not any formative or summative data from within the school year or units taught. The teachers agreed that they did not compare data unless a teacher brought up a potentially poor test question and was wondering if it was the same for anyone else's students. The teachers said that post-assessment procedures were mostly individualized. Most teachers mentioned they would reteach or revisit problem concepts or questions and alert parents that practice or support would be needed at home. The teachers cared about outcomes but it was not a join venture to discuss or compare the outcomes. There was no shared data.

Data did not drive instruction at either school across the team. For some individual teachers at each building data was considered regularly but others mentioned not knowing how to apply the data exactly or felt the pressure to push on with the curriculum regardless. The teachers did mention that the MCA practice test completed mid-year focused their teaching on areas of concern.

The teachers did not draw a direct connection in data analysis being tied to changing professional practice individually or as a team. The teachers at School A felt that their team member who tended to share lesson success most frequently was usually bragging about high scores and never discussed the teaching or lesson. Both schools' teachers mentioned that they ensured student learning by observation or formative assessments. Some used small group sessions for students to demonstrate learning and standard mastery. The team responses tended toward a feeling of greater comfort

discussing lesson delivery in smaller groups or during lesson planning groups but not everyone was present. The teachers also mentioned you had to be the type that was willing to share. One teacher was adamant that team discussion toward improved practice never happened. Several teachers also mentioned that the district would not offer or had not ever offered direct feedback on their professional practice. They felt it could be very informative and cause a shift in thinking if they knew where they stood within the district for effectiveness. The teachers said it would have to be a growth measurement and that there currently was not a growth measurement. They only received data from MCAs and that data does not measure student growth for their teaching.

Improving student achievement was discussed. The teachers at both schools felt frustrated by the intent to meet MCA demands. All teachers felt more time was spent comparing the two schools than on any constructive way to improve achievement. The teachers at both schools felt the MCA scores were hugely important but also arbitrary as they did not measure start to end yearly growth for students. The teachers were frustrated that students felt that if they did not pass a section they were failures. The teachers felt if there was a way to show students that they had grown and made improvements the high-stakes anxiety might be lessened. It was evident that all teachers reflected to some extent and had feelings to share. All the teachers felt for their students and wanted them to succeed to earn a sense of accomplishment.

Some staff members were required to turn in weekly reflections to their administrators. Others said they reflected on MCA data, others reflected so they knew where to start their next lesson. One teacher said her reflections reminded her to avoid gimmicks even though they are tempting and attractive to parents. Another teacher said it

reminded her to stick to the curriculum and standards. Reflections on data were personal and in most cases passive and informal.

Teachers, as team members, did not regularly collect data as evidence of student learning jointly. The teachers did use the data to reflect and improve their professional practice in different ways but did not share their strengths to help team members grow professionally. Changes or shifts in practice were based more on personal reflection than based on evidence and data analysis. The teachers had ideas of what might help their teams and or professional practice.

Other Factors

This aspect was for questions that did not fit under the other aspects or ideas or comments that repeatedly arose during the interviews. These answers are covered in figure 8 (appendix 2, p. 111). I asked all participants to answer or follow up.

All the teachers had different thoughts about how to affect change in student results. One responded that she did not know. One responded that it was important to find and share each student's strengths. Another teacher said it was most important to have a connection with the student on a personal level to reach them. One teacher thought the key was having good parent communication. All but one teacher thought all students could learn. The one negative response was specifically directed toward severely disabled students.

The teachers had suggestions on what might help their team improve. One teacher suggested that having new eyes on the team was good because it caused them to reassess their approach, align to standards and remove clutter. Another teacher suggest reducing time spent on old units, to stop reinventing the wheel, stay off Pinterest, and focus on the

curriculum. There was a repeated feeling that teachers should not be allowed to become complacent at a grade level. All the teachers suggested less committee meetings and more flexibility in the daily scheduling. There was also a suggestion to assign a team leader that was responsible to lead, share and gather ideas. The assigned-leader stayed in place as leader in a non-rotating but earned position. Then those people were accountable but also empowered to make all other decisions with administrators, which could eliminate duplicated efforts and extra committee time. Many teachers were passionate about suggestions and had similar ideas.

Using DuFour's (2015) essential aspects helped me to align my collected research into usable areas of inquiry. This approach also allowed me to identify things that were successful at either or both schools and things that stood out as areas of potential improvement. There were remarkable similarities between the teachers responses from both buildings in regards to most of the questions. There was one PLC aspect that revealed a stark separation area between schools that may be the contributing factor as the most essential PLC characteristic among these same grade-level teams.

Neither school was using a full PLC structure, but that was known before the research began. The teachers were doing what they thought was best for their students and wanted leadership. Both schools had just introduced PLC meetings this past school year. The research revealed that neither school had a full understanding of what a PLC was or how it should operate. I knew I would not find a fully-functioning PLC but I wanted to find out if within their structures there were PLC characteristics quietly at work guiding student achievement.

Both schools had strong attributes and dedication to student success. All the teachers wanted to perform well and felt they were doing all they could within their time and exposure/experience constraints. Characteristics of a PLC were missing but I learned many things from their data and feel very fortunate for having had the opportunity to talk to each of them.

I was looking to compare the answers at both schools to the essential characteristics or aspects of a PLC and look for trends or outliers. I only compared the attributes between schools to find the outliers. Then those qualities were compared to the essential aspects of a PLC. I was able to synthesize and compare all the data and come to a conclusion - a different conclusion than I had anticipated.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

DuFour (2015) stressed in his insights that if you are about to implement a PLC, "focus less on what the educators in high-performing PLCs *do* and more on how the members of the organization *think*--the mindset of those educators" (p. 100). I found the answer to my research in the mindsets of the educators.

I started my case study with the hope of identifying, through interviews, any outlying tendencies or trends that would explain student achievement differences at two elementary schools. Especially important would be my comparison of the interview answers to current PLC research. Can teachers, or teams, function on a PLC level without a maintained consensus toward a school-wide model as necessary in a true PLC? I was searching for aspects that aligned with effective PLC characteristics that could potentially explain a performance difference between the schools and answer this important question: *Are characteristics of a professional learning community guiding student achievement?*

There had been an unexplained performance trend between the two elementary schools for years. What could explain that? Was there something different in the educators' approaches or thinking that was causing the difference? It was a search for effective PLC practice outside of a fully formal PLC environment. And it was successful. I found a significant difference in one of the PLC aspects. It was not what I expected. As a researcher I learned that you have to be open to the answer that presents itself in the

data even if it is not a result you were anticipating. I learned much more during my research by finding the unexpected answer. The research has caused a permanent shift in my own professional practice.

This chapter will also revisit the literature to discuss what aligned and where I saw a conflict. I also discuss my new understanding based on my data and which data agreed and disagreed with my research. I discuss the implications and limitations of my research and conclusion. I end by sharing some recommendations according to the research and data.

Literature Revisited

Returning to DuFour's (2015) six essential aspects or necessary characteristics for a successful PLC is practical as I coded my research based on his six aspects.

First, teamwork: Did the "Educators work collaboratively rather than in isolation and have clarified the commitments they have made to each other about how they will work together" (2015, p. 230)? No, not at either school. Teachers were not guided in team successful practices and did not understand the role or goal of the type of teamwork required for a PLC. Moirao et al. (2012) would place that onus on the district for not supplying appropriate training at the specific team level. The interviewed teachers seemed eager and willing to meet, and did meet regularly, but they did not have the guidance to move meetings effectively toward outcomes as high-performance teams. Caine and Caine (2010) were correct that "not all conversations lead to useful learning" (p. 21).

Second, common goals: Did the "fundamental structure of the school becomes the collaborative team in which members work interdependently to achieve common goals

for which all members are mutually accountable" (DuFour, 2015, p. 230)? No. Not at either school but according to Reeves (2010) teachers have little experience collaborating with teammates "to determine their learning needs" (p. 24). Because the teams did not know their needs, it was nearly impossible to set common goals as a team. The main problem here is that this approach was supposed to set common goals for the entire school. It was intended to account for school-wide ownership of student achievement.

Third, guaranteed curriculum: Did "the team establishes a guaranteed curriculum, unit by unit, so all students have access to the same knowledge and skills, regardless of which teacher they are assigned" (DuFour, 2015, p. 230)? Not exactly, but this is the characteristic where I saw the largest divide between the two schools in thinking and action. I believe it is this difference that is accountable, largely, for the MCA performance data differences.

School A, the higher achieving school, was much more vested and focused on delivering the research-based curriculum chosen by the district with fidelity to the program. The teachers talked specifically about not having time to add other items and said they did not want to change for change's sake. They said they did not want to reinvent the wheel. They believed the program could and would work if they adhered to it with minimal changes.

School B took a much different approach. Many of the teachers discussed adding old treasured lessons or adding items they had found or created themselves to the lesson plans. These items were added at the cost of removing or shortening lessons from the designed curriculum, whether the teachers realized the deletion or not. DuFour (2015) felt it was necessary to implement the new process and avoid preserving traditional items. So

School B's actions were in direct conflict with DuFour (2015). DuFour et al. (2006) also warned to beware of any actions that remove teachers from the process or lessons, because that would diminish the process. That definitely seems to be the case for School B = the team was not united in curriculum. When the teachers added their own flair or flavor to the lessons they were no longer on the same track toward a guaranteed curriculum. The students were not having the same experiences in each of their classrooms. Teachers mentioned others doing "pet projects" and special activities. Teachers said they felt the need to compete in this area. All these items deterred from the common curriculum and the research supporting the curriculum. Teachers at School B did mention that some teachers are often far behind others with lesson completion as well.

DuFour et al. (2006) felt that purchasing curriculum should be avoided and allowing curriculum to be determined by textbooks should be avoided. In that sense neither school was performing under a true PLC format but those situations cancelled each other out because both schools were doing it, so it was not an outlier in the data. It also was not up to the teachers and was directed by the administration.

Fourth, assessments: Did "the team develop common formative assessments to frequently gather evidence of student learning (DuFour, 2015, p. 230)? No. Neither school developed its own assessments. I think both would be open to writing their own assessments but they seemed to feel that was not what the district curriculum director wanted. They felt they were supposed to use the curriculum tests. They had not written their own assessments to supplement the tests provided either. Both groups did modify questions if they experienced a concern. It did seem that test modifications were done as

a whole group. DuFour (2015) would allow this practice if it were regular and complete; he stated that it is not the product of the common assessments but the process of discussion and exploring the questions together that is important.

Fifth, interventions: Did "the school create systems of intervention to ensure students who struggle to receive additional time and support for learning in a way that is timely, directive, diagnostic, and systematic" (DuFour, 2015, p. 230)? Both schools had a similar intervention system in place. It did seem systematic. I think the problem was more with the teachers' mindsets. DuFour (2015) stated that the program needed school-wide acceptance to avoid roadblocks. The teachers seemed opposed to the system because it was a large divergence from their prior system and control shifted to the Title and Reading Specialist teachers. I actually understand why they found fault with the timeliness and fluidity of the program, DuFour (2015) would as well but without school-wide acceptance, the PLC structure would not work. At some point, the shift has to come to interventions that lead to measurable improvements with everyone sharing accountability.

Sixth, evidence: Did "the team use evidence of student learning to inform and improve the individual and collective practices of its members" (DuFour, 2015, p. 230)? This aspect was the area of greatest need for both schools. This is vitally important. DuFour's (2015) key question is: "Are we here to ensure students are *taught*, or are we here to ensure that our students *learn*?" (p. 103). There is no way to ensure student learning without regularly collecting data. There needs to be an urgency from every teacher to improve their own practice, which requires open exchanges about best practices based on what is happening in the classrooms with student achievement. Moirao

et al. (2012) would ask, "Does the staff have a collective knowledge of research-based practices? Is there a common language for talking about teaching and learning?" (p. 32). This is an area in need of training. I believe the teachers would be eager to use this data and skills if they all had a common place to start.

Understanding the Literature and Data

The most important part of the literature review for me was looking at the different opinions, views, and definitions of what a PLC really is or requires. The many researchers in the field agreed for the most part. The characteristics were similar with some researchers synthesizing their important characteristics or grouping ideas differently. I needed a broad understanding of what makes a PLC work in order to look for isolated aspects within other structures or environments.

The majority of my collected data does not align with the characteristics outlined in the literature review but I knew it most likely would not as both schools were just beginning a PLC format. I was hoping to find some characteristics existing without the benefit of the whole structure and I was able to see some traits of a true PLC.

It is evident to me that the researched district succumbs to what commonly happens according to DuFour, that "the idea of improving schools by developing *professional learning communities* is currently in vogue. People use the term to describe every imaginable combination of individuals with an interest in education" (2006, p. 2) but without proper training and launching, the PLCs cannot be successful or sustained.

There is one direct literature contradiction with my findings. Reeves (2010) stated, "High-impact professional learning focuses on people and practices, not the programs" (p. 22). However, the largest difference I found between the two schools and

the single aspect that I think is the leading cause of School A's success is curriculum- or program-related. Curriculum developed or purchased does need to be guaranteed and research-based to succeed. My research could cause me to formulate a different question for new research in the future.

Implications and Limitations

The first implication for me is that after reading all the literature and collecting all the data, I believe that PLC aspects can be effectively used outside of a formal PLC. Not necessarily on the same scale, because you would be missing the school-wide interventions but you could do nearly everything else effectively in a co-taught classroom. The more I read and listened, the more I realized that you wouldn't need an entire team to execute many of the items successfully. You would only need a partner or small group of teachers that shared students and could share data and teaching practice ideas. I found this encouraging. Sharing data with my co-teacher has made me a better teacher and more purposeful in my planning for our students. I have found having a second perspective; voice and opinion can help with planning, and in connecting with students.

Sharing data is the key. I do not think a PLC could exist in any format without shared data and the willingness to shape professional practice based on evidence to ensure student growth.

I think my data also demonstrates that the district teachers feel a strong desire to be more aware of their students' growth, as they all mentioned data. They were hoping to get data that shows growth. They would like an early-fall level and a mid- or end-year data point. I agree with their point. They could then show students how they have grown

instead of making a student feeling like a failure for not showing full competency on the MCA test. Having students feel unsuccessful is a disservice to the child. All the teachers interviewed felt pain for their students who did not feel they had succeeded on the tests. High stakes tests are doing more harm than good in that case and I was not aware of that feeling before doing the interviews. Helping the teachers get, and interpret, this type of data could lead to better understanding and a wider use of data throughout the year. Then the data could start driving the changes in instruction needed to ensure students are learning.

The teachers also wanted personal data. This could drive their motivation to improve their practice. Why not give teachers personal data? If a teacher ranks 12th of 12 teachers in a grade, that data could be motivating. The teacher can be informed of such data privately. Such information could enable a teacher to improve, and to be open to new methodologies. This information could also lead to discomfort, anger or excuse making, but a quality teacher would want to use the information to better help students. Maybe, in this district, that kind of change is required. And if this kind of change led to embarrassment or hard feelings, that may be necessary to improve the quality of teaching for the people who matter most - the students.

A limitation of my research is that although I found a difference in beliefs and actions between the two schools that aligned with a PLC aspect, there is the possibility that the divide is caused by something entirely different that no one thought of or mentioned.

Another limitation that the data showed is the need to have a whole-school intervention system. I can see this being limiting for many districts trying to implement a

new PLC structure. As the data demonstrated, this was hard for the teachers and probably hard for the interventionists as well. The lack of fluidity in the program could indicate that the interventionists were overwhelmed and maybe uncomfortable as well. But, for a fully implemented PLC this could be the biggest catch. There needs to be shared data and timely responses across lots of grade levels with countless students and limited resources. I think implementing a solid intervention system would need to happen a year or so prior to launching a PLC structure.

Would this research transfer to another district? Possibly, but not automatically. The research could merely provide a starting point for a district curriculum director, or an alternative way of thinking if a school has trouble meeting its goals.

The final considerations, for any district wishing to avoid a PLC Lite, are four items DuFour and Reeves (2016) require teachers, and teams, to know:

1. What do we want students to learn?

2. How will we know when they have learned it?

3. What will we do if they have not learned it?

4. How will we provide extended learning opportunities for students who have mastered the content? (p. 70)

These questions could be a limitation because they require data, collaboration, and trust. This is not easy to do, as the research proved. Because the basic needs for a successful PLC are so high, it is a limitation in itself.

Recommendations

My primary recommendation to the district would be to limit or eliminate any extra "created" items outside of the curriculum. So if the administrator happens to

observe the teacher making copies or using a worksheet and it is not copyrighted to the district's chosen curriculum, the teacher would have to offer a specific, valid reason why the extra work was necessary and prove the research behind their worksheet choice. This would eliminate the gamified and cute items that lack research and direct skill advancement toward mastery. This would most likely be limited to literacy and math. Within the social sciences I would recommend making sure each grade level is doing what is in their standards and letting go of old favorite units or lessons. I would recommend enforcing lesson lengths and delivery according to current best practice and the district's desired structure. This could eliminate literacy or math units being cut short to subsidize pet projects. The teachers at School B seemed very concerned with parent perception. I would recommend eliminating projects that aren't being undertaken by the entire grade level. Teachers should be able to engage with their students while staying true to their benchmarks. Hands-on and authentic practice does not require games or meaningless activities. This change would have to be strictly enforced at all grade levels to create improvement and break unwanted habits. Once the change is made, the staff should appreciate fidelity to one curriculum. That would be an excellent first step toward a PLC structure. I might also suggest relaxing on the coverage push for curriculum as DuFour et al. (2006) and DuFour (2015) all agree that coverage-models do not have a place in a PLC.

The next recommendation would be to work on the intervention system and create a working, fluid, diagnostic program before trying to launch any other PLC pieces. While this is happening, the district could use the year to train teachers as to what PLC meetings are meant to look and sound like. Use DuFour and Reeves (2016) four questions (What

do we want students to learn? How will we know? Etc.) to guide all meetings and point out that all students are to be discussed, not the lower quartile. This is a big transition and it needs time and delicate attention.

The final recommendation might be to start working on writing common assessments for the tested units. That does not mean that the curriculum provided assessments have to go away. The common-written assessments could just be added to supplement where there is a need or to collect the specific data for PLC sharing. They could be short and skill-specific. Remember, it is the process of writing and not the product that is important (DuFour, 2015). This would get the discussions started.

I feel like the teachers interviewed were eager and happy in their fields. They seemed representative of their grade-level and entire building staffs in many respects. It would be possible to implement a PLC in this district but it would take time and it would require starting over to be successful. Student learning has to be a measurable focus for everyone.

Conclusion

DuFour (2015) reminds us, " A learning-focused culture understands that the school was not built so that teachers could have a place to teach--it was built so that the children of the community have a place to learn" (p. 104). I wanted to focus my research on the teachers' thoughts, understanding that thoughts drive actions. I feel like the data reflected an honest and encompassing view into this grade-level's thinking at each building and together as a district grade-level.

I learned a lot as a researcher and academic writer. I found out that the answer I anticipated was wrong and I could have missed that if I had not formulated the correct

questions and listened openly to all answers. I interviewed people I had never met and I am grateful that they trusted me to hear their story. I hope to pay that forward.

I learned that the teachers I interviewed possess a massive amount of knowledge. I was amazed by their insights and dedication. I believe they would do anything to help their students but need guidance toward a PLC. I also saw that they had no idea how they might be perceived by their teammates, which is important and telling.

I learned that each team is unique. Each team will have problems or quirks but as professionals teachers must focus on what is important and that is student learning. I found that listening to teammates can be highly instructive. I hope to do much more listening in the future.

My hope is that I grew as a professional while conductive this research. I think I have. I learned better approaches to confrontation based on all the insights shared. Most of all, I learned the importance of humility. I admired the most humble teachers immeasurably and aspire to be like them.

My final thought is to stay true to the mini PLC I have been lucky enough to create in my co-taught classroom. I am going to approach all *learning* with purpose and awareness of what I want my students to learn, how I will know if they learned it, what I will do if they do not learn it, and what I will do for students who already know the material (DuFour and Reeves, 2016). I will happily share all data and any teaching methods or professional practice help anyone would think to ask about. I will watch, I will listen, and I will learn to be a better educator for my students.

I believe professional learning communities are the answer to successful student achievement. I think this district could sustain a PLC structure with proper

implementation and a slow start. *Are characteristics of a professional learning community guiding student achievement?* Not enough, but DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker (2006) summarize the struggle:

> Even the grandest design requires hard work. The professional learning community model is a grand design--a powerful new way of working together that profoundly affects the practices of schooling. But initiating and sustaining the concept requires the school staff to focus on learning rather than convenient teaching, work collaboratively on matters related to learning, and hold itself accountable for the kind of results that fuel continual improvement. (p. 5)

Professional learning communities are not easy. This district can succeed in this endeavor by studying the data, which explains their areas of greatest need for improvement. We all need to focus on the learning.

Appendix 1

Interview Questions

Demographics

1. How many years have you been teaching?

2. Which grade levels have you taught?

3. Have you taught in other districts?

4. How many students are in your class? Is that typical of prior years?

5. How many students are in your class? Boys? Girls? Is that typical of prior years?

6. Do you have any extra training or degrees?

Focus on Learning

1. Do you believe all students can learn?

2. Do you post learning targets? How do you use them?

3. Do students understand and use the targets?

4. How do you decide, as a teacher, when to move on to the next skill or lesson? (student mastery, coverage model, etc.)

5. What is your procedure or system to ensure additional time for interventions and re-teaching?

6. What do you do when students already know the material?

7. How long is a typical lesson? Can you describe a lesson of your choice?

Collaborative Culture

1. Describe a typical team meeting.

2. How often do you meet as a team?

3. When do you meet? How long do the meetings last?

4. Do you have enough time to collaborate fully? What is missed, if anything?

5. Who attends the meetings?

6. Does your team have a clear goal for your meetings?

7. Which students were the focus of the meetings?

8. Do you write assessments as a team?

9. Do you discuss the desired outcomes of a unit before teaching the unit? Do you

   decide how to measure the outcomes?

Collective Inquiry

1. Do you learn together as a team? Can you give me an example?

2. When you get a new curriculum, what is your approach? (Completely vested or keep old trusted items) Does your whole team share the same approach?

3. What causes a shift in your thinking or practice?

4. Do you have a system for sharing data across the team?

5. Do you compare data as a team? Which data is used? How often do you compare?

6. What happens after the data is compared or a test is taken?

7. Does the data drive instruction? How?

Action Orientation

1. Do you change your professional practice based on data or learning from co-workers?

2. How, do you believe, you affect change in your students' results?

3. How do you decide, as a team, if an activity is to be used (research based, measurable outcomes, used it in the past, busy work, looks fun)?

4. Who determines which students get interventions? How is it determined?

5. How often are intervention results revisited? How long do interventions last? How quick after assessment can a change be made to intervention groups?

6. How do you ensure that all students learn? How do you ensure the right students get enrichment or intervention as needed?

Continuous Improvement

1. Do you discuss, as a team, how to improve instruction? How often? What does this sound or look like?

2. Do you discuss how to improve student achievement?

3. Do you reflect on your own practice based on these discussions and/or data?

4. Do you see improved instruction as a workshop exercise or a daily goal?

Results Oriented

1. How do you measure your effectiveness as a teacher?

2. What evidence do you use?

Other Factors

1. Who leads meetings?

2. Do you feel like you have a say in decisions?

3. Is anyone's opinion given more weight than others?

4. How is conflict handled?

5. How would you describe the trust factor on your team?

6. Are you comfortable enough to ask tough questions and deep discussions? Will everyone share their data when they feel like they need help with their practice?

7. Do you view your team as above, typical, or below in this area? What would help? What might be the problem areas?

8. What is your general view of high-stakes tests?

9. What does your preparation involve? Is this a team decision?

Appendix 2

Interview questions with answers – Listed as Figures in Research Chapter 3

Figure 1

Interview responses follow each question in random order to protect anonymity. The same interviewee's responses do not fall on the same letter each time. If the interviewee offered more than one answer I included both. If the interviewee refrained from answering it is not noted. My interview topic categories were modeled after the dissertation work of Johnson (2016) who studied Minnesota PLCs using these same interview categories with district superintendents. The questions are not necessarily the same due to relevance of audience.

In all answers, I am withholding specifics if necessary to protect identities as some answers could identify my interviewees. I have removed names and inserted positions or pronouns as needed as well.

Demographics

1. How many years have you been teaching?

   a. Ranged from 4 years to 29 years

2. Which grade levels have you taught?

   a. Ranged from Kindergarten through 5th grade

3. Have you taught in other districts?

   a. Yes

   b. no

4. How many students are in your class? Is that typical of prior years?

    a. 24 or 25 this year but may have ranged from 23 to 27 on list at one point

    b. Student counts were typical of prior years

5.   Do you have any extra training or degrees?

    a. Ranged from reading certificates to master's degrees and administrative training

Figure 2

Focus on Learning

1. Do you believe all students can learn?

    a. Yes

    b. Not the severely handicapped

    c. Absolutely

    d. At some level

2. Do you post learning targets?

    a. Not consistently

    b. Better when we could use them year after year, premade

    c. Yes but i don't use them as administration would expect

    d. Yes

    e. We have to

3. How do you use them?

    a. Talk about them at the beginning and during the lesson

    b. Talk about them in the morning message

    c. Post by gathering spot

    d. Try to refer to them at the end of the lesson too, about 75% of time

    e. Not referred back to during other lessons or post lesson

    f. Ask how can you share this with your family or friends

    g. What can I do for you tomorrow to help with this target

4. Do students understand and use the targets?

    a. If written in language they can understand

    b. Students don't seem to use the targets

    c. Some students, higher students will refer to targets while working with peers

    d. To some extent but they don't use them

    e. Possibly a quarter of class understand and really use the targets

    f. Making them age appropriate is accused of dumbing down targets but it makes them useful to students

    g. Not sure they ever really use them

    h. They know where they are if asked

5. How do you decide, as a teacher, when to move on to the next skill or lesson? (Student mastery, coverage model, etc.)

    a. Unfortunately we are pushed as a district to move each day by curriculum demands

    b. I have to move on but if possible I try to reteach in strategy groups or during activities/centers

    c. A lesson a day, combine and cut Fridays lessons in the teacher's manual

    d. Move on during most lessons, skip most of reader's theatre week activities keeping only the fluency work to catch up

    e. Cut week 3 activities to do MCA prep

    f. Skip social and science block to extend math centers/activities so I can reteach small groups

    g. Informal assessment but mostly by curriculum demands

    h. During math practice work I call small groups that need help

6. What is your procedure or system to ensure additional time for interventions and re-teaching?

   a. Used all available help, this year a math corp helper volunteered 7 hours a week

   b. Left on your own to figure it out, no district help

   c. One-on-one during recess

   d. Cafe or Daily 5 groups so I can work on skills with students

   e. Use the Fluency week (reader's theatre week) or math centers

   f. Very hard because you are locked into a schedule with block I/E times

   g. Daily 5 can allow for interventions if the groupings are fluid which is hard

   h. Have to move on no matter what and figure it out, need to finish curriculum

   i. Skip extra recess for study hall or instruction

   j. Parent volunteers

   k. Homework

7. What do you do when students already know the material?

   a. Enrichment for some math concepts if center time

   b. This is a challenge, we can only do so much and the students that need help have to demand your first attention

   c. Let leaders lead small groups

   d. Move on

   e. Usually nothing, I wish it were different but that is the reality

   f. Math is easier than reading but daily 5 helps

   g. Challenge worksheets if I have them from other years or old curriculum

8. How long is a typical lesson?

    a. Varies by topic and how new the material is to the students

    b. 7 minutes for some or up to 55 for others, social and science run long

    c. Longer for introductory lessons or hard concepts

    d. 10 to 15 minutes

    e. Longer than they should be

    f. Hard to get whole class together so the lessons are long when I get everyone in one place, I have to use the time

    g. Curriculum does help with daily 5 now, seems to make sense if you use it

    h. Theme teaching would help but it's hard to fit in, always have to cut out something to make it work

Figure 3

Collaborative Culture

1. How often do you meet as a team?

    a. Way too often with not much getting done

    b. More often than necessary because it takes all our prep

    c. One to three times a week

    d. Once for planning, once for PLC, usually again to finish planning

    e. 2-3 times a week organized

    f. We meet together and then in smaller groups to finish

    g. Not everyone comes all the time

    h. Very often

    i. Usually once and then as needed or alternating weeks for PLCs

2. When do you meet? How long do the meetings last?

    a. Mornings

    b. Prep

    c. After school

    d. Entire time of prep

    e. 45 minutes or longer

    f. 40-50 minutes

    g. 40 minutes

    h. Every other week sometimes

3. Do you have enough time to collaborate fully? What is missed, if anything?

a. No

b. Very dysfunctional

c. Yes because we do it when available in smaller groups like after school but then not everyone can come and decisions still have to be made

d. Never seems like enough time, lack training and organization for teams

e. No, often deterred by other staff or committee meetings

f. Meetings are dominated by other committee updates or news

g. No, they do not keep us on the same page for our students

h. Often turns into gossip

4. Who attends the meetings?

a. Just the team usually

b. Team

c. Anyone who can come

d. PLCs we have an administrative rep present but not active usually or reading specialist or title teacher as invited

e. Principal and team for PLCs

f. Title teachers can be invited if a student is being discussed

5. Does your team have a clear goal for your meetings?

a. Not clearly communicated

b. Not really

c. No

d. Planning

e. Sometimes if a student is brought forward

     f.   Usually not sure what to bring

     g.   Usually ends in frustration, Title teacher trumps classroom teacher with little exposure to students

     h.   In the beginning it seemed like our Administrator had a script but later they were quiet and more of an observer

     i.   Not sure exactly what is supposed to be done

6. Which students were the focus of the meetings?

     a.   Struggling students

     b.   Any one brought forward by a teacher

     c.   Kids not getting services they need

     d.   At risk kids

     e.   Nominated students do not get equal time if someone is very demanding about their student

     f.   Title teacher makes decision based on their limited exposure to student

     g.   Classroom teachers do not get much say

7. Do you write assessments as a team?

     a.   No

     b.   District curriculum director wants us to use the assessments provided

     c.   We might tweak them afterwards for next year

     d.   Nope

     e.   Not really, we modify assessments if we think it didn't work

8. Do you discuss the desired outcomes of a unit before teaching the unit? Do you decide how to measure the outcomes?

a. No, we used to years ago

b. Might tweak them to exclude non-tested items on the MCA

c. State standards and MCA tests determine the goals

d. We might point out weird words which is basically teaching to the test

e. No, not really

f. Individual planning mostly

Figure 4

Collective Inquiry

1. Do you learn together as a team? Can you give me an example?

    a. No

    b. Not outside of staff meetings or workshops

2. When you get a new curriculum, what is your approach? (Completely vested or keep old trusted items) Does your whole team share the same approach?

    a. Completely vested at first and modify as we see fit in following years

    b. I hold onto old resources and treasured projects

    c. I add some things to make it fun like games or activities I find

    d. Vested, I trust the research behind the program

    e. Vested

    f. It's hard to eliminate things that have always worked

3. What causes a shift in your thinking or practice?

    a. Research if interesting

    b. A student may force a shift

    c. Training supported by research or an excited co-worker

    d. District expectations

    e. Passion in certain subjects

    f. Compulsion to keep up with my team mates

4. Do you have a system for regularly sharing any data across the team?

    a. No system or regularity

    b. Not technically, based on MCA data for the NEXT teacher

    c. No system, no consistent sharing

    d. Some people are too uncomfortable with it

    e. Nothing organized

5. Do you compare data as a team? Which data is used? How often do you compare?

    a. Can't think of a time when it was discussed

    b. Not everyone is open minded

    c. Younger staff seem to roll eyes

    d. Maybe if a teacher notices a bad test question

    e. Veteran teachers resistant to new ideas

6. What happens after the data is compared or a test is taken?

    a. Individualized by teacher

    b. Might discuss a change for next year as a team

    c. Reteach problem areas

    d. Let parents know that practice is needed at home

7. Does the data drive instruction? How?

    a. MCA data - no, never see any growth measured so it means nothing

    b. Not really, I'm not sure I understand exactly how to apply the data

    c. There's always the push to keep moving so it's limited

    d. MCA practice tests drive instruction and teaching toward test areas because it's so pounded into our heads

    e. We use MCA practice tests to create practice packets around January

    f. Not for everyone

g. I'd say not outside of MCA practice data

Figure 5

Action Orientation

1. Do you change your professional practice based on data or learning from colleagues?

    a. I would try but I don't ever get the data and I've asked for it

    b. I could be motivated by data because I'm competitive

    c. Sometimes I'm driven by colleagues sharing from other districts or workshops

    d. If I feel lousy about how a lesson or unit went, I motivate myself, so data

    e. Student based mainly, too many curriculums and ideas come and go

    f. Not MCA or district data, it's always arbitrary

2. How, do you believe, you affect change in your students' results?

    a. I'm not sure

    b. Sharing their strengths

    c. Knowing kids and having a connection with them

    d. It can depend on the class but making sure they understand what is taught

    e. Parent communication

3. How do you decide, as a team, if an activity is to be used (research based, measurable outcomes, used it in the past, busy work, looks fun)?

    a. Usually it is just presented and you circle your name if you want copies

    b. Use it if you want it

    c. Theme packets are already available

    d. Creating can get out of control and competitive

    e.   We try to stick to the curriculum

    f.   There's not a lot of time for extra items with these curriculums

    g.   You'd have to cut something to do activities and there's not time

    h.   People need to stop trying to reinvent the wheel

4.   Who determines which students get interventions? How is it determined?

    a.   Lead title teacher

    b.   Very disconnected from classroom teacher so no idea

    c.   Title told us

    d.   Positions for students were determined based on staffing, Dibels was used but old data and no input from classrooms

5.   How often are intervention results revisited? How quick after assessment can a change be made to intervention groups?

    a.   Maybe a trimester but it was hard to tell

    b.   No follow up so I had no idea if the student was successful

    c.   Exited positions were not always filled with new students

    d.   We had no control or input so it was meaningless

    e.   Each trimester, so not timely

    f.   Not based on skill or success, more by trimesters

    g.   Lots of classes were cancelled on short days for data but it was never shared with us

    h.   Only revisited if we asked and then it was still very hush hush

    i.   Towards the end of the year, nothing happened at all

    j.   We felt it wasn't working and our voice didn't matter

k. Seemed like a pet project for administrators to protect

l. Very hard to share with parents because data was not shared

m. It was not fluid enough to serve the students as skills were changing

n. No one spoke up at district title meeting so it sounded like each school was not having problems with the system in the meeting but that wasn't the case

6. How do you ensure that all students learn? How do you ensure the right students get enrichment or intervention as needed?

a. On my own, I focused on my own room and what I could get to or manage

b. Study hall in place of extra recess and I used it for checking in with students

c. As I see a problem or pattern but it was as time permitted during IE or recess

d. Gut feeling mostly, no reassessing or pre or post testing

e. It wasn't up to us because we never saw the data so the PLCs failed

f. During practice time in math

g. Ultimately it is my responsibility so I communicate to parents and intervene when and where I can during the school day, it is very stressful and challenging

Figure 6

Continuous Improvement

1. Do you discuss, as a team, how to improve instruction? How often? What does this sound or look like?

    a. A little, never talked about small groups and that's where we needed help

    b. Sometimes during planning but not everyone comes

    c. Some will share, some won't or at least not there in a meeting

    d. Some teachers share if they had a really successful lesson or project but it wasn't often well received and it was the SAME teacher over and over with gifted kids

    e. We don't and I would challenge anyone to come up with an example if they say we do

    f. We could at PLC and planning meetings if you were that type

    g. It was more talk of success than instruction or "how-to" help students

2. Do you discuss how to improve student achievement?

    a. All the time, very frustrating to meet MCA demands

    b. Lack of flexibility, not enough time to intervene as needed

    c. There's more bragging about results than discussing or sharing how it was taught

    d. Not as much as we should, we compare the two schools more than anything

e. No one knows where they stand, it could be eye opening as a professional in both a good and bad light

f. The motivation isn't there because there's no real accountability except for whole schools or grade levels, teachers aren't accountable

g. We need data that measures growth from beginning of the year to the end, then you are accountable. Year to year doesn't measure anything for the staff. Even better if it gave us a mid-year growth as well.

h. We tried to stick to the curriculum and best practices to eliminate busy work or pet projects, this is always hard with new curriculum

3. Do you reflect on your own practice based on these discussions and/or data?

a. We did weekly reflections for non-tenured staff but they became very repetitive and they weren't discussed for growth or to change practice

b. Yes, tried to be mindful to incorporate more fun activities using the MCAs most challenging concepts and find activities to address problems

c. I write detailed sub plans each night so I am forced to reflect and it helps me teach the next day with purpose and intent

d. I try to avoid games and gimmicks even though they are tempting and attractive to parents and community members sometimes

e. I think we always reflect in one way or another

f. Not formally

4. Do you see improved instruction as a workshop exercise or a daily goal?

a. Daily goal

b. Never a workshop exercise

    c. Need to change every day and every year, can't rely on the old even if it's easier

5. Is there anything else that could help your team improve?

    a. New eyes, need to look at standards and remove the clutter

    b. Reduce time spent on old units or old curriculum, stop reinventing the wheel

    c. Teachers need to move to avoid becoming complacent

    d. More time to work on theme units and social sciences with less stress on MCAs

    e. Extra recess

    f. Admin needs to put their foot down on created games and activities, I shouldn't have to fight constantly to insist we use curricular items as researched

    g. Flexibility in our day or schedule

    h. Less committee meetings

    i. Assigned team leaders with leadership skills and training that keep accountability

    j. Less wasted time

Figure 7

Results Oriented

1. How do you measure your effectiveness as a teacher?

     a. I struggle with this because I have asked for my data to know where I

          stand and I cannot get it, it could be informative

     b. I don't, not my job, I do my best with what I have

     c. Year to year is not anything, I'd like growth measurements for my

          students

     d. There's so little data that is not subjective, sometimes MCA's but only

          who didn't pass and that doesn't help me overall

     e. When you can see kids use a concept or transfer a skill

     f. Guage it on the kids or I take the blame if not successful

     g. Sometimes it's about a student coming back to you years later and

          remembering a lesson or activity

2. What evidence do you use?

     a. Informal assessments

     b. If I have to bring students up at PLC or not

     c. If students don't know something I just recently taught or introduced

     d. Data plots

     e. Own judgment with Cafe strategies

     f. Confident judgment if a veteran, could be a lot of guessing if new because

          no useful data to promote professional change

3. What do students do when they are done with an assignment in class?

    a. Activity packets, like a Thanksgiving theme, etc.

    b. Authentic reading or writing

    c. Finish incomplete or missing work

    d. Worksheets or activities that are created or kept from prior years

    e. Drawing in a notebook that they may later write about

    f. Silent reading

4. Thoughts on homework?

    a. There are a lot of skills that need to be practiced with the MCA demands

    b. They need math and reading every night

    c. I'm not a fan, it doesn't tie to student success

    d. I think most students can finish or get a great start during our study hall
        with guided help

    e. We correct as a group, I don't worry about their score but the practice as
        we review the problems and ideas

    f. Parents expect homework

    g. It needs to be scored

    h. It's just practice and should be limited

Figure 8

Other Factors

1. Who leads meetings?

    a. The squeakiest wheel

    b. Sometimes we have an agenda so whoever sends it

    c. The loudest always leads and controls the meetings with her buddy

    d. Goes back and forth between two

    e. Reading rep lately or administrator if they are there

    f. We may just pass the clipboard

2. Do you feel like you have a say in decisions?

    a. Quietly I do, when in my own room I decide what I will or will not do

    b. I feel less and less respected

    c. Enough to do my own thing

    d. May not share opinion but I always listen

    e. Not completely

3. Is anyone's opinion given more weight than others?

    a. Definitely, some people listen more to some than others

    b. It would help if there was a designated leader or hierarchy

    c. They sure think so but it works against them

    d. Depends

    e. Squeaky wheel

    f. Maybe

4. How is conflict handled?

    a. Sometimes we have had to involve the administrator

    b. Usually there is hurt feelings that really linger

    c. We have had many conflicts over special projects or opportunities

    d. It's incredibly awkward and we try to avoid conflict at the cost of opinions

    e. Usually the issue is just dropped when tension arises

    f. It has caused division in the team

    g. We try to talk it through using a clipboard to pass and voice concerns

    h. Everyone is just so passionate that you have to remember to step back

5. How would you describe the trust factor on your team?

    a. We have had assigned jobs not completed as expected and that is tough

    b. Pretty trusting

    c. All good people but too competitive as professionals

    d. It's divided but everyone seems to have someone to talk to

    e. Not great

6. Are you comfortable enough to ask tough questions and deep discussions? Will

    everyone share their data when they feel like they need help with their practice?

    a. No

    b. It's easier to just take a copy and throw it out

    c. I share but it's hard to tell if people are listening

    d. Yes, I think we all will

    e. Yeah, if it's for a student that needs help or to get title

    f. Not with data

g. Yes, but comfortable enough to just do my own thing so I don't care

h. Enough of us seem to be willing to talk and listen

7. Do you view your team as above, typical, or below in this area? What would help? What might be the problem areas?

a. Above average in working together

b. Above average as people but below average as professionals

c. Typical I guess, every team has its issues

d. Problem is related to people staying in grades too long

e. People need to be split up to avoid ganging up and being bullies

f. People become complacent

g. More guidance or training for PLC meetings

h. Personality testing or strength focus could help every team grow

8. What is your general view of high-stakes tests?

a. Not a fan, why should my performance be based on a two-hour window

b. Buzz kill for kiddos, if they fail, they think they ARE failures, so frustrating

c. Publicized and obsessed over but not authentic learning

d. We think the other school should have proctors because they help their students

e. We stop teaching to prepare while we say it's no big deal

f. Forces us to squish needed concepts up and move too quickly, no mastery

9. What could help promote PLC success for your team?

a. More guidance, we started with laminated posters that had to be super expensive but they never amounted to anything but to hold post-it notes

b. Administrator stepped in but didn't do anything, just called us all passionate

c. We waited 4-8 weeks without information or data after a student was brought up to the PLC team

d. Classroom teachers need a voice in the process, it is too passive for us

e. Too many people afraid of conflict because of lack of guidance

f. Avoid one person becoming too dominant and favoring ideas or students

g. The meetings need to go somewhere, something needs to come out of them

h. Teachers need data to share with students, brag about growth and share success

i. Teachers and students need goals

Appendix 3

Informed Consent Letters

Month day, year

Dear _____,

I am a graduate student working on an advanced degree in education at Hamline University, St. Paul, Minnesota. As part of my graduate work, I plan to conduct research with elementary teachers from June to July, 2016. The purpose of this letter is to request your participation. This research is public scholarship. The abstract and final product will be catalogued in Hamline's **Bush Library Digital Commons**, a searchable electronic repository, and it may be published or used in other ways.

The topic of my master's capstone (thesis) is to find out if characteristics of a professional learning community may be guiding student achievement without a formal professional learning community setting being in place. I plan to interview elementary teachers about their thoughts and beliefs that guide their practice. I will include questions regarding team collaboration and collaboration time availability and usage. The interview may be recorded and should last from 30 minutes to 45 minutes in a convenient location for you. The interview will be completely confidential. I will also analyze documents such as public data regarding district results on MCA tests. After completing the capstone, I will summarize the findings in a report to share with the participants. It could be informative to your practice and interesting.

There is little or no risk if you choose to be interviewed. All results will be confidential. Pseudonyms for the district, schools, and participants will be used. The interview will be conducted at a place and time that is convenient for you. You will not need to submit any work or samples. The interview recording will be destroyed after I transcribe and code the answers. I will scan the transcriptions and save them to a jump drive which will be stored in a safe deposit box. The original documents will all be shredded. The participants' names will never be stored with the data collection documents.

Participation in the interview is voluntary, and, at any time, you may decline to be interviewed or request to have your interview content deleted from the capstone, without negative consequences.

I have received approval from the School of Education at Hamline University and from Dr. Johnson at your district office to conduct this study. My results might be included in an article or in a professional journal or a session at a professional conference. In all cases, your identity and participation in this study will be confidential.

If you agree to participate, keep this page. Fill out the duplicate agreement to participate on page two and return it to me when we meet for your interview. Please, email me back at ssouhan01@hamline.edu to confirm your participation and we will set up a date and time for your interview. If you have any questions, please contact me.

Sincerely,
Staci Souhan
1010 West Broadway, Monticello, MN 55362
Ph: 239-233-9599 Email: ssouhan01@hamline.edu

Informed Consent to Participate in Qualitative Interview
Keep this full page for your records.

I have received the letter about your research study for which you will be interviewing elementary teachers and analyzing documents related to district MCA scores. I understand that being interviewed poses little to no risk for me, that my identity will be protected, and that I may withdraw from the interview portion of the project at any time without negative consequences.

_____ _____

          Signature   Date

Informed Consent to Participate in Qualitative Interview
Return this portion to the researcher, Staci Souhan.

I have received the letter about your research study for which you will be interviewing elementary teachers and analyzing documents related to district MCA scores. I understand that being interviewed poses little to no risk for me, that my identity will be protected, and that I may withdraw from the interview portion of the project at any time without negative consequences.

_____   _____

            Signature   Date

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