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Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership



Dr. Joey Cope, Dean of the
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Date April 6, 2020

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Experiences and Perceptions of Rural Junior High Teachers
Participating in a Professional Learning Community

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

Pamela Ann Mills Gambrel

April 2020

Acknowledgments

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The journey has been a long and arduous one in which I experienced a lot of highs and lows. During this journey, both of my daughters graduated from college, my dad had brain surgery, my mother had a tumor removed from her ovary, and both of my girls got engaged three weeks apart and then married three weeks apart. In addition, I transitioned from being an assistant principal to a principal, and last, but certainly not least, I was blessed with a granddaughter.

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This study is dedicated to the educators that believe in the opportunity to make a difference to every single child they meet. I believe that educators are truly a blessing from God because they have the heart and compassion to teach the future. Always remember that your attitude determines your altitude!

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Abstract

In this qualitative descriptive case study, the researcher investigated how junior high school teachers' perceptions of the role of how professional learning communities (PLCs) shaped their instructional practices in a rural Title I school in Texas. Exploring and understanding the experiences and perceptions of the teachers and administrators that participated in an English, language arts, and reading PLC provided valuable data that helped the administration determine professional development opportunities that could improve the instructional strategies of the teachers. By collaborating, analyzing student data, and sharing teaching strategies, the teachers were empowered to take ownership and improve their instructional practices. Examining the teachers' perceptions and experiences revealed the strengths and weaknesses of the local program and provided an opportunity to personalize professional development to increase teacher learning as well as student achievement. Furthermore, the researcher identified and analyzed barriers to develop a plan of action to increase stronger team bonding.

Keywords: professional learning communities; collaboration; shared mission, vision, and values; collective inquiry; continuous improvement; results orientation

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Over the last two decades, educators in the United States have witnessed many changes in public education (Philpott & Oates, 2017; Sampson & Horsford, 2017). The National Commission on Excellence published a report that painted a dismal picture of the educational system in the United States. The members reported, “the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future—as a Nation and a people” (Gardner, 1983, p. 5). As a result of this study, during the late 1980s, methods, theories, and best practices within schools began to change as teachers transitioned from working in isolation to working collaboratively.

One of the most recent and notable changes is the transition from the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, Public Law 107-110 to HB 2804 (2015) Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) gives states more control over their decision-making regarding such issues as accountability, funding, and school improvement (Darrow, 2016). The release of the nation at risk report some 30 years ago and the NCLB were both catalysts in a shift in focus on the learning culture and how the educational system can improve student learning. This shift is now reflected in ESSA (Darrow, 2016; DuFour, 2004; Hallam, Smith, Hite, Hite, & Wilcox, 2015; Lippy & Zamora, 2012; Prenger, Poortman, & Handelzalts, 2017; Sharicz & Lees, 2014).

The combination of the claims made in the nation at risk report along with DuFour’s professional learning community (PLC) framework’s focus on shared mission, vision, values, collective inquiry, collaborative teaming, action orientation, and continuous improvement generated a shift in the educational system (DuFour, 2014; Gardner, 1983). Student learning continues to be the focus of educational institutions. Therefore, many districts have developed

collaborative teams of PLCs that focus on academic growth for students (Prenger et al., 2017; Willis & Templeton, 2017). The conceptual framework of PLCs stems from a concern with improving the educational system in the United States and is based on decades of research starting in 1960 (DuFour, 2014, 2015; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Little, 1982; Rosenholtz, 1989, 2000; Senge, 2006; Wenger, 2000).

Prior to the 1980s, schools functioned as entities made up of individual teachers working in isolation. Then in the late 1980s, a shift in the traditional approach began as professional learning communities were introduced. As previously mentioned, the concept of professional learning communities emerged as early as the 1960s, but the concept really took root in the late 1980s with the research of Judith Little (1982) and has continued to grow through the early 1990s and 2000s based on the works of Rosenholtz (1989, 2000), DuFour and Eaker (1998), Wenger (2000), DuFour (2004), and Senge (2006).

Professional learning communities are “composed of collaborative teams whose members work interdependently to achieve common goals linked to the purpose of learning for all” (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006, p. 3). In response to the state mandate to make educational decisions, the individualized efforts of some schools to implement PLCs have shown an increase in student achievement (Hipp & Huffman, 2010).

This paradigm shift in public education institutions that utilize PLCs may provide additional information to affect school improvement. Members of successful PLCs are focused on achieving student results by sharing and focusing on important concerns and relationships (Huffman & Hipp, 2003). The transition to using PLCs that focus on a shared vision, a collaborative culture, and student learning reinforces the goal of HB 2804 ESSA to enhance school improvement. Furthermore, the additional attention placed on utilizing collective inquiry,

action, and orientation that focuses on results with a mindset of continuous improvement provides an academic platform to increase student achievement.

In an effort to improve student achievement and help improve communication between administrators and teachers, many school leaders have implemented PLCs and coordinated professional development to meet the needs of the teachers better (DuFour, 2015). Student achievement and teacher perception have been improved by successfully implemented PLCs (Brown, Horn, & King, 2018). Doolittle, Sudeck, and Rattigan (2008) discovered that the productive, rigorous, and supportive environment of PLCs increases teacher commitment and openness, leading to increased teacher professional involvement.

Establishing and sustaining PLCs requires administrators and teachers to make changes that emphasize open and honest communication and establish a foundation of trust (DuFour, 2014; DuFour & Reeves, 2016; Liou & Daly, 2014; Owen, 2016; Prenger et al., 2017; Sharicz & Lees, 2014). Therefore, if school personnel are to successfully utilize effective PLCs that improve student achievement and teacher professional development, administrators and teachers must be educated on how to implement and maintain PLCs properly.

Successfully implementing effective PLCs requires a focus on student learning, a culture of collaboration, and an emphasis on results (DuFour, 2004; Hallam et al., 2015; Lippy & Zamora, 2012; Prenger et al., 2017; Sharicz & Lees, 2014). To ensure the success of PLCs, educators must reflect on four questions: (a) What do the students need to learn?, (b) How will it be decided if the students are learning?, (c) How will the teachers respond when students do not learn?, and (d) What is the plan to enhance and challenge learning? (DuFour & DuFour, 2012).

Professional development is another crucial area that impacts the effectiveness of PLCs. Thessin (2015) suggested that schools need to gather data and observe the collaborative work of

the teachers to determine what type of professional development would best benefit the school and teachers. School administrators are responsible for designing or locating professional development opportunities to assist teachers in developing and sustaining PLCs (Teague & Anfara, 2012). Furthermore, leadership teams who share goals during structured activities such as professional development produce a positive relationship and yield a positive prediction of PLC success (Prenger et al., 2017). Peppers (2015) argued that effective leaders empower teachers and provide professional development opportunities to support ongoing growth and exploration of how to help sustain PLCs. The continuation of professional development assists in increasing the levels of teachers' perceptions and experiences (Ho, Lee, & Teng, 2016).

Statement of the Problem

Numerous research studies have been conducted to examine how to implement and maintain successful PLCs (Brodie, 2013; Brown et al., 2018; Doolittle et al., 2008; DuFour, 2004, 2014, 2015; DuFour et al., 2006; DuFour & Fullan, 2013; Easton, 2015). However, there is insufficient research in the area of educator experiences and perceptions and the impact that these experiences and perceptions may have on teacher learning and student achievement (Antinluoma, Ilomäki, Lahti-Nuuttila, & Toom, 2018; Charner-Laird, Ippolito, & Dobbs, 2016; Tam, 2015; Zonoubi, Eslami Rasekh, & Tavakoli, 2017). This study was designed to determine whether the perceptions and experiences of junior high teachers impact their instructional practices and student achievement.

Muñoz and Branham (2016) examined the PLC goals and outcomes in 10 elementary schools and three high poverty level middle schools that serviced a high percentage of at-risk urban students. The researchers found in schools that implemented PLCs with intensive support, participants indicated that PLC goals were achieved. Conversely, in schools without intensive

support, participants stated the achievement goals were not achieved. Intensive support was characterized as PLCs that were implemented well, introduced with professional development, and used data to determine the actions that needed to be taken (Muñoz & Branham, 2016).

Muñoz and Branham concluded that PLCs must be implemented with fidelity if they are to have a positive impact on student learning.

Researchers observed that teachers have struggled to attain PLC goals (Muñoz & Branham, 2016; Sims & Penny, 2015; Voelkel & Chrispeels, 2017). Voelkel and Chrispeels found that PLC goals were not met when teachers did not complete all required steps—specifically, in one school, teachers failed to meet the PLC goal of analyzing data because they only collected data but did not analyze it. Those studies document that in interviews, these teacher and administrator participants indicated the PLC was not implemented effectively due to a lack of depth in the implementation and low level of collaboration (Voelkel & Chrispeels, 2017).

Sims and Penny (2015) conducted a case study to explore the impact of PLCs on teachers' instructional practices in a single high school in a suburb outside a major Texas city. The researchers found that in schools that focused only on collecting student data and did not emphasize administrative support and professional development as part of the PLC process, the PLC goals were not attained. Sims and Penny concluded that for PLCs to work effectively, school personnel must develop an environment of support and trust among all participants.

According to Sharicz and Lees (2014), an essential prerequisite for teams to embark on their PLC developmental journey is a sense of ownership or buy-in by the team members. An exploration of the communication channels that the PLC team members engage in during the

PLC sessions will be explored to examine the sense of ownership and buy-in that the teachers demonstrate in their collaborative groups.

Moolenaar, Slegers, and Daly (2011) found a strong correlation between teacher networks, teacher efficacy, and increased student achievement. The researchers discovered that student achievement increased when teacher efficacy and networks were strong. Supportive learning environments are a direct result of the collective efficacy beliefs and the teachers' personal sense of efficacy and professional practice.

Furthermore, Sims and Penny (2015) claimed that successful PLCs include conversations that are open and reflective, utilize educational resources for teaching and learning, and focus on student learning. Getting teachers to buy-in to the concept of PLCs as well as establishing trust among the teachers have also been identified as crucial to the success of PLCs (Hallam et al., 2015; Owen, 2016). Willis and Templeton (2017) reported that principals perceived that teacher buy-in, mutual trust, recognizing goals, providing time for teachers to collaborate, and communication have the most influence in establishing and sustaining PLCs.

The literature clearly describes the factors that assist in establishing effective PLCs; however, it lacks in examining how the perceptions and experiences of the teachers impact their instructional practices. The experiences and perceptions of the members who form the relationships between the teachers and administrators of the PLC are primary factors that can have an impact on student learning (Leclerc, Moreau, Dumouchel, & Sallafranque-St-Louis, 2012). This study was designed to examine how the perceptions and experiences of the teachers and the administrator who participate in a professional learning community at a rural Title I school in East Texas shaped their instructional practices.

Purpose of the Study

This study describes junior high English, language arts, and reading teachers' perceptions concerning the role PLCs may play in shaping their instructional practices in a rural Title I junior high school in Texas. For this study, Title I schools are defined as schools that serve "high percentages of children from low-income families" and junior high schools are defined as serving students from sixth to eighth grade (United States Department of Education, 2015, p. 1).

Research Questions

Q1. How do teachers describe their experiences in the PLC process in a rural Title I junior high?

Q2. How do teachers describe how they incorporate or not the ideas from the PLCs in their teaching in a rural Title I junior high?

Q3. How do teachers describe their perceptions of the value of PLCs, if any, in shaping their instructional approach in a rural Title I junior high?

Significance of the Study

Implementing successful and productive PLCs in a school is a major undertaking for administrators as well as the teachers. Exploring and understanding the experiences and perceptions of the teachers and administrators that participate in PLCs may contribute valuable information that can be used as a foundation to increase student achievement. By taking what the teachers learn, analyzing student data, and differentiating instruction, the information gathered could be utilized to impact student achievement positively. An examination of the teachers' perceptions and experiences could reveal the strengths and weaknesses of the local program and provide an opportunity to personalize professional development to increase teacher learning as well as student achievement. Furthermore, PLCs "contribute to schools' performance as student

learning [and] can be a system-wide blueprint for managing positive school change and enhancing teacher effectiveness” (Muñoz & Branham, 2016, p. 45).

Definition of Key Terms

Action oriented. The members of a PLC put their hopes or ambitions into action and make their visions concrete (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

Collaboration. Individuals within an organization pull together to focus on achieving a common goal rather than working independently (Swan & Morgan, 1993).

Collective inquiry. Developing a process where individuals work together to increase knowledge by exploring and analyzing information together (DuFour et al., 2006).

Continuous improvement. An endless cycle where results are improved by planning, doing, checking, and acting (DuFour et al., 2006).

Mission. The sole reason of existence for an organization that explains why they exist (DuFour et al., 2006).

Professional development programs. Professional development programs are composed of workshops or training sessions that are often followed up by coaching (Sjoer & Meirink, 2015).

Professional learning communities. Professional learning communities (PLCs) are teams of individuals that work together collaboratively to achieve goals that improve student achievement and teacher learning (DuFour et al., 2006).

Results oriented. The focus on end results rather than the input or intentions (DuFour et al., 2006, p. 218).

Rural schools. Schools that have an enrollment of between 300 and the average district enrollment for the state with a 20% or less growth in enrollment over the last five years or fewer than 300 enrollments (Texas Education Agency, 2017).

Self-efficacy. The belief that one has in their ability to succeed or accomplish a specific task (Bandura, 1977).

Title I. This federal aid program provides financial assistance to schools that serve a high percentage of children from low-income families to assist them in meeting academic standards (United States Department of Education, 2015).

Values. The beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes one must demonstrate to achieve a vision (DuFour et al., 2006).

Vision. A perception one builds for an organization (DuFour et al., 2006).

Chapter Summary

The literature on PLCs reveals the importance of focusing on student learning, creating a culture of collaboration among team members, and analyzing data gathered from student achievement information (D'Ardenne et al., 2013; Darnell, 2015; DeLuca, Bolden, & Chan, 2017; Easton, 2015; Lee, Zhang, & Yin, 2011). Examining the relationships between PLCs, teacher efficacy, student results, experiences, and teachers' perceptions provides insight into how to implement successful PLCs.

Education reformers and researchers strongly advocate that schools be developed as professional learning communities "as a systematic and effective way to improve teacher quality" (Lee et al., 2011, p. 820). Sharing common goals or commitments produces opportunities for teachers to share their professional knowledge and skills openly. The transition

to PLCs should incorporate necessary professional development and training that will enable the educators to effectively and efficiently enhance their skill sets.

Vescio, Ross, and Adams (2008) conducted a review and argued the importance of PLCs being student-centered and driven by developing teachers' knowledge of practice, which enhanced student growth. The increase in professional knowledge and development for teachers assisted in increasing their efficacy and building a stronger foundation of collaboration for PLCs. As a result of the exposure to positive experiences and persuasion, teacher efficacy increased, and the teachers believed that they could teach all the children in ways to achieve higher standards.

Successfully implementing effective PLCs requires focusing on student learning, creating a culture of collaboration, and focusing on results. D'Ardenne et al. (2013) reported that a "successful PLC depends on a commitment to student learning and on the unique expertise of the particular professionals involved" (p. 150). The exploration of this topic will be beneficial to school districts, campus personnel, and students because it will help identify steps that can be taken to implement PLCs effectively, which could lead to increased student achievement. Thus, the purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study is to explore junior high school teachers' experiences and perceptions concerning the role PLCs play in shaping their instructional practices in a rural Title I school in Texas.

In the following chapters, the theory, methodology, findings, and implications from the study are discussed. In the second chapter, a review of the literature on professional learning communities, the theoretical and conceptual frameworks for the study, and the experience and perceptions of the participants are presented. The third chapter covers the methodology and design utilized for the study. In the fourth chapter, the results of the PLC process are presented.

Finally, the fifth chapter addresses the findings, implications, recommendations, and conclusions regarding the study. Completing this qualitative study through the use of observations, interviews, and documentation may provide school districts, administrators, and teachers with information that will be beneficial in determining professional development needs as well as assist in increasing student achievement.

In Chapter 2, relevant literature is presented through a variety of resources to provide background knowledge of the philosophy behind the concept of PLCs. The conceptual and theoretical framework of PLC establishment is also reviewed. In addition, the characteristics that form the foundation of PLCs are examined as well as the roles of the principal and teachers. Finally, the experiences and perceptions of the teachers are discussed along with the impact on student achievement.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to investigate how junior high school teachers' perceptions of the role of how professional learning communities (PLCs) shaped their instructional practices in a rural Title I school in Texas. This literature review presents background information on the establishment of PLCs and the characteristics that define them. The research questions guiding this study examined the following:

Q1. How do teachers describe their experiences in the PLC process in a rural Title I junior high?

Q2. How do teachers describe how they incorporate or not the ideas from the PLCs in their teaching in a rural Title I junior high?

Q3. How do teachers describe their perceptions of the value of PLCs, if any, in shaping their instructional approach in a rural Title I junior high?

The exploration of this topic may be beneficial to school districts, campus personnel, and students because it may help identify steps that can be taken to implement PLCs effectively, which could lead to increased student achievement.

This review begins with an introduction of the history of PLCs. Following the introduction, the first section of this review focuses on student learning, the culture of collaboration, and results. This section also offers insight into the characteristics of PLCs. The next section of this review explores the roles of the principal and teachers. It sheds light on the experiences and perceptions of the teachers.

Background of Professional Learning Communities

The term professional learning community (PLC) emerged through the process of school personnel looking at and developing their own style of learning communities (Stoll, Bolam,

McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006). Throughout the last two decades, many districts have attempted to develop PLCs but have failed at implementing them successfully. Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 caused a dramatic shift in federal policy by limiting the control the federal government had on public schools (Darrow, 2016). This change in power provided local communities with the unique opportunity to work together with community members to create and design new missions and visions for their school districts (Sampson & Horsford, 2017). The implementation of ESSA required that school leaders reshape their thinking and make decisions that would improve classroom instruction and student achievement (Gilbert, Voelkel, & Johnson, 2018). As a result, many districts implemented PLCs to meet the needs of the students and teachers better. Tam (2015) asserted that PLCs provide teachers the opportunity to acquire a new understanding by challenging individual beliefs and practices while participating in ongoing communication and sharing experiences with colleagues.

According to Hands, Guzar, and Rodriguez (2015), “research demonstrated that the development of learning communities is contingent on organizational culture” (p. 239). Key stakeholders should be included in collectively examining their professional practices and striving to reach a common goal (Wilson, 2016). In addition, teachers need to shift from being “representative of change [to] leaders of change” (Wilson, 2016, p. 58).

Professional learning communities provide an environment to encourage teacher professional development, enhance collaboration, increase student achievement, and improve teacher perception (Brown et al., 2018). Furthermore, Zonoubi, Eslami Rasekh, and Tavakoli (2017) claimed that student learning and teachers’ self-efficacy, perceptions, learning, and classroom management improved when teachers participated in PLCs.

A primary factor in failed PLC implementation is a lack of focus on student achievement (Sims & Penny, 2015; Weber, 2018). See Figure 1 to view the reason and rigor behind the drive to implement professional learning communities.

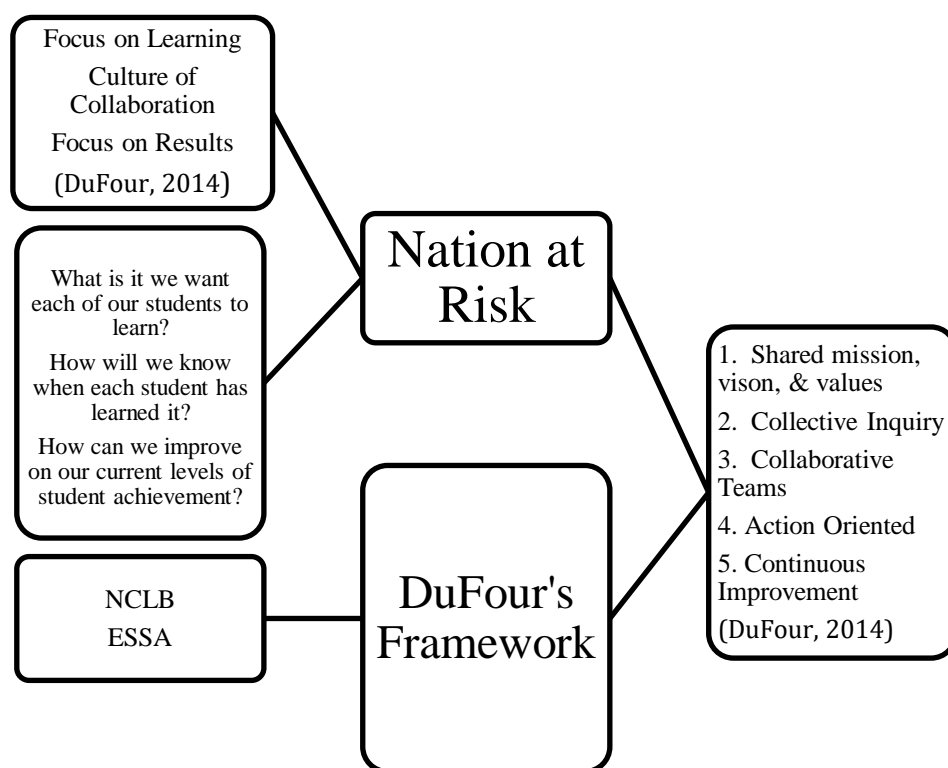


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of PLC establishment.

DuFour (2004), a distinguished educator, author, and PLC consultant, posited that the focus of effective PLCs is on learning rather than teaching. In addition, the PLC members hold each other accountable while working collaboratively. DuFour (2004) suggested that PLC members ask the following crucial questions: “(a) What do we want each student to learn?, (b) How will we know when each student has learned it?, and (c) How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning it?” (p. 2).

Professional learning communities should be structured around organizing groups, identifying research lines or areas of interest, planning for innovation, sharing findings, disseminating information, and redefining strategies (Bonces, 2015). The successful

implementation and sustaining of a PLC require that the PLC participants be willing to collaborate with others (Terry, Zafonte, & Elliott, 2018).

Schools that fail to embrace the true culture of PLCs are known as PLC Lite (DuFour & Reeves, 2016). To avoid being a PLC Lite, school personnel reflect on how their group functions by regularly having discussions regarding their practices and student performance (Darnell, 2015). As a way to further clarify student achievement and avoid being a PLC Lite, DuFour and Reeves (2016) suggested that the question “How will we provide extended learning opportunities for students who have mastered the content?” (p. 70) be added to the PLC meetings. Ultimately, to avoid being a PLC Lite, PLC members need to use the collected data and determine how to use it to strive for higher levels of student learning (DuFour, 2015).

Professional learning communities that incorporate motivation along with the perception of shared goals show an increase in the prediction of PLC success. In addition, the utilization of structured activities that target specific student learning fundamentally increases the gained knowledge of acquired skills (Prenger et al., 2017).

While PLCs can significantly impact student achievement, PLCs can also be a powerful tool to improve teacher self-efficacy. Doğan and Adams (2018) asserted, “PLCs remain a powerful format for teacher learning to thrive” (p. 655). Zonoubi et al. (2017) conducted a study and found that teachers’ self-efficacy grew when they participated in collaborative reflection.

Student learning. Student learning is the primary focus of professional learning communities (Budgen, 2017; DuFour, 2004, 2014; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Easton, 2015). The collection and analysis of data utilized in PLCs lead to higher levels of student learning (DuFour, 2015). To achieve the goal of increasing student learning, educators must address what they can do better to assist the students in developing their knowledge and skills.

Recent research showed that when PLCs produce positive effects on teachers and their institutions, improved student performance is reported (Doğan & Adams, 2018; Linder, Post, & Calabrese, 2012). The collective efforts of the teachers in PLCs to collaborate, analyze student data, and hold each other accountable exemplifies an increase in student learning (Lippy & Zamora, 2012).

Culture of collaboration. Collaboration is a significant factor necessary when implementing PLCs (Terry et al., 2018). The formation of collaborative teams is the basic structure that is necessary when developing a professional learning community (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Through the development and interactions of collaborative teams, the teachers and administrators can address the need for knowledge, understanding, and skills required to implement and maintain PLCs successfully. Carpenter (2015) conducted a case study on PLCs and determined that effective collaboration is key to establishing a positive school culture as well as an effective professional learning community.

Creating a culture of collaboration is a primary goal of forming PLCs. Successfully implementing PLCs requires that teachers and administrators make a wholehearted commitment to work together to make the reform happen (Battersby & Verdi, 2015). Effective PLCs create a culture of collaboration that provides educators time to talk about education, lead others, and learn from their peers, which increases opportunities to serve better and enhance the learning experience of the students (Darnell, 2015). All members work together to share the common goal of promoting collaboration. The collaborative efforts of the teachers and administrators assist in developing trust and setting goals to increase student learning (Hallam et al., 2015).

Focus on results. Professional learning communities determine their effectiveness based on results. Healthy PLCs are products of strong leadership at the school and the participants that

demonstrate ownership or buy-in to the PLC process of examining results and using them to make necessary academic adjustments (Sharicz & Lees, 2014). Teachers and administrators use the collected data to evaluate student performance and teaching strategies. Successful PLCs encourage the use of data and relevant information gathered to develop better teaching practices that will facilitate improved student learning (DuFour, 2004).

As PLC participants focus on results, they must take the time to collectively support each other as they make sense of learner errors while examining their teaching practices (Brodie, 2014). Dehdary (2017) pointed out that focusing on results requires looking at the strengths and weaknesses of the teachers and students, and an effort must be made to create an opportunity to provide them time to grow.

Characteristics of Professional Learning Communities

The term professional learning community has been around since the 1960s, and in the 1980s, it became more explicit (Solution Tree, 2019). Many researchers have studied and made recommendations on how to implement PLCs. However, DuFour and Eaker (1998) are the men responsible for making PLCs more widely known and understood. They identified six characteristics that must be present in a well-functioning PLC. These six characteristics are shared mission, vision, and values; collective inquiry; collaborative teams; action orientation and experimentation; continuous improvement; and results orientation (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Characteristics of professional learning communities (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

Shared mission, vision, and values. Effective PLCs have a shared mission, vision, and values. The community members of the PLC share a unified responsibility to the instructional foundation of what they seek to achieve (Choi & Sazawa, 2016; DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Creating a shared vision describes what the school will focus on as a collective agency. The focus of the shared mission, vision, and values focuses on what the campus as a whole must do to move forward to achieve the goals (DuFour & DuFour, 2012).

Developing and sharing the same mission, vision, and values is what distinguishes a PLC from a general grade-level meeting. The development of knowledge and beliefs are the first inputs needed to commit to a PLC vision and standards (Ke, Kang, & Liu, 2016). The unified focus on a collective mission, vision, and values embeds the guiding principles in the hearts and minds of the individuals (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). A school's purpose is easily identified in its mission statement (Lunenburg, 2010). Shared visions are developed over time when teachers and administrators interact in daily informal conversations (Owen, 2016). The development of these

shared missions, visions, and values provides a firm foundation on which the leaders can translate into clear expectations for the school (Farley-Ripple & Buttram, 2014).

Collective inquiry. The next characteristic of PLCs is collective inquiry among the members. Each individual is relentless in seeking methods to solve problems and examine results (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). A key element necessary to ensure the collective process is the importance that all team members commit to a set of principles that reinforces the collective vision of the PLC and not their individual interests (Graham & Ferriter, 2010).

Collective inquiry is the engine that fuels development, improvement, and revitalization in a PLC (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). When teachers and administrators demonstrate a unified focus on student learning, student success increases and significantly influences obtained knowledge and skills of the teachers (Prenger et al., 2017). The maximization of collective involvement among teachers and administrators builds and reinforces skills that reinforce student and teacher growth (Blank, 2013).

Collaborative teaming. Collaborative teaming is the third facet of a PLC. The organization focuses on building the school's capacity to learn through collaborative efforts (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). The key component to collaborative teaming is that all the team "members work interdependently to achieve common goals linked to the purpose of learning for all" (DuFour et al., 2006, p. 3).

The basic structure of professional learning communities is the formation of collaborative teams (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Collaborative problem solving provides teachers with opportunities to research and solve problems (Tan & Caleon, 2016). Well-developed PLCs utilize formal and informal collaboration strategies (Hallam et al., 2015). Moolenaar et al. (2012)

argued that student achievement is positively affected and teachers' practices benefit when teachers collaborate.

Action orientation and experimentation. The members of a PLC are action oriented. Aspirations are turned into action and visions to reality (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). The members realize the importance of turning their talk into actions. They believe in engaging in experimenting and testing their hypotheses. Action-oriented teams use the outcomes from assessments to pinpoint areas of strengths and weaknesses and then determine ways to improve the current results (DuFour & DuFour, 2012).

Taking action and experimenting are key components underlying PLCs. When teachers discover a willingness to explore and experiment, they soon discover that learning takes place when action is taken (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Sharicz and Lees (2014) found that when teachers participated in risk-taking exercises, made mistakes, and had opportunities to create a safe learning environment, they were better prepared to embark on a developmental learning journey. Owen (2016) asserted that while PLC members develop stronger connections, they must also be willing to challenge ideas to increase the opportunity for success while gaining a better knowledge base through the accomplishment of joint work.

Continuous improvement. Members of PLCs are committed to continuous improvement and growth. The members examine their fundamental purpose, review what they hope to achieve, discuss strategies for growth, and determine what principle will be used to appraise their progress (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). The process of collecting evidence, establishing strategies, carrying out strategies, evaluating the changes, and implementing new knowledge is the ongoing cycle that aids in continuous improvement (DuFour et al., 2006).

Schools that create a school environment where innovation and experimentation are viewed as day to day business rather than tasks are reflective of schools that create perpetual learning environments (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). The culture of collaboration found in PLCs provides a “vehicle for individuals to extend teaching and research capacities” (Patton & Parker, 2017, p. 359). Continuous improvement requires the participants reflect on their fundamental purpose, what they hope to achieve, review the strategies they use, and determine what criteria they will use to make improvement efforts (Carpenter, 2015; Chou, 2011; DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

Results orientation. The final area signifying an effective PLC is that the members study and analyze their data to determine if they are meeting their shared vision, mission, and goals (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). The members utilize ongoing assessments to determine if their efforts result in achieving their goals. The team develops and pursues measurable goals that coordinate with the school and district goals for student achievement (DuFour et al., 2006).

Creating and maintaining successful PLCs involves a learning process for all members and creates a forum for social change within a school as the fundamental purpose shifts to questioning and determining how students learn (Lippy & Zamora, 2012). First and foremost, a shared mission, vision, and values must be identified for the school and PLC (DuFour & DuFour, 2012). Through a unified vision, a collective focus is reinforced (Graham & Ferriter, 2010). In addition, the development of a collaborative, action oriented, and experimental PLC team increases the opportunity to identify strengths and weaknesses while determining methods to improve results (Prenger et al., 2017). Ultimately, the commitment for continuous improvement increases the opportunity for members to focus on the results of the PLC and allows for growth.

Reviewing and analyzing the collected data provides the PLC members with data-driven results (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). The collected data furnish administrators and teachers the evidence needed to identify areas of weakness and determine methods for improvement as well as identifying ways to challenge the high achieving students (DuFour & Mattos, 2013). Educators need to devote time and energy to identify specific research-supported practices and strategies that will enable them to increase student learning (Wasta, 2017).

The philosophy of PLCs aligns well with increasing student achievement through the utilization of collaborative learning and professional development. Muñoz and Branham (2016) posited that well implemented PLCs can be a master plan for developing positive school change and increasing teacher effectiveness. Many experts believe implementing PLCs alongside professional development will aid in promoting student growth and strengthen teachers' capacity to collaborate and better meet the essential needs of their students (Ho et al., 2016; Riveros, Newton, & Burgess, 2012; Teague & Anfara, 2012; Thessin, 2015; Watson, 2014).

Professional learning communities are focused on the commitment of helping every student learn (DuFour et al., 2006). School districts embrace the concept of PLCs when they desire to enrich the learning for students and teachers. Professional learning communities work by developing a collaborative focus on learning for all individuals. DuFour and DuFour (2012), as modified from DuFour and Marzano (2011), identify the three significant ideas that are the backbone of PLCs as (a) the fundamental purpose that all students learn, (b) PLC participants must work together collaboratively to ensure all students learn, and (c) the administrators and teachers are results oriented.

Various researchers have discussed the essential characteristics or theoretical framework of PLCs that are present within schools. Although different studies present different factors or

characteristics, they appear to focus on shared goals, student learning, reflective dialogue, collaboration, leadership, structured activities, and trust (Carpenter, 2015; DuFour, 2015; Prenger et al., 2017; Vanblaere & Devos, 2016). In addition, PLCs where the teachers were engaged in ongoing collaborative activities that focused on instructional learning opportunities, analyzing student data, and creating and refining student assessments appeared to exhibit the characteristics needed to sustain growth (Jones & Thessin, 2015).

According to DuFour and Eaker (1998), essential PLC characteristics are developing a shared mission, vision, and values, utilizing collective inquiry, building collaborative teams, implementing action orientation and experimentation, striving for continuous improvement, and focusing on results orientation. Researchers revealed the diverse needs of all students are likely met when PLCs utilize the essential characteristics (Barton & Stepanek, 2012). Furthermore, developing a clear vision for the PLC and defining the expectations of the participants provides helpful insight into what steps are needed to transfigure a school into a constructive learning community (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

Role of Principals

Principals are primary agents in the success or failure of PLCs. Jones and Thessin (2015) asserted that the principal is the key to guiding PLCs to continued development. As the campus instructional coordinator, principals need to foster professional learning habits they expect their teachers to display (Cherkowski, 2016). In addition, “shared leadership is a central component of effective professional learning in collaborative groups such as professional learning communities” (Carpenter, 2015, p. 682). Gillespie, Wells, and Panzer (2010) found that the behavior of the principal had a direct correlation to the amount of trust the teachers had in their principal’s leadership.

The principal's leadership and social interactions with the teachers play an important part in the effectiveness of a PLC (Song & Choi, 2017). Furthermore, another area of importance needed to construct a successful PLC is the establishment of a climate of trust (Thornton, & Cherrington, 2014). The principal should develop an atmosphere that fosters adopting positive leadership strategies, setting directions, and developing relationships that are built upon trust (Yin & Zheng, 2018). According to Wells and Feun (2013), administrators need to ensure the perceived notions of the desired school culture are clearly defined and the teachers are involved in developing the desired expectations.

Support teachers. Teachers need to be supported by the campus principal and encouraged to take part in the shared leadership of the PLCs. Encouraging leadership among the teachers strengthens the professional learning community (Easton, 2015). It is crucial for school leaders to provide teachers with the necessary provisions of resources, time, space, and collaboration skills to participate in the PLCs in order to develop and sustain PLCs.

The principal must support the teachers by clearly communicating the expectations and providing teachers with the fundamental support to complete the process (Brown III, 2016; Carpenter, 2015; Teague & Anfara, 2012). Teachers need to be provided with scheduled times to work together to discuss and study their practices, which will increase teacher and student learning (Charner-Laird et al., 2016).

Provide professional development. To implement and maintain successful PLCs, principals need to provide professional development for the teachers. Continuous learning is crucial for teachers to grow their learning community into a transformational group. Campus administrators need to be assessing the individual needs of the teachers and schedule professional development that will aid in supporting and developing a stronger PLC (Benoliel &

Schechter, 2017).

Professional learning communities provide the framework for determining the type of professional development needed to assist the teachers in better serving the students. The utilization of PLCs holds the key to developing knowledge-building opportunities and increasing professional growth for teachers (Popp, & Goldman, 2016).

Role of Teachers

The role that teachers play in a PLC will determine the success or failure of the organization. Teachers have the potential to be agents of change in the school. As change agents, teachers must take collective responsibility for the students' learning, participate in reflective inquiry, collaborate on learning, and work on individual and group learning (Watson, 2014).

Professional learning communities provide teachers with opportunities to challenge their individual beliefs, share new experiences, and acquire new understandings (Tam, 2015). Furthermore, teachers that collaborate are afforded more opportunities to find solutions to real problems when they participate in PLCs.

Leadership. The implementation of PLCs brings about the possibility of developing shared leadership among the teachers. Opportunities for leadership within the PLCs allow for structures and processes of formal decision-making to be established that can be shared by the teachers. These leadership strategies then provide opportunities for teacher debate and collegial learning as they take turns leading (Owen, 2016).

Student advocate. Teachers have the opportunity to be advocates of students since they spend a large amount of time with them. Professional learning communities provide teachers with the opportunity to examine critically their teaching practices while getting to know their students better. As teachers gather data about their students, they gain valuable information,

which directly impacts the achievement of the students when utilized to help the students (Chou, 2011).

In addition, research shows that student achievement is related to teacher efficacy (Banerjee, Stearns, Moller, & Mickelson, 2017). Therefore, as teachers participate in PLCs and increase their belief in their abilities to assist in student outcomes, the students will tend to demonstrate behaviors that meet this belief (Protheroe, 2008).

Teachers' Experiences from Engagement in Professional Learning Communities

Teachers that participate in professional learning communities are participating in a collaborative effort to increase student achievement. By participating in PLCs, teachers develop in-depth insight into the nature, needs, strengths, and weaknesses of their peers (Jones & Thessin, 2015). In addition, PLCs provide a successful format to increase teacher learning (Doğan, & Adams, 2018).

The implementation of PLCs brings with it the opportunity to provide professional development, establish stronger lines of communication, and build trust among the teachers and administrators. DuFour and Mattos (2013) found schools that embraced PLCs share collective responsibility of their students, are more willing to share and be transparent, improve their teaching and student achievement, develop productive professional development, and retain teachers in their profession.

Professional development. Implementing and maintaining PLCs brings about opportunities for teachers to receive and provide professional development on their campus. The common planning time formed to conduct PLC meetings provides time for meaningful, effective, and applicable professional development for the teachers (Dever & Lash, 2013). Furthermore,

Prenger, Poortman, and Handelzalts (2017) found that motivation is a necessary component for the professional development of PLCs.

Professional learning community participants should address the professional development needs they feel are necessary to assist them in increasing professional growth as well as positively impacting student achievement. The professional development that is established to assist with improving PLC effectiveness and teacher growth should be centered on the schools' campus improvement plan (Antinluoma et al., 2018).

Communication. Developing strong communication channels is a key component to implementing and maintaining PLCs (DuFour, 2004; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hallam et al., 2015). The challenge for school leaders is to make sure the goals of the district are vocalized to the teachers and implemented and sustained (Huffman, 2011).

Open and honest communication is necessary if PLCs are going to function properly. The communication channels must be open and bidirectional; meaning the administrators listen to the teachers and vice versa. Formal and informal communication needs to take place daily. This type of communicative relationship builds a strong foundation for risk-taking. For example, PLC meetings need to provide time for the teachers to reflect, study, and share instructional practices (Cansoy, & Parlar, 2017).

Trust. Trust is a necessary and critical component needed to create successful PLCs, and a commitment to trust is considered to be a precondition to PLCs (Cranston, 2011). Teachers and administrators that trust each other are better prepared to be open and honest about their thoughts and practices. Ning, Lee, and Lee (2015) found that “a collegial professional learning team climate (whereby team members trust and respect each other and engage in supportive and productive interactions with one another as professional colleagues) is extremely crucial for

teachers' collaborative learning and development" (p. 339). Furthermore, the establishment of a trusting atmosphere and environment will increase the development and sustainability of the PLC (Lee et al., 2011).

Developing a foundation of trust is essential to the success of a PLC (Gray, Mitchell, & Tarter, 2014). Trust is necessary to provide the PLC members with the openness and freedom to ask questions, share ideas, and develop a stronger learning environment (Sharicz & Lees, 2014). The establishment of trust can have an impact on the foundation of the effectiveness of the school (Cranston, 2011).

Teachers' Perceptions from Engagement in Professional Learning Communities

The perceptions formed by teachers are a direct product of their experiences during the PLC process. Vescio et al. (2008) found that teachers' perceptions of PLCs reveal they use PLCs to improve their teaching practice, and they support and value increasing student achievement. Teachers are the experts in their field, and they possess rich knowledge, which can be beneficial for themselves and their colleagues (Liou & Daly, 2014). Therefore, when teachers perceived higher instructional and transformational leadership, their reflective dialogue was higher (Vanblaere & Devos, 2016).

Collaborative learning. Collaborative learning is a dominant component of the framework for establishing a well-functioning PLC (DeLuca et al., 2017). According to Leavitt et al. (2013), collaborative communications was the most valuable aspect of teachers participating in PLCs. Teachers act as change agents in schools, and they learn from each other by examining and discussing student work with their peers (Ho et al., 2016). As a direct result of collaboration, student learning is positively influenced (Lippy & Zamora, 2012).

Schools that implement collaborative learning as part of their daily routine develop skill sets that improve teacher learning and increase student success (Chediak, Kunnari, Inforsato, & Amorim Júnior, 2018). As part of a collaborative effort, school personnel must also develop strategies that are effective for collaborative work and learning (Chen & Mitchell, 2015).

Student achievement. Student learning is a positive action that surfaces from PLCs when teachers engage in collaborative practices (Lippy & Zamora, 2012). When the teachers work collaboratively on structuring action research regarding their students, higher levels of learning emerge and student achievement increases (Battersby & Verdi, 2015). Results oriented PLCs collect data, analyze it, and use it to develop plans to increase student learning (Muñoz & Branham, 2016).

Members of a PLC are provided a platform to share knowledge and expertise among team members to discuss and evaluate instructional routines and strategies and modify them to improve instructional practices. The implementation and utilization of PLCs provide teachers and administrators opportunities to participate in collaborative meetings with their peers to reinforce professional growth and increase student achievement (Woodland, 2016). Song and Choi (2017) found a positive variable for predicting increased academic achievement and school effectiveness was witnessed when positive relationships were present among PLC members.

Theoretical Framework Discussion

The literature review provided insight into several social learning theories that gave background information on how people learn by observing and interacting with others. Gleaning from the theories of Bandura, Vygotsky, Lewin, and Wenger, researchers have discovered how individuals learn and develop. Along with these theories, this study will be based on the works of DuFour (2004), DuFour and Fullan (2013), and Hord (2015).

Albert Bandura is the most well-known name in the area of social learning. His research began in the 1960s and extended through the 1980s (Swanson & Holton, 2009). Bandura focused on the efficacy or belief one has about their ability to complete a task successfully (Nohria & Khurana, 2014). A key component of PLCs is they provide teachers with the opportunity to increase their self-efficacy by observing and modeling for others as they strive to master individual and group goals. Bandura's theory reinforced that people are grounded with the ability to change based on one's reactions no matter what other factors and motivators are present ("Gold Medal Award," 2006).

Lev Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) is his most well-known contribution in the education world. His social constructivism theory focused on the social aspects of learning while providing individuals with the opportunity to construct and organize knowledge actively (Clarà, 2017; Gao & Li, 2017). He argued that social interactions can transform learning experiences. Additionally, Vygotsky stressed that learning was not only perceiving but processing what was being perceived and acting accordingly (Esteban-Guitart, 2018). The collaborative sessions of PLCs allow teachers to gain knowledge from their social interactions with coworkers, thereby impacting perceptions and experiences.

Kurt Lewin claimed that behavior is a result of physical and social situations, and he stressed the importance of "understanding the underlying forces of outward behavior" (Billig, 2015, p. 444). His three-step model focused on examining the patterns of interactions between individuals by unfreezing customs or habits, changing or moving when the actions occurred, and refreezing by adopting the new habit and creating a perception that change is needed (Burnes & Bargal, 2017). Lewin suggested that the environment is defined by the way a person perceives or

organizes it (Swanson & Holton, 2009). The environment of professional learning communities is impacted by the perceptions and experiences of the individuals participating.

Etienne Wenger's theory of communities of practice encouraged the sharing of ideas and practices with like-minded individuals to advance further the professional identity of the group members (Morley, 2016). The philosophy behind communities of practice is that human beings are knowledgeable and social, and actively participating in communities produces meaningful and productive solutions. Professional learning communities are similar to the foundation pillars of a social learning system because the members of the organization share their reflective practices to enhance collective learning (Wenger, 2000).

Conceptual Framework

Conducting a qualitative descriptive case study allows for an in-depth description of junior high school English, language arts, and reading teachers' experiences and perceptions concerning the role PLCs play in shaping their instructional practices in a rural Title I school in Texas (Crowe et al., 2011). Through the use of observations, interviews, and documentation, the nature of the PLC process may be uncovered and understood better. In addition, the teachers' perceptions and experiences will be explored and new ideas or thoughts may be discovered.

According to Antinluoma, Ilomäki, Lahti-Nuutila, and Toom (2018), schools that had higher readiness as a professional learning community demonstrated more balanced characteristics. Professional learning communities can reshape the beliefs and practices of teachers (Tam, 2015). The development of the PLCs that share the goals can create a better understanding among the members, thus giving the community a better chance at survival (Dehdary, 2017).

Bradley-Levine, Smith, and Carr (2009) conducted a study and found teachers' confidence and understanding increased when they reviewed literature, conducted a study, and completed a research project. The perceptions and experiences of the teachers revealed that the teachers should possess the knowledge to reflect on their teaching and make changes to improve the academic experiences for their students. Figure 3 shows the factors that can impact PLCs.

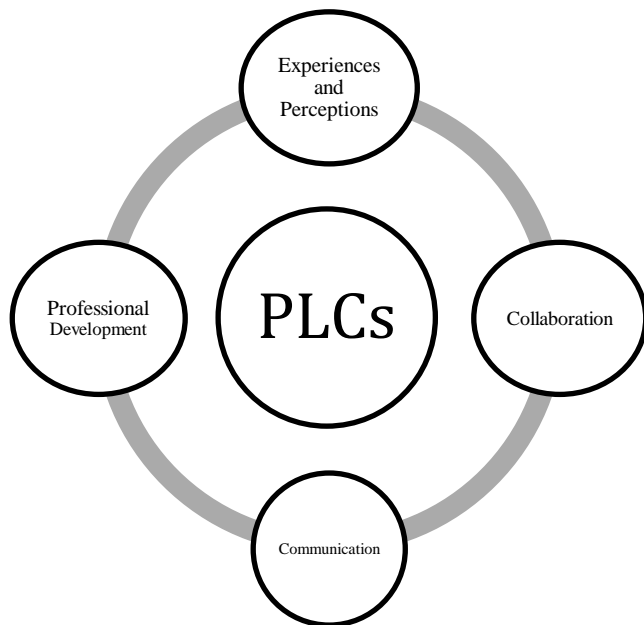


Figure 3. Conceptual framework for professional learning communities.

Experiences and Perceptions

Increasing communication, sharing, and perceiving competence leads to team collaboration that develops trust through benevolence, reliability, and openness. Hallam et al. (2015) argued that principals should work to help their staff be continuous learners, which aids in creating positive teacher experiences and perceptions.

PLCs provide teachers with learning and teaching experiences that can strengthen their development and enhance student achievement. Sompong, Erawan, and Dharm-tad-sa-na-non (2015) conducted a study and found schools that developed effective PLCs witnessed a change in the teachers' behavior, and the teachers emphasized higher importance in preparing the children.

Additionally, the teachers collaborated more in planning and designing lessons. Furthermore, every team showed higher teacher satisfaction, and the instructional behavior of the teachers changed in a positive way. Researchers found PLCs provide a framework for future professional self-development.

Providing opportunities for collaborative reflection in the classroom help to cultivate and promote PLC experiences (Ishii, 2017). The experiences that teachers have with administrators and their colleagues during the PLC meetings shape their perceptions regarding PLCs. Vanblaere and Devos (2016) discovered that the way teachers perceive their leaders impacted their participation in PLCs, thus leading to increased PLC benefits. Furthermore, Ho, Lee, and Teng (2016) found that “overall there is a significant relationship between school-level teacher qualifications and teachers’ perception of school-based PLC practices” (p. 39).

Collaboration. Collaborative effort is a core area necessary to establish a solid PLC foundation. Administrators and teachers must willingly volunteer to participate in the PLC process (Carpenter, 2015). Through the voluntary actions of those participating in the PLC, the participants can better focus on working collaboratively to focus on the shared purpose, values, leadership, and collective inquiry to provide continuous improvement (Carpenter, 2015). Furthermore, DeLuca, Bolden, and Chan (2017) determined that teachers need additional support if they are to engage in a collaborative effort effectively. The culmination of the collaborative efforts of the teachers and administrators reinforces the building of mutual trust and focus on student achievement.

Communication. Developing honest and open lines of communication is a prerequisite of implementing and sustaining effective PLCs. Darnell (2015) suggested that PLC participants needed to “encourage active listening, ensure equitable participation, and create a culture of

safety, respect, trust, and mutual appreciation” (p. 17). By focusing on developing and maintaining good relationships, professional learning community members enable the community to develop trust, which is essential to the success of the PLC (Easton, 2015). Team collaboration facilitated through benevolence, reliability, and openness increases communication, sharing, and perceived competence (Hallam et al., 2015).

Communication is a vital component to the success or failure of PLCs. According to DuFour and Eaker (1998), “communication is most powerful when it is timely” (p. 241). Open lines of communication in schools that promote honest and forthright dialogue produce well-functioning and supportive PLCs (Huffman, 2011). Kalkan (2016) conducted a study of 176 primary and 155 secondary schools and determined that loyalty and commitment improve when a higher degree of trust exists. The author also pointed out that bureaucratic support strengthens trust in the organization, enables stronger bonds to be formed, and improves the development of the school. Patton and Parker (2017) asserted that professional learning communities that engage in meaningful reflection provide a vehicle for participants to enhance teacher education and research. Each of these studies reinforces the need for open and honest lines of communication.

Professional development. Researchers in multiple studies have demonstrated the importance of teachers meeting PLC goals (Battersby & Verdi, 2015; Cherkowski, 2016; Lee et al., 2011; Prenger et al., 2017). Prenger et al. (2017) found that teachers’ participation in professional learning communities leads to professional development and a more supportive school environment. Professional learning communities also enhance teacher quality (Lee et al., 2011). Battersby and Verdi (2015) opined that developing functional PLCs is more critical than ever to increase student achievement. Cherkowski (2016) argued that educators need to cultivate professional learning as they work to build structures that increase student achievement.

Professional development and training opportunities provide teachers with a sense of community and help to build trust among individuals. The establishment of a secure and trusting atmosphere provides more opportunities for growth.

Chapter Summary

Educators are continuously faced with educational reforms, state and federal mandates, new programs, and changing curriculum that can challenge their teaching and learning. School personnel are often expected to implement these new practices without the necessary training to help them understand and be successful. The implementation of professional learning communities can be a platform to help educators develop a plan to implement educational changes successfully.

Professional learning communities are a means to examine student progress and help teachers improve their teaching to impact student achievement positively. Therefore, PLCs need to apply best practices in situations where learning is deficient if they are to be effective (Van Lare & Brazer, 2013). Shirley Hord (2015), a Learning Forward's scholar laureate, argued that PLCs are "the most powerful structure and strategy for enhancing educators' effectiveness and increasing students' successful learning" (p. 38). Learning Forward is an organization that promotes excellence in professional learning.

Implementing and maintaining PLCs that meet their goals is often a struggle for educators because teachers and administrators lack the knowledge, understanding, skills, or training to be successful (DuFour & Reeves, 2016). A lack of time to implement PLCs is another roadblock that hinders the successful maintenance of PLCs (Leclerc et al., 2012; Lujan & Day, 2010; Prenger et al., 2017). The isolated nature of teaching along with the lack of time to work together inhibits the opportunity to form collaborative groups.

Administrators must make a vigilant effort to set aside time to allow teachers to work together as well as provide for professional development to meet their needs. Furthermore, the time spent on professional development for the teachers is an important precursor to facilitate active PLC participation along with the ability to provide teachers the opportunity to network (Prenger et al., 2017).

Brodie (2013) argued the keys to successful PLCs are that professional learning is increased and the data is from teachers' own classrooms, the learning is collaborative, and the PLC facilitators are skilled with the knowledge of how to design and implement appropriate activities for the teachers. DuFour and Eaker (1998) claimed school personnel that learn to function as PLCs are "the most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement" (p. xi). Implementing and sustaining PLCs is difficult, but those PLCs that learn to function well together through sharing a mission, vision, values, implementing collective inquiry, supporting one another, focusing on continuous improvement, and working collaboratively will be successful.

Teachers' levels of confidence can have a significant impact on student achievement. According to Epstein and Willhite (2015), the belief that teachers have in their ability to impact student learning is teacher efficacy. Educators that are well established and confident in their skills are more likely to participate in collaborative groups. The development of schools as professional learning communities is being strongly advocated by educational reformers as a systematic way to improve teacher quality (Lee et al., 2011). Sharing common goals and commitments produces opportunities for teachers to share their professional knowledge and skills openly. Cherkowski (2015) stated, "professional learning for educators should reflect the autonomy of the learner; build on their prior experiences, honor individual readiness to learn, and

provide opportunities for different orientations to learning” (p. 537). The transition to PLCs should incorporate the necessary professional development and training that will enable educators to enhance their skill sets effectively and efficiently. As a result of the exposure to positive experiences and persuasion, teacher efficacy will increase, and the teachers will believe they can teach all the children in ways to achieve higher standards.

When teachers learn how to engage in collaborative learning and focus on their commitment to their students, student achievement will be increased. Professional development and training opportunities provide teachers with a sense of community and help to build trust among individuals. The establishment of a secure and trusting atmosphere provides more opportunities for growth through the utilization of professional learning communities.

The intent of this literature review was to provide a background of the events that led up to the formation and utilization of PLCs. The examination of the conceptual framework of the establishment of PLCs was presented along with the characteristics of PLCs. In addition, the various components of PLCs, such as student learning, focusing on results, shared vision, mission, and values, collective inquiry, action oriented, continuous improvement, and results oriented were presented.

Future research is needed on how administrators initiate, support, and sustain professional learning communities. In addition, research is needed regarding the perceptions and experiences of teachers that participate in PLCs. The next section presents the introduction of the research method and design that was utilized to conduct the qualitative descriptive case study.

Chapter 3: Research Method and Design

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to explore junior high teachers' experiences and perceptions concerning the role PLCs may play in shaping their instructional practices in a rural Title I school in Texas. According to the United States Department of Education (2018), Title I is the largest federally funded education program that contributes financial assistance to public schools that provide educational services to students from low-income families. Funds from the Title I supplement can be utilized to assist students that are migrant, limited English, homeless, disabled, neglected, delinquent, at-risk, or those with any other need. Schools are labeled as Title I when the enrollment percentage of low-income families is high, based on the Department of Education guidelines (United States Department of Education, 2018).

To examine the experiences and perceptions of junior high teachers that participate in a PLC at a Title I school, the utilization of a descriptive case study allowed for a detailed account of a phenomenon under study to be presented (Garman & Piantanida, 2009; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2018). The data collection for the study comprised of teacher and administrator interviews, observations, and collection of PLC meeting records. Yin (2018) stated that the five rationales appropriate for a single case study are critical, unusual, common, revelatory, or longitudinal. This study focused on describing the experiences and perceptions of junior high teachers in a rural Title I school who participated in PLCs. Therefore, the factors in this case study appropriately fit in the common category because the goal was to capture the circumstances and conditions that were present in PLC meetings (Yin, 2018). In this chapter, an extensive analysis is presented to understand the real-life experiences of the teachers and the administrator who participated in the English, language arts, and reading PLC at a rural Title I junior high. These

educators were invited to participate in the study. The research questions that guided this study were:

Q1. How do teachers describe their experiences in the PLC process in a rural Title I junior high?

Q2. How do teachers describe how they incorporate or not the ideas from the PLCs in their teaching in a rural Title I junior high?

Q3. How do teachers describe their perceptions of the value of PLCs, if any, in shaping their instructional approach in a rural Title I junior high?

The research tradition of using a qualitative descriptive case study is helpful because it does not dictate a prescribed set of data but rather provides flexibility and allows an emerging set of data to direct the study (Tetnowski, 2015). The study was conducted in the natural setting and allowed for an in-depth study of the organization.

In this chapter, the research design is discussed, followed by an explanation of the population and sample size used (Yin, 2018). Next, methods of data collection and analysis procedures are introduced as well as the instruments that were utilized. Then, the methods to establish trustworthiness are explained. Finally, the role of the researcher, ethical considerations, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations are presented.

Research Design and Method

The methodology that was utilized for this study provided a platform to study participants in their natural setting. Merriam (1998), Garman and Piantanida (2009), and Yin (2018) reiterated that case studies are beneficial to researchers who are interested in the process and are entirely descriptive. Therefore, the opportunity to study professional learning communities in action allowed for multiple forms of data to be gathered to determine what patterns were present.

The researcher is the key instrument as data are examined, behavior is observed, and participants are interviewed (Creswell, 2014). For research to be valid, the research design needs to be strong in theory and concept, practical in methodology, extremely thorough, and reasonable (Patton, 2015).

A qualitative case study is a factual method that investigates a present-day experience in depth within its real-world context while collecting numerous data (Yin, 2018). Qualitative data is gathered through fieldwork, which allows the researcher to spend time in the setting of the study (Patton, 2015). While in the field, I used interviews and observations to examine and code data to identify common themes. The qualitative data gathered reflects the words, opinions, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of the teachers and administrator (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2018). The exploration of this topic allowed for an examination of how teachers engage in PLCs, identified the perceptions of the participants in PLCs, and provided insights as to how the PLCs shape teachers' instructional practices.

Qualitative descriptive studies focus on “clarifying and better understanding a particular educational issue, whether it is a curricular model, reform effort, or educational policy” (Butin, 2010, p. 53). Conducting an in-depth study of how junior high school teachers' experiences and perceptions concerning the role PLCs play in shaping their instructional practices provided meaningful descriptive information that could potentially increase student achievement.

Utilizing a qualitative descriptive case study method, I was able to answer the why and how of a situation and focused on the experience and perspectives of the participants (Roberts, 2010; Yin, 2018). I took field notes on the behaviors observed during the PLC meetings and interviews. In addition, agenda notes and meeting notes were gathered and analyzed.

The case study design was selected because it allowed the research to take place in the natural setting while gathering data to explore junior high teachers' experiences and perceptions concerning the role PLCs may play in shaping their instructional practices in a rural Title I school in Texas. Information rich in context was gathered over a period of seven months through the use of in-depth observations and interviews (Patton, 2015).

Participants

To limit the study to a manageable size and for their location accessibility, the participants of this study were limited to the English, language arts, and reading teachers and administrator at one Title I junior high in the Piney Woods of East Texas that serve sixth-through eighth-grade students. The selected junior high campus comprised four English, language arts, and reading (ELAR) teachers, one special education ELAR teacher, and one administrator. The student population for the 2018–2019 school year for the identified junior high was 177 students with 70.9% of the student body qualifying for the free and reduced meal program. Once I received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (see Appendix E), the principal and teachers of the Title I junior high school in East Texas were contacted and invited to participate in the study.

Criteria for Participation

To participate in the study, the school had to be a rural Title I junior high school in East Texas that utilizes PLCs. The administration, along with the teachers, had to be willing to participate in the study by being interviewed, completing the Teacher Collaborative Assessment Survey (TCAS), and being observed as they interacted in their PLC meetings. I worked in a neighboring school district that has implemented PLCs within the last six years.

Background of the School

A rural Title I junior high located in the Piney Woods of East Texas that serves sixth-through eighth-grade students was the site of this study. The student population during the 2018–2019 school year for the junior high was 177 students with 70.9% of the student body qualifying for the free and reduced meal program (Texas Education Agency, 2019). The decision to implement PLCs was made by the principal and teachers to make sure that they were utilizing data during their PLC meetings to drive instruction. Revamped planning periods were implemented to add PLC meetings and to incorporate vertical alignment, to learn teaching strategies, and to analyze student achievement data.

The enrollment by race or ethnicity at the Title I school district consisted of 2.3% African American, 43.2% Hispanic, 51.3% Caucasian, 0.8% American Indian, 0.5% Asian, and 1.9% two or more races (Texas Education Agency, 2019). Student group enrollment is 70.9% economically disadvantaged, 26.9% English language learners, and 43% special education (Texas Education Agency, 2019). Average class sizes are 15.2 in sixth grade, 13.3 for seventh and eighth grades for English and language arts, and total enrollment for the district is 739 (Texas Education Agency, 2019).

According to the principal at the study site, content PLCs were first implemented by the principal at the rural Title I junior high school beginning of the 2013–2014 school year, and the initial focus for the first year was on developing better communication, getting the teachers to know each other better, and building trust among the team leaders. During each subsequent year, additional areas of focus were added to the PLCs. To establish a connection within individual grade levels across the subjects, the principal added grade level vertical alignment during the second year of PLC implementation (the 2014–2015 school year). The principal added vertical

alignment across the school in the 2015–2016 school year to ensure that vertical alignment of the curriculum between grade levels was occurring. In the fourth year of PLC implementation (2016–2017), strategies to improve teaching techniques were added. In the 2017–2018 school year, the principal integrated the gathering and analyzing of student data into the PLC process. Unlike previous years, in the 2017–2018 school year, the principal stated that the teachers struggled to meet the PLC goal of analyzing student data to drive instruction. Students were heterogeneously grouped, except for honors students being grouped together.

Four of the ELAR PLC participants have worked together for seven years. The fifth participant has worked with the team for three years, and the remaining participant has worked with the team for two years. The ELAR team made up one of the PLC teams on campus. The other PLC teams comprised the math, science, and history teachers. Training for the participants was provided through the Region VIII Service Center, and the leadership team helped to build the foundation work of the PLCs. The administrator, who has been with the district for seven years and six of those as the principal, headed up each of the PLC meetings by providing an agenda and encouraging the members to participate by studying data and asking thought-provoking questions that require the participation of the teachers.

Several pieces of evidence demonstrate that the teachers have not met the 2017–2018 PLC goal of analyzing data effectively to help improve student performance. After reviewing the results during the fifth year of attending PLC meetings, reviewing progress monitoring data, and speaking with the teachers about disaggregating student achievement data, the principal determined that even though teachers had collected student data, they still struggled with how to analyze it to drive instruction. Secondly, during administrative and PLC meetings, the principal voiced her concern with the teachers about the need for the teachers to analyze the student data

in more depth to examine student progress. As a side note, I found that teachers did not know how to disaggregate the data, make sense of it, tie the findings to objectives, and use it for planning.

The third piece of evidence showing that this problem existed in the junior high is the Texas Academic Performance Report for 2016–2017, which showed a decline or limited amount of academic growth in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade reading scores from 2013–2014 to 2015–2016. The percentage of students who earned *approaches grade level or above* scores was identified for comparison purposes. The Texas State Assessment of Academic Readiness sixth grade reading *satisfactory* scores fell from 79% in 2013–2014 to 76% in 2014–2015 to 61% in 2015–2016, then rose to 70% in 2016–2017 and 2017–2018, but they dropped to 67% in 2018–2019 (Texas Education Agency, 2019). The Texas State Assessment of Academic Readiness seventh grade reading *satisfactory* scores fell from 86% in 2013–2014 to 79% in 2014–2015 to 61% in 2015–2016, then rose to 71% in 2016–2017 and 2017–2018, and increased again to 74% in 2018–2019 (Texas Education Agency, 2019). The Texas State Assessment of Academic Readiness eighth grade reading *satisfactory* scores first rose from 87% in 2013–2014 to 93% in 2014–2015, but fell to 88% in 2015–2016, then rose to 80% in 2016–2017, rose again to 83% in 2017–2018 but dropped to 82% in 2018–2019 (Texas Education Agency, 2019). See Figure 4 for a visual representation of scores.

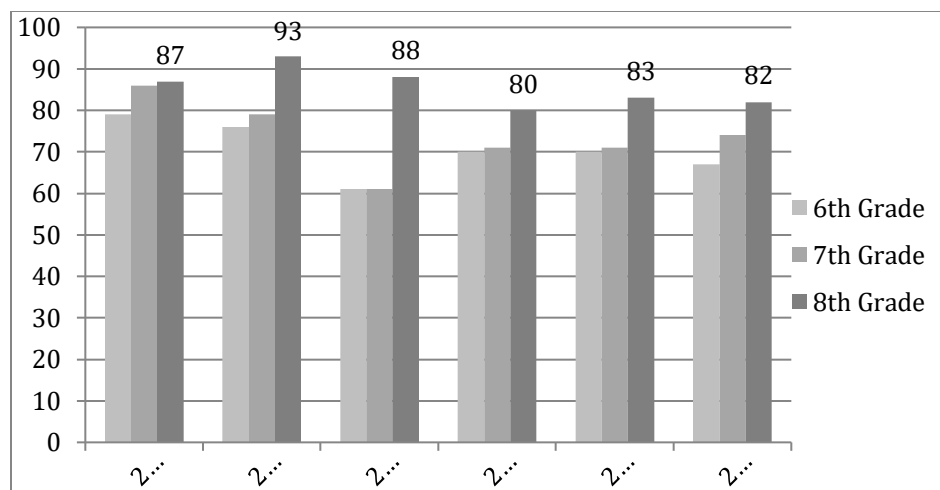


Figure 4. STAAR reading scores for rural title I junior high.

All ELAR teachers that teach sixth, seventh, and eighth grade, and the school principal, were invited to participate in the study at the rural Title I junior high. The ELAR PLC meets once a month, and the principal creates the agenda and chairs the meeting. The culture of the school was warm and inviting, and the ELAR PLC had two teachers that worked well together while the other three teachers were more independent participants.

Sample

Once the site was identified, the sample group was selected. According to Garman and Piantanida (2009), Merriam (1998), and Yin (2018), probability and nonprobability are the two types of sampling useful in qualitative descriptive case studies. Purposeful sampling, which is a type of nonprobability sampling, was utilized after the IRB approval was received. This style of sampling represented the entire population of English, language arts, and reading teachers that participated in the PLC at the rural Title I junior high campus. Each individual was deliberately chosen based on their participation in PLCs and their ability to provide information about their experiences and perceptions regarding their interactions in PLCs (Creswell, 2014). Purposeful sampling is a core design issue for purposeful and strategic thinking (Patton, 2015). This strategy

provided for a deeper understanding of teachers' perceptions and experiences and provided insights into the utilization of PLCs on this campus.

Qualitative sampling. Qualitative sampling inquiry typically focuses more deeply on small samples. The purposeful sampling that was utilized in this single-case study is appropriate because it allows for an examination of the data to address the research purpose and questions better (Leavy, 2017). Furthermore, Yin (2018) asserted that conducting the qualitative single-case design is justifiable because it allows for a critical test of the existing theory.

Materials and Instruments

Permission to conduct the study from the principal at the Title I junior high was granted once the IRB gave their approval. In addition, the TCAS was utilized to observe the interactions during the PLC meetings. The TCAS is a tool to measure dialogue, decision-making, action, and evaluation of the teacher team present in PLCs (Woodland, 2016). Qualitative methods of data collection were utilized to generate information and provide a platform to reflect and identify patterns of the thoughts and behaviors of the teachers and administrator (Patton, 2015).

The updated version of the Teacher Collaboration Assessment Rubric (TCAR; see Appendix A) called the Teacher Collaboration Assessment Survey (TCAS; see Appendix B) was “developed over time through an interactive process involving university-based subject matter experts, school district leaders, and teachers” under the direction of Dr. Rebecca Woodland to assess the quality of teachers' collaboration within PLCs (Blitz & Schulman, 2016, p. D-21). The TCAS is “composed of questions and Likert-type items measuring the components of dialogue, decision-making, action taking, and evaluation [and the] respondents are asked to rate their agreement on a Likert scale, ranging from *disagree* to *strongly agree*” (Blitz & Schulman, 2016, p. D-21; italics added).

In 2013, the TCAS was determined to be a valid tool that provided all five sources of evidence suggested by the American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, and the National Council on Measurement in Education Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing (Woodland, Lee, & Randall, 2013). The five sources of evidence the TCAS covered were evidence based on content, evidence based on response processes, evidence based on internal structure, evidence based on relation to other variables, and convergent and discriminant evidence (Woodland et al., 2013).

Semistructured individual interviews were conducted with each of the participants. Prior to each interview, I thoroughly explained the study, and each participant signed an informed consent. The interviews lasted 30 to 40 minutes, and Creswell's (2014) interview protocol was used to collect interview data (see Appendix C). The interviews were digitally recorded and downloaded on a password-protected computer. Each of the interviewees was assigned a number to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. After the interviews were transcribed using the Go Transcript transcribing service, the interviewees were given the opportunity to review the transcripts to make sure that they were accurate.

The interview questions were created by studying other dissertations about professional learning communities and extracting important and relevant information from peer-reviewed journal articles that studied PLCs. After the questions were compiled, they were emailed to five professors who work in the Educational Organizational Leadership Department at Abilene Christian University to be critiqued and to gather insight about how to improve upon them. Four of the professors responded and provided feedback that was utilized to improve the questions. One to two practice run interviews were conducted prior to beginning the research to field-test the questions.

The following questions were asked during the individual interviews to obtain an accurate understanding of the teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding PLCs.

- Interview Question 1: Please tell me a little bit about who you are as an educator and your background in education.
- Interview Question 2: Based on your understanding, what is a professional learning community?
- Interview Question 3: Please describe your understanding of the purpose of the content level professional learning community that you participate in on your campus.
- Interview Question 4: Describe your experiences in the content level professional learning community you participate in? Please elaborate on any strengths or weaknesses that you observe or experience.
- Interview Question 5: What are your views on collaboration with your peers?
- Interview Question 6: Describe how new ideas shared in professional learning community meetings are incorporated in your teaching.
- Interview Question 7: What is your perception of the value of your participation in the professional learning community and how participation has shaped your instructional practice?
- Interview Question 8: How has the participation in the content level professional learning communities impacted the decisions you make regarding instructional practices?
- Interview Question 9: What suggestions or recommendations, if any, would you have for your content level professional learning community?

- Interview Question 10: Do you have any additional information that you would like to share?

Professional learning community meeting documents gathered included the agenda notes and any other documents shared during the PLC content area meetings. In addition, the observation notes were recorded, scaled, and coded using Dedoose software.

Interviews. Interviews were chosen as a method of data collection because they provide a platform to gather information that cannot be observed or gathered from a survey-type tool that has limitations of answer choices. Interviews allowed the participants to reveal personalized information and perspectives that can, in return, be utilized to provide descriptive data to answer the how and why questions that were at the center of the qualitative descriptive case study.

Incorporating interviews in the case study allowed the teachers to share their thoughts and stories, which helped to identify common themes and thought processes regarding PLCs (Campbell, 2015). Merriam (1998) stresses the importance of asking good interview questions to gather meaningful data. Open-ended interview questions were utilized to gather information that assisted in eliciting the views and opinions of the teachers and administrator (Creswell, 2014). The data gathered from the interviews contributed information that was rich in detail and meaningful concerning teachers' PLC experiences (Lamb, 2013). Each of the teachers, along with the principal, was interviewed at the beginning of the study.

The semistructured interviews provided the necessary freedom to allow the participants to choose their own words and describe their personal feelings regarding their experiences and perceptions of being involved in PLCs. Any common thoughts, experiences, or perspectives were recorded and researched further and compared to observation notes to describe the impact PLCs had on the experiences or perspectives of the teachers and administrator.

The interviews were used to gain insight into trends, thought processes, and perspectives observed or identified during the interviews. The questions were designed to focus on the case study topic while gaining insight into the personal views, perceptions, attitudes, and meanings of the teachers, administrator, and PLC (Yin, 2018). The questions were designed to elicit as much information as possible about the schoolteachers' experiences and perceptions concerning the role PLCs play in shaping their instructional practices.

Observations. Field-based observations of the PLCs meetings took place monthly, and the researcher utilized the TCAR (see Appendix A) to observe and record 52 separate items that were separated into four structural components focused on the dialogue, decision-making, action, and evaluation structural components of PLCs (Woodland, 2016). Data gathered from the TCAR were used to understand the effects of PLCs on instructional quality, student learning, and other organizational outcomes.

The conceptual framework and questions were used to drive the observations and determine what information was being observed and described (Garmin & Piantanida, 2009; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2018). The PLC meetings I observed to gather additional data over a period of seven months were audio recorded and transcribed using the Go Transcript transcribing service. In addition, I collected the PLC agenda and minutes to examine the methods and thought processes of the participants in the PLCs.

Documentation from the observations was recorded, guided by the framework of TCAS, and provided the data that was analyzed to help develop a descriptive case report to identify case-specific themes (Morgan, Pullon, Macdonald, McKinlay, & Gray, 2017). The TCAR is a tool that provides a strategy to critically analyze dialogue around student success by incorporating improvement science with previous PLC rubrics (McKlin, 2017). Woodland

(2016) posited that “evaluators can use the TCAR for the developmental, formative, and/or outcome evaluation of PLCs that may lead to increased rigor and improved performance of teacher teaming in PK-12 educational settings” (p. 513).

Dr. Rebecca Woodland was contacted to request permission to utilize the TCAR. She granted permission as long as full attribution and citation were provided, and she was sent a copy of my approved dissertation prospectus so she could see how the TCAR would be utilized. Dr. Woodland also informed me that the TCAR was now called the Teacher Collaboration Assessment System (TCAS), and the current version was the one listed as TCAR in the article, *Evaluating PK-12 Professional Learning Communities: An Improvement Science Perspective*, published by Dr. Woodland in 2016.

Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Qualitative designs are emergent (Garman & Piantanida, 2009; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2018). The process can change as different factors are introduced. The descriptive case study allowed for the focus to be on the everyday life of the PLCs. The data gathered from the interviews, observations, and documents were inductively analyzed for codes, categories, and themes that surfaced from the interviews, PLC group discussions, and observations (Ivankova, 2015). The frequencies and percentages of the themes that emerged from the observations, interviews, and documents were examined to develop a comprehensive analysis.

Data analysis consisted of examining, categorizing, tabulating, testing, preparing and analyzing the data collected from the interviews, observations, and PLC documents (Yin, 2018). I utilized the Dedoose research software program to analyze the transcribed interviews and to develop the initial coding scheme. Using the Dedoose platform, I was able to create and modify codes to match the methodology, and the platform aided in organizing the research information

gathered from the data resources. Furthermore, the data gathered were sorted into groups to identify common themes, concepts, or events that surfaced.

Coding the data took place by identifying each category and assigning a color code to prioritize the data. A descriptive approach was used to analyze the interview and observation data, and the PLC documents were examined to compare and contrast information with the interviews and observations. Finally, the data were entered into the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) program for statistical analysis.

Conducting a qualitative descriptive case study provided the opportunity to capture the beliefs, understandings, perceptions, and experiences of the teachers that participated in the ELAR PLC. Utilization of the data provided a platform to evaluate the program and develop interventions to strengthen the PLCs.

Methods for establishing trustworthiness. To establish trustworthiness in this study, the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the research were presented and proven to be effective (Shenton, 2004). Establishing credibility was accomplished by utilizing well-established research methods of qualitative investigation. The triangulation of the data from the interviews, observations, and PLC meetings was organized and presented to reinforce credibility.

The external validity of the study is reinforced by demonstrating how the transferability of the study is such that other researchers can replicate the study. Transferability is the ability to transfer the research findings from one context to another (Leavy, 2017). The background information and the factors are presented to allow the readers the opportunity to establish a degree of similarity when transferred to another case (Patton, 2015).

Establishing dependability is accomplished by presenting the description of the methods used in a logical, traceable, and documented way (Patton, 2015). By presenting the process in a clear and concise manner, a future researcher would yield the same results if the work were to be replicated.

Confirmability is demonstrated by providing a detailed methodological description of the descriptive qualitative research. The findings of the study results were reported based on the data gathered from the interviews, observations, and PLC meetings and not representative of the researcher's thoughts. The data-oriented approach is what leads to the formation of the conclusions and recommendations (Shenton, 2004).

Researcher's role. My role was to observe the PLC meetings, conduct the interviews, and gather and analyze the data. Data were gathered from interview transcripts, PLC documents, and observations. The data coding was based on priori themes as well as themes that emerged during the analysis (Yin, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

To ensure ethical behavior, I provided the participants with written notification explaining the study, and they were guaranteed they were participating of their own free will. In addition, the confidentiality and anonymity of the subjects were reinforced by assigning participant numbers to the individuals to replace names. The participants and site could withdraw at any time if they felt the need to do so. The recorded interviews were kept in a securely locked filing cabinet, and no identifying factors were released.

Once the IRB approved the study, I approached the principal and teachers and provided them with written documentation of the study. Junior high English, language arts, and reading teachers that participated in the PLCs were invited to take part in the case study. After the school

district and personnel granted access, interviews were scheduled and conducted in a location or fashion that was convenient for the participants. Next, times and dates were arranged to observe their PLC meetings.

Assumptions

The first assumption was that the participants would answer the interview questions in an honest manner. Secondly, the exposure of all the participants being involved in the same PLC meetings created a similar background for the study. The final assumption was that the number of participants would be enough for an appropriate level of data saturation to conduct a worthwhile and supported study.

Limitations

One limitation of the study was the small group sample since only the English, language arts, and reading teachers were included. However, Yin (2018) argued that a small group size can yield valuable results. Another limitation was the possibility of unknown conditions or circumstances. In addition, conducting observations and interviews can be very time consuming for the researcher and participants. Furthermore, researcher biases along with personal beliefs, values, and experiences could potentially influence data interpretation and, ultimately, the results of the study. Finally, the willingness or unwillingness of the participants to participate or their attitudes toward the study could directly impact the study.

Delimitations

This study was limited to one campus and was a single case study. The data only reflect the perceptions and experiences of the English, language arts, and reading teachers and administrator who were involved in the study. Only one campus was chosen as the focus to be able to study in great depth the formation of their PLCs and how the teachers' experiences and

perceptions concerning the role PLCs played in shaping their instructional practices in a rural Title I school in Texas. The reason that only the teachers who participated in the ELAR PLC were studied was the importance of these subjects. English, language arts, and reading impact all other curricular areas significantly. These three core areas are the foundation areas necessary to build upon in all other subject areas. A student must be able to read and properly utilize language arts skills if they are to understand the other subject areas because reading is a crucial and necessary component of all subjects. Furthermore, comprehension is an invaluable skill and necessary in all aspects of learning. According to Dougherty Stahl (2015), essential reading strategies and skills are the foundation for general understanding.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the problem and questions that this case study was designed to accomplish. The study results revealed details about how information and ideas discussed in PLCs actually influenced teacher practice. Furthermore, a summary of the study design provided more insights into what PLC practices were most helpful.

Data were collected through the utilization of interviews, observations, and meeting notes. Purposeful sampling was utilized to gather data that represented the experiences and perceptions concerning the role PLCs may play in shaping the instructional practices of junior high teachers in a rural Title I school in Texas.

Finally, this study was important because if teachers perceived information as valuable, they can take what they learned and help students by analyzing data and differentiating instruction, which can lead to higher achievement.

Chapter 4: Results

To investigate how junior high school teachers' perceptions of the role professional learning communities may play in shaping their instructional practices in a rural Title I junior school in the Piney Woods of East Texas, I conducted a qualitative case study. Four regular ELAR teachers, one special education ELAR teacher, and one administrator participated in the study. This study examined three research questions qualitatively:

Q1. How do teachers describe their experiences in the PLC process in a rural Title I junior high?

Q2. How do teachers describe how they incorporate or not the ideas from the PLCs in their teaching in a rural Title I junior high?

Q3. How do teachers describe their perceptions of the value of PLCs, if any, in shaping their instructional approach in a rural Title I junior high?

I divided this chapter into three sections: participant information, sources of data collection, and thematic analyses. The first section provides demographic details and information collected about the participants. Data points gathered from the interviews, TCAS, and observations are presented in the second section. The third section is an analysis of the themes that surfaced during the interviews and observations.

In this chapter, I provide an examination of the data collected during the interviews, TCAS, and observations to review the perceptions and experiences of the administrator and teachers that participated in the PLC. Participants were interviewed individually to determine how they viewed PLCs and whether they saw strengths, weaknesses, collaborative efforts, ideas shared or gained, and identification of instructional practices in the PLCs.

The second section is a review of the data collected from the participants' interviews, the TCAS, and the monthly PLC observations that took place over a period of seven months. The TCAS measured the dialogue, decision-making, action taking, and evaluation that the participants observed in the monthly PLCs. The third section presents the thematic topics that surfaced during the interviews and observations.

Participant Information

I collected participant demographic information from the interviews. Each of the six participants was interviewed and asked 10 questions. Participant descriptive information is presented in Table 1. Although the sample is small, it is representative of the entire team of English, language arts, and reading teachers and the principal at the rural Title I junior high who were eligible to participate in the study.

Table 1

Descriptive Data of Participants

Participant Number	Years Taught	Age	Levels Taught	Certifications
1	23	54	Elementary and Middle	Elementary, ESL, Principal, and Superintendent
2	13	64	Middle	ELAR, Social Studies, and ESL
3	27	54	Middle	Vocational Agriculture, Special Education, and ESL
4	19	58	Middle	ELAR, Secondary English, ESL, and Educational Diagnostician
5	20	42	Middle	Generalist, Physical Education, and ESL
6	8	36	Middle	ELAR and Physical Education

Five of the six participants were female. Sixty-six percent were baby boomers, and 33% were Generation X. All the participants were identified as Caucasians. Table 2 shows the demographics of the participants.

Table 2

Demographics of Participants

Demographics	Frequency <i>n</i>	Percent %
Gender		
Male	1	16
Female	5	83
Generation Type and Age		
Millennial (18–34 years old)	0	0
Generation X (35–49 years old)	2	33
Baby Boomers (50–68 years old)	4	66
Other	0	0
Ethnicity		
African American	0	0
Asian/Pacific Islander	0	0
Caucasian	6	100
Hispanic/Latino	0	0
Native American/American Indian	0	0
Other	0	0
Missing	0	0

Note: $N = 6$

Qualitative Data Collection

Once IRB approval was granted, I began to collect data. First, I acquired permission from the principal, the four ELAR teachers, and one special education ELAR teacher at a rural Title I school in East Texas to conduct a qualitative study on their campus by observing their monthly PLC meetings. In addition, I received permission (see Appendix D) from Dr. Rebecca Woodland to use the Teacher Collaboration Assessment Survey (TCAS) she created. Dr. Woodland granted permission and requested that I submit my dissertation prospectus to her so she could review how I planned to use the TCAS.

I interviewed all participants and had them complete the TCAS in order to answer the research questions:

Q1. How do teachers describe their experiences in the PLC process in a rural Title I junior high?

Q2. How do teachers describe how they incorporate or not the ideas from the PLCs in their teaching in a rural Title I junior high?

Q3. How do teachers describe their perceptions of the value of PLCs, if any, in shaping their instructional approach in a rural Title I junior high?

In addition, I observed seven PLC meetings to listen to their discussions and watch their interactions with each other.

Interviews

The first phase of data collection consisted of providing each participant with informed consent to conduct the research and obtain their written permission to participate in the study. Next, I conducted semistructured interviews with the six participants. Each of the interviews lasted approximately 30–40 minutes, and Creswell's (2014) interview protocol was used to collect interview data (see Appendix C). All of the interviews were digitally recorded and downloaded on my password-protected computer. Each participant was assigned a number to protect their confidentiality. After each interview was transcribed, I had each participant review and sign off that the transcripts were accurate.

Interview question 1. Please tell me a little bit about who you are as an educator and your background in education. I used this question so I could gather background information about each participant regarding their years of experience and areas of certification. Question 1 coincides with research questions 1, 2, and 3.

Interview question 2. Based on your understanding, what is a professional learning community? I examined the administrator and teachers' perspectives of what they believed a PLC is. Question 2 coincides with research questions 1, 2, and 3.

Interview question 3. Please describe your understanding of the purpose of the content level professional learning community that you participate in on your campus. I wanted to know if the participants understood the purpose of the PLC that they participated in each month. Question 3 coincides with research questions 1, 2, and 3.

Interview question 4. Describe your experiences in the content level professional learning community you participate in. Please elaborate on any strengths or weaknesses that you observe or experience. I wanted to explore the participants' experiences and perceptions of the PLC they attended each month. Question 4 coincides with research questions 1 and 3.

Interview question 5. What are your views on collaboration with your peers? I wanted to determine if a collaborative culture existed among the participants. Question 5 coincides with research questions 1 and 2.

Interview question 6. Describe how new ideas shared in professional learning community meetings are incorporated in your teaching. I wanted to examine if the participants incorporated new ideas into their teaching that they learned about during a PLC. Question 6 coincides with research question 2.

Interview question 7. What is your perception of the value of your participation in the professional learning community and how participation has shaped your instructional practice? I wanted to know if the participants felt compelled to participate and whether the PLC helped shape their instructional practices. Question 7 coincides with research question 3.

Interview question 8. How has the participation in the content level professional learning communities impacted the decisions you make regarding instructional practices? I wanted to know if the participation in the content level PLC impacted decisions they made regarding their instructional practices. Question 4 coincides with research questions 1, 2, and 3.

Interview question 9. What suggestions or recommendations, if any, would you have for your content level professional learning community? I wanted to see if the participants had any suggestions or recommendations for the current PLC that they participated in each month. Question 9 coincides with research questions 1 and 3.

Interview question 10. Do you have any additional information that you would like to share?

The 10 questions asked in the open-ended interviews allowed the participants to share their experiences and perceptions of the PLC meetings they participated in monthly. Each of the interviewees appeared comfortable and willing to speak freely and share their thoughts without any reservations. After carefully transcribing and coding the interviews, I determined the themes that appeared to surface throughout the interviews. All of the participants mentioned that they felt the PLCs were beneficial to them. Participant 1 stated, “Usually, there’s something I take away from every single meeting.” In addition, Participant 5 declared, “The truth is we have a better understanding of what we do in the classroom and what we need to do.” Furthermore, Participant 4 claimed, “I think they can be a tremendous asset to a teacher. And for the most part, I feel like I benefit from the PLCs.”

After conducting an analysis of the interview transcripts, three main themes appeared intertwined among all of the interviews. The top three themes that emerged were (a) strategies, (b) collaboration, and (c) sharing ideas. These three themes appeared a total of 34 times among

all six interviews. Table 3 shows the different themes identified and the number of times the themes were mentioned during the interviews.

Table 3

Interview Themes Identified

Participant Number	Strategies	Collaboration	Sharing Ideas
1	0	1	2
2	2	1	2
3	4	1	0
4	4	2	3
5	1	0	3
6	4	4	0
Total	15	9	10

Note: Count represents the number of times each theme was mentioned by participants.

Theme 1: Strategies. Reviewing effective strategies can be fundamental in education to help build and establish better teaching techniques. Five of the six participants indicated that discussing strategies during their PLCs was a major part of their monthly meetings. When discussing PLCs, Participant 1 exclaimed that they “share strategies to ensure vertical alignment [and to] look at different strategies and how they build vertically.” The participants noted that they must be specific on how to implement strategies. For example, Participant 3 suggested that they get “very specific about what kind of strategies” they use when teaching the students and determining how they can help them learn. Participant 3 said that in their PLC they “discuss strategies and methods that have been successful.” Participant 4 acknowledged that their PLC

“gives me an opportunity to share strategies and to learn new strategies.” When referring to PLC conversations with other teachers, Participant 5 stated that teaching abilities can be enhanced when they “use their ideas and strategies to enhance your teaching abilities.” Participant 3 stated, “I’ve picked up valuable information. You can even discuss specific cares and strategies that might work for those specific students.” While most of the participants shared similar thoughts, Participant 5 stated that the team members needed “to listen and respect every teacher in the content level because I think that sometimes you don’t get that from every teacher.”

Theme 2: Collaboration. Professional learning communities are primarily known for providing educators with opportunities to collaborate. Participant 1 claimed that “without collaboration, you are on your own, and so collaboration is the key to success.” When asked about collaboration with their peers, Participant 4 said that they collaborated well with one of the teachers, but that the two other teachers do not always “agree with the way we do things.” Participant 5 stated that they can “collaborate and learn from each other on how we can touch every kid.” According to Participant 6, successful collaboration “depends if they are open to it or not” and that “collaborating with how they teach certain things and things we can try; it helps everybody in every situation.”

Theme 3: Sharing ideas. Ideas are formed and generated in PLCs when educators get together to talk and plan. Participant 1 recalled, “there are ideas I give them, and they make them their own.” Participant 6 explained that people bring in ideas that can help to save time and prevent them from being overwhelmed. Participant 3 stated, “I’ve picked up valuable information. You can even discuss specific cares and strategies that might work for those specific students.” Reflecting upon what a PLC is, Participant 5 stated, “the truth is that we have a better understanding of what we do in the classroom and what we need to do.” Finally,

Participant 6 said, “usually, there’s something that I take away from every single meeting.”

Teacher Collaboration Assessment Survey

I interviewed all participants and had them complete the TCAS in order to answer the research questions:

Q1. How do teachers describe their experiences in the PLC process in a rural Title I junior high?

Q2. How do teachers describe how they incorporate or not the ideas from the PLCs in their teaching in a rural Title I junior high?

Q3. How do teachers describe their perceptions of the value of PLCs, if any, in shaping their instructional approach in a rural Title I junior high?

I utilized the TCAS to assess how the participants felt regarding the monthly PLC meetings that they attended. Each of the participants completed a survey that required them to answer 40 questions that addressed the dialogue, decision-making, action, and evaluation they observed in their PLC. Each of the questions was based on a Likert scale of one to five with one being *strongly disagree* and five being *strongly agree*.

Dialogue. Professional learning communities create opportunities for dialogue.

According to Woodland et al. (2013), “dialogue is one key component of an effective cycle of collaborative inquiry” (p. 444). The dialogue that takes place can transform a school into an effective PLC.

Participants answered 11 questions about the dialogue observed in their PLC meetings. Comparing the range of scores revealed the mean for the questions in the dialogue category, which ranged from a 2.8333 to a 4.8333. Table 4 shows the questions that the participants were

asked on the TCAS, and the table gives the breakdown of the minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation of the scores.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics for Dialogue

	<i>N</i>	Minimum	Maximum	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
The purpose of our collaboration is to systematically improve instruction to increase student learning.	6	4.00	5.00	4.8333	0.40825
The membership configuration of my primary team is appropriate—the right people are members of the group.	6	4.00	5.00	4.6667	0.51640
Team meetings are consistently attended by ALL members.	6	4.00	5.00	4.1667	0.40825
Agenda for team dialogue is preplanned, written, and accessible to all in advance of meeting.	6	3.00	5.00	4.5000	0.83666
Team meetings are purposefully facilitated and employ the use of protocols to structure and guide dialogue.	6	3.00	5.00	4.1667	0.75277
A thoughtful, thorough, and accurate account of team dialogue, decisions, and intended actions is recorded.	6	4.00	5.00	4.8333	0.40825
Every member has access to running records of team dialogue, decisions, and subsequent actions to be taken.	6	4.00	5.00	4.8333	0.40825
Inter-professional disagreements occur regularly—these disagreements are welcomed, addressed openly, and lead to new shared understandings.	6	3.00	5.00	3.8333	0.75277
Team members participate equally in the group dialogue; there are no dominators or hibernators in the group.	6	2.00	4.00	2.8333	0.75277
Our dialogue is consistently focused on examination of evidence relate to performance and attainment of goals.	6	4.00	5.00	4.5000	0.54772
The topic of dialogue is focused on our instructional practices and not other issues (e.g., school schedules, textbook purchases, fundraising, discipline, students' family issues, chaperoning).	6	3.00	5.00	4.3333	0.81650
Valid <i>N</i> (listwise)	6				

The question that had the lowest score (2.8333) referred to the fact that the team members participated equally in the group, and there were no dominators or hibernators in the group.

Participant 2 stated:

I think that everybody needs to be able to buy into it. Sometimes not everybody is on the same page. They are just kind of, oh, it's just another meeting that we have to go to and they are not prepared for the meeting and that can become an issue.

There were three questions that had the highest mean of 4.8333. The first question measured whether the purpose of the collaboration was to improve instruction to increase student learning systematically. The second question was meant to explore information on whether there was a thoughtful, thorough, and accurate account of team dialogue, decisions, and intended actions that were recorded. Furthermore, the third question addressed whether every member had access to running records of team dialogue, decisions, and subsequent actions to be taken.

Participant 5 claimed that the interactions with their PLC peers have shaped and enhanced their professional teaching ability. When reflecting on PLCs, Participant 4 stated, "I think PLCs are, if they work the way they are supposed to, a tremendous asset to a teacher. And for the most part, I feel like I benefit from the PLC."

Decision-making. Collaborative teams use decision-making to determine the instructional practices that will most benefit their students. The decision-making component of a PLC is based on DuFour's (2004) guiding questions that educators use in a PLC to drive their decision-making.

The decision-making portion of the TCAS composed eight questions that each of the participants answered (see Table 5). Table 5 gives the breakdown of the minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation of the scores. Comparing the range of scores revealed that the mean for the questions in the dialogue category ranged from a 3.8333 to a 4.677.

Table 5

Descriptive Statistics for Decision-Making

	<i>N</i>	Minimum	Maximum	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
My team regularly makes decisions about what instructional practices to initiate, maintain, develop, or discontinue.	6	3.00	5.00	5.00	0.81650
All of our decisions are informed by group dialogue.	6	4.00	5.00	5.00	0.51340
The process for making any decision is transparent and adhered to—everyone knows what the decisions are/were and how and why they were made.	6	3.00	5.00	5.00	0.75277
The decisions we make are clearly and directly related to the improvement of instructional practice and the improvement of student learning.	6	4.00	5.00	5.00	0.40825
The team used a specific process for every decision it makes (e.g., consensus, majority, or some other decision-making structure).	6	4.00	5.00	5.00	0.40825
The team members regularly identify specific instructional practices that they will initiate or maintain to increase student learning.	6	3.00	5.00	5.00	0.81650
Team members regularly identify strategies they will change or discontinue.	6	4.00	5.00	5.00	0.51640
Our group regularly determines what information about instructional practice and student learning needs to be obtained.	6	3.00	5.00	5.00	0.98319
Valid <i>N</i> (listwise)	6				

The question that had the lowest score at a 3.8333 addressed whether the PLC members thought their group regularly determined what information about instructional practice and student learning needs were obtained. Participant 4 suggested that the PLC provided them with an opportunity to look at the data, determine what they needed to do, and where they needed to go to do what was best for the students. Participant 4 stated:

I think that for the most part just even the preparation to get ready for the PLC is probably what has a bigger impact on how I drive my instruction because Mrs. B. is really good at having us prepare information that's going to help our kids.

There were three questions that had the highest mean of 4.6777. The first question measured whether the decisions they made were clearly and directly related to the improvement of instructional practice and the improvement of student learning. The second question explored whether the team members regularly identified specific instructional practices that they would initiate or maintain to increase student learning. The third question addressed whether every team member regularly identified strategies that they would change or discontinue. Participant 3 claimed that they picked up valuable information about different strategies they can use with specific students. When reflecting on their PLC, Participant 5 said, "well, it has shaped my professional teaching ability, and I believe whenever you interact with other teachers, there's not just one way of doing things. And, I think doing it different is what shapes your teaching. It enhances it."

Action. Taking action is a key component of the cycle of a PLC. If appropriate actions are not taken, then teachers are not able to move forward to educate students successfully.

The action portion of the TCAS comprised 10 questions that each participant answered (see Table 6). Table 6 gives the breakdown of the minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation of the scores. Comparing the range of scores revealed that the mean for the questions in the dialogue category ranged from a 2.5000 to a 4.677.

Table 6

Descriptive Statistics for Action

	<i>N</i>	Minimum	Maximum	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Each group member takes actions related to individual/team learning as a result of team decision-making.	6	1.00	4.00	2.6667	1.36626
As a result of group decision-making, each one of us makes meaningful (pedagogically complex) adjustments to our instructional practice.	6	1.00	4.00	2.5000	1.22474
Actions are directly related to student learning.	6	2.00	5.00	3.8333	1.47196
Each member knows what actions (related to learning) to take next at the end of the meeting.	6	4.00	5.00	4.6667	0.51640
Team member actions are coordinated and interdependent.	6	3.00	5.00	4.0000	0.63246
Each individual teacher employs specific instructional strategies that will increase student learning.	6	4.00	4.00	4.0000	0.00000
Each individual teacher discontinues less effective strategies.	6	4.00	5.00	4.5000	0.54772
Actions that are taken after or between meetings are distributed equitably among team members (i.e., every member takes steps to improve individual or team learning).	6	3.00	4.00	3.8333	0.40825
Each member can name some aspect of instruction that we have stopped/started as a result of the group decision-making.	6	3.00	5.00	3.8333	0.75277
Each member of the team commits to carrying out team actions.	6	3.00	4.00	3.3333	0.51640
Valid <i>N</i> (listwise)	6				

The question that had the lowest score at a 2.5000 was whether the participants made meaningful (pedagogically complex) adjustments to their instructional practice as a direct result of the group decision-making. Participant 4 felt it was unfortunate that not all of the teachers truly participated 100% during the meetings. Along the same lines, Participant 2 asserted, “some of the newer teachers feel maybe threatened a little by talking about their experiences in the classroom.” Therefore, if that statement holds true, the newer teachers might miss an opportunity to make suggested adjustments to their instructional practice.

Evaluation. The final component crucial to the completion of a successful education cycle is that of evaluation. During PLCs, the educators must evaluate to determine where the areas of strength and weakness are within their educational system.

The evaluation portion of the TCAS comprised 11 questions that each participant answered (see Table 7). Table 7 gives the breakdown of the minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation of the scores. Comparing the range of scores revealed that the mean for the questions in the dialogue category ranged from a 2.1667 to a 4.8333.

Table 7

Descriptive Statistics for Evaluation

	<i>N</i>	Minimum	Maximum	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
As a group we regularly collect and analyze quantitative data (e.g., numbers, statistics, scores) about member teaching practices.	6	4.00	5.00	4.3333	0.51640
As a group we regularly collect and analyze qualitative data (e.g., open-ended responses, interviews, comments) about member teaching practices.	6	3.00	5.00	4.3333	0.81650
As a group we regularly collect and analyze quantitative data (e.g., numbers, statistics, scores) about member student learning.	6	3.00	5.00	4.5000	0.83666
As a group we regularly collect and analyze qualitative data (e.g., open-ended responses, interviews, comments) about member student learning.	6	3.00	5.00	4.5000	0.83666
We observe the classroom instruction of our colleagues.	6	1.00	4.00	2.1667	1.16905
We collect information on the quality of the instruction during our observation.	6	1.00	5.00	2.5000	1.64317
We analyze data collected through peer observation of classroom instruction.	6	1.00	4.00	2.1667	1.16905
We use student performance data to evaluate the merit of our instructional practices.	6	4.00	5.00	4.8333	0.40825
We regularly share evaluation data on the effect of our instruction in our primary team.	6	4.00	5.00	4.6667	0.51640
The accomplishments of our team are publicly recognized.	6	2.00	5.00	3.6667	1.21106
Our team can accurately and thoroughly articulate and substantiate its accomplishment related to student learning over time.	6	2.00	5.00	4.0000	1.09545
Valid <i>N</i> (listwise)	6				

The question that had the lowest score at a 2.1667 was about whether the PLC members observed in the classrooms of their peers. The years of experience for the participants ranged from eight to 27 years. Participant 2 pointed out that they were not all at the same experience levels, and some of the newer teachers might feel threatened by the more experienced ones.

Participant 4 stated:

I think it's important that everyone participate. Unfortunately, in ours, I don't believe that we have 100% participation. I think it's important because when you are discussing your students and their issues that you're dealing [with], sometimes people have really good ideas.

Only one question had the highest mean of 4.8333. The question measured whether teachers used student performance data to evaluate the merit of their instructional practices. The fact that the administrator brought and shared data at every PLC meeting allowed the teachers the chance to evaluate their teaching practices.

Professional Learning Community Observations

I attended seven ELAR PLC meetings over the course of seven months. The administrator was the facilitator of the PLC meetings, and she determined the agenda and guided the discussion. She shared data at each of the meetings, reviewed TEKS, and provided the teachers with ample opportunities to share and interact with each other.

PLC observation number one. The first PLC meeting that I observed took place on Thursday, September 2, 2019. Five of the six members were present (four teachers and one administrator). The administrator started the meeting by reminding them of the norms they decided on this summer during their planning sessions. Next, they reviewed the four driving questions that they needed to focus on all the time. These four questions were the ones that DuFour (2004) established as the driving force of PLCs. Then she asked the teachers to share a positive that occurred that week. One teacher bragged about how well her students did with

designing a plot map and coming up with a theme. Another teacher was thrilled to announce that all of her students completed their summer reading. All the teachers were positive and encouraging to each other as they shared their success stories.

After the reflection time, the administrator distributed the 2019 STAAR reading test scores and the beginning of the year assessment scores for the teachers to review and compare. They discussed the significance of how STAAR scores of approaches count once, meets count twice, and masters count three times regarding the ranking they earn from the Texas Education Agency. Next, they focused on the grade level TEKS that were about inferencing. The principal had the teachers discuss the vocabulary words that were part of the aligned content and the strategies they used for implementation. The teachers intensely studied their scores and TEKS and checked to see where they aligned vertically.

All four teachers intentionally reviewed their scores and determined the areas where their students appeared to be struggling. Next, the teachers began to share ideas and strategies on how better to assist their students in developing a deeper understanding of the concept of inferencing. One teacher shared some question stems that she used with her students to encourage higher-order thinking skills. Then she provided each teacher with color-coded copies that were to be used with fiction, poetry, and nonfiction texts.

The administrator ended the meeting by asking them where they were in the process for identifying their goals and completing the self-reflection for T-TESS which is the Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support System. She reminded the teachers that they needed to develop one professional and one student learning measurable goal.

PLC observation number two. The second PLC meeting took place on September 26, 2019. All team members were present. The administrator started the meeting by telling the

teachers that the focus for the day was going to be on writing. She pulled up the TEKS side by side and had the teachers verify the differences in the TEKS vocabulary between the grade levels, and they discussed the vocabulary words that are part of the aligned content and the strategies used for implementation.

Next, the administrator had the teachers review their STAAR goals and determine which TEKS were their lowest scores. Each teacher verified which TEK was the most difficult for their students to master. After reviewing the data, the teachers determined the variety of complete sentences, and how they look and how they differ would be their focus for the day.

During the discussion, each teacher discussed teaching strategies used to assist in writing. The sixth-grade teacher said that she used a free thinking map, a combination of the flow map, and tree thinking maps, to assist the students in organizing their thoughts when writing because it addresses the flow of their thoughts and provides examples or explanations. The seventh-grade teacher used the BMS map, which is a basic mapping support or thinking map to organize thoughts. The eighth-grade teacher stated that she used the TAP map, which focuses on the topic, audience, and purpose of the writing. They talked about how each of the named graphic organizers was helpful in getting the students to brainstorm and expand upon their thoughts.

To wrap up the meeting, the administrator had the teachers discuss the similarities from grade level to grade level in the verbs listed in the TEKS and how the lessons help to prepare the students for the next grade level. For example, one grade level might have to identify and one grade level might have to explain a concept. During the meeting, the administrator made sure to involve all the teachers by asking questions to engage them in interactive discussions. For the most part, all of the teachers were actively involved and gave helpful and positive feedback to each member present. However, one teacher was working on her computer and doing some

paperwork during the session and had to ask for clarification a couple of times when the administrator asked her some questions to engage her.

PLC observation number three. The third PLC meeting took place on October 17, 2019. Five of the six team members were present. The administrator started the meeting by telling the teachers that the focus for the day was going to be figurative language.

Each teacher identified the TEKS that addressed figurative language at their grade level. The sixth-grade teacher said she used reading passages, matching games, and anchor charts to teach about figurative language. After further discussion, the seventh-grade teacher said she taught figurative language by involving the students in five stations that incorporated music, games, and the SmartBoard. The eighth-grade teacher stated she had the students create a booklet with examples and definitions and also identify figurative language in their daily readings.

Next, they pulled up the TEKS side by side and compared the vocabulary words that were aligned along with the content and the strategies used to implement them. They discussed how the TEKS could be spiraled using differentiated strategies. In addition, they discussed the similarities from grade level to grade level in the verbs and how the lessons prepared the students for the next grade level.

The meeting ended with a discussion about the quintile reports. They discussed the expected progress target being defined as the distance between the meets performance standards from the previous year and the current year in the same content area. The administrator pointed out that the definition of the expected progress meant that the goal is that the students in the meets and masters performance levels will maintain their respective academic achievement.

PLC observation number four. The fourth PLC meeting took place on November 21, 2019. Four of the six team members were present. The administrator started the meeting by

telling the teachers that the focus for the day was the author's purpose.

Each teacher reviewed the verbiage of their grade levels TEKS. They discussed the vocabulary words that are a part of the aligned curriculum and the strategies they used for implementing them. Next, they discussed why figurative language helps to increase understanding of the author's purpose.

Then each teacher introduced one teaching strategy used to determine the author's purpose. The sixth-grade teacher stated she used graphic organizers and guiding questions. The seventh-grade teacher used think critically workstations and discussed the voice, tone, and mood that the students could identify in the text. The eighth-grade teacher said she had the students give technology presentations to depict the author's purpose.

To spiral the teaching of the TEK with using differentiated strategies, the sixth-grade teacher reported she used see, hear, and do strategies to get the students actively engaged. The seventh-grade teacher reported she used peer partner and grouping methods while the eighth-grade teacher used novels and had the students find evidence to support and identify the author's purpose.

Overall, all three grade level teachers agreed that the similarities between the grade levels required that the students be able to explain, analyze, and describe the author's purpose. During the discussion, the teachers discussed why students have difficulty grasping critical thinking. They determined that real-world examples included comparing depth using visuals of mountains and valleys. Furthermore, they determined that most of their students' prior knowledge of things is gathered through pictures because many do not have the opportunities to experience things firsthand. Therefore, teachers determined that they must assist their students in making real-world connections to increase the depth of knowledge in critical thinking.

PLC observation number five. The fifth PLC meeting took place on December 12, 2019. Four of the six team members were present. The administrator started the meeting by telling the teachers that the focus for the day was writing across the board.

All participants identified the traits they were going to be looking for in the students' writing. One of the teachers said that she was going to be looking at the 90-seconds training concepts that incorporated the use of a central idea or thesis examples, million-dollar words, and whether they stayed on topic.

Another teacher discussed how her students were doing an expository essay over humor. She explained how she encourages the students to identify the central theme and give examples of how humor positively or negatively affects life in different situations.

Next, they discussed how they were going to grade the essays. They talked about how they would level them from a one to a four based on the criteria of thesis, million-dollar words, examples, and staying on topic. Then they planned to give the papers back to the students and have the students correct them. The administrator ended the meeting by telling the teachers to focus on the final TEKS tested and to review the readiness standards as they prepared their lessons to ensure that the students received instruction on the most appropriate information.

PLC observation number six. The sixth PLC meeting took place on January 23, 2020. All six team members were present. The administrator started the meeting by telling the teachers that the focus for the day was semester exams. Each teacher was given a breakdown of their tests based on the readiness standards.

One teacher noted that students still struggle with plot even after they have been learning about it for several years. In addition, they determined that the students across the grade levels

struggle with finding the climax. The teachers reported that the students tend to identify one of the rising action conflicts as the climax.

The administrator asked probing questions to find out how the teachers help the students spiral their knowledge to gain a better understanding. She also asked them to explain how they differentiate within the TEKS. One of the teachers responded by explaining that they had to assist the students in connecting personal background information to the source.

Identifying the main idea versus the theme of a text and determining the author's purpose were the areas that the seventh-grade teacher said her students struggle with in their reading and writing. Furthermore, the eighth-grade teacher noted that students sometimes do not have the prior knowledge needed to answer some of the questions.

Toward the end of the meeting, they discussed the mastery level of the students and talked about what it means if a student score drops from one year to the next. At this point, one of the veteran teachers became loud and stated that she was not going to teach to the test. The administrator reminded her that they do not teach to the test, but rather they teach the TEKS. At the end of the meeting, the administrator told the teachers to notify her of their training needs between now and the end of the year, and she confirmed that she would get some writing training scheduled for them in the next few days.

PLC observation number seven. The seventh PLC meeting took place on February 13, 2020. Five of the six team members were present. The administrator started the meeting by telling the teachers that the focus for the day was on the TEKS that they thought their students needed to work on before the next benchmark testing.

The sixth-grade teacher stated her students needed to work on POE (process of elimination). She stated that the students confused the rising action with the climax of the story.

The seventh-grade teacher said her students struggle with question analysis and answer choices, and the eighth-grade teacher reported her students struggle with informational text analysis.

During the discussion, the sixth-grade teacher discussed how she used the analogy of a roller coaster to teach rising action and climax. The seventh-grade teacher talked about having the students choose two-wording choices and look for distractors, and the teacher conducted student conferences to review strategies. To better understand information text, the eighth-grade teacher had her students make their own STAAR questions using academic vocabulary.

After the teachers discussed their strategies, the administrator asked the teachers how they spiral the TEKS using differentiated strategies. The sixth-grade teacher said she used the same strategies she talked about earlier and pairing high and low partners to work together. The seventh-grade teacher discussed using the process of elimination, and the eighth-grade teacher used articles based on reading levels and had the students answer and discuss the questions in small groups.

Then they discussed the similarities from grade level to grade level in the verbs and how the lessons would prepare the students for the next grade level. The administrator concluded the meeting by sharing their 2019–2020 STAAR goals and showed them the number of students they needed at each level to meet their goals in reading and math.

After an analysis of the observation notes, four main themes surfaced. The top four themes that emerged were (a) TEKS, (b) strategies, (c) progress, and (d) goal. These four themes appeared a total of 145 times among all seven observations (see Table 8).

Table 8

Observation Themes Identified

Observation Number	TEKS	Strategies	Progress	Goals
1	5	5	1	1
2	7	3	1	1
3	3	3	5	8
4	15	1	1	3
5	15	4	16	1
6	15	6	1	2
7	15	5	2	0
Total	75	27	27	16

Note: Number of occurrences of response for each theme.

Theme 1: TEKS. Every single PLC meeting focused on a specific TEKS for each grade level. The administrator and teachers reviewed the TEKS and discussed the vocabulary and determined what the best strategies were for teaching the students the appropriate TEKS. The teachers reviewed the language of the TEKS and determined how they could align them vertically between the grade levels. In addition, they discussed the changes that were made to the ELAR TEKS this year.

Theme 2: Strategies. As the teachers and administrators had discussions regarding TEKS, they talked about the different strategies they used to teach the concepts to their students. Discussing and sharing strategies was a very natural occurrence at the PLC meetings. The teachers shared and asked for ideas with and from one another. On two different occasions, one teacher brought in some sample strategies to share with the other teachers. During the PLC discussions, the veteran teachers always took the lead in talking and sharing their thoughts. In an

effort to get the younger teachers involved, the administrator would ask questions to encourage participation.

Theme 3: Progress. Each of the meetings began with a time of celebration. The teachers shared a student's progress story because they were excited to see them grasp a concept or exhibit growth. To address academic progress, the administrator brought in data from assessments and benchmarks for the teachers to analyze and review. All the participants discussed the progress that they saw and determined the areas of weakness that they needed to address.

Theme 4: Goals. At every PLC meeting, the administrator stressed that the goal was for the students to make progress by moving forward and not backward. The participants reviewed the data from former and current assessments and analyzed it to determine if there was any progress made.

To reinforce ownership by the students, the administrator pointed out the importance of visiting with each student and helping them to set goals that they could strive for every day. She explained that it is easier for the students to understand if the students are told the number of questions they needed to get correct in order to move forward rather than telling them a percentage because it is easier for the students to think rationally in numbers rather than percentages.

Chapter Summary

The analysis of the data in this chapter concentrated on describing junior high English, language arts, and reading teachers' perceptions concerning the role PLCs may play in shaping their instructional practices in a rural Title I school in Texas. To gather data, I utilized semistructured interviews, the TCAS, and observations to complete this qualitative study. The

data were broken down into ethnicity, gender, years of experience, and education level. In addition, I identified themes that surfaced during the interviews and observations that helped form the experiences and perceptions of the PLC participants. In Chapter 5, I will discuss how the data gathered from the interviews, TCAS, and observations helped to form the research-based conclusions.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The implementation of effective and successful professional learning communities in a school is a major undertaking for administrators as well as teachers. According to Jones (2013), “learning communities rely on a constant supply of new information that becomes the driving force of learning, change, and thus adaptation of individual members of the organization.” (p. 818). Bearing this in mind, it is important to note that the experiences and perceptions of the team members play a vital role in the flexibility that determines if there will be changes that produce positive results.

Since the inception of PLCs, there has been a plethora of research and recommendations on how to implement and maintain PLCs. However, there is limited research on the experiences and perceptions of the individuals involved in the PLCs. In this study, I described junior high teachers’ perceptions concerning the role PLCs play in shaping their instructional practices in a rural Title I school in Texas.

This qualitative case study explored the experiences and perceptions of the teachers and administrators that participated in an English, language arts, and reading PLC. I analyzed multiple sources of data through the utilization of semistructured interviews, the TCAS, and field observations to answer three research questions:

- Q1.** How do teachers describe their experiences in the PLC process in a rural Title I junior high?
- Q2.** How do teachers describe how they incorporate or not the ideas from the PLCs in their teaching in a rural Title I junior high?
- Q3.** How do teachers describe their perceptions of the value of PLCs, if any, in shaping their instructional approach in a rural Title I junior high?

The first phase of the study involved interviewing each participant individually to gain knowledge about their experiences, perceptions, and attitudes regarding the PLC they participated in monthly. Each participant answered 10 open-ended questions. An analysis of the data revealed that three themes emerged throughout the interviews. The three themes that emerged from the interviews were strategies, collaboration, and sharing ideas.

The second phase of the study consisted of the participants completing the TCAS. This survey research tool required that the participants answer 40 questions by reflecting on how they viewed the dialogue, decision-making, action, and evaluation components of their PLC meetings.

The third phase of the study incorporated monthly observations of the PLC meetings. An analysis of the observation notes revealed four key themes that surfaced during these meetings. The themes that emerged were the discussion of TEKS, strategies, progress, and goals.

In Chapter 4, I presented the data collected and an analysis from each component of the study. This chapter provides interpretations of the data collected from the interviews, surveys, and observations to contribute to a better understanding of the experiences and perceptions of the teachers that participated in the English, language arts, and reading PLC. The incorporation of the analyzed data along with research literature, current practices, and recommendations within the limitations set forth in the study provide an interpretation and recommendation from current to future practices. Finally, this chapter provides administrators with recommendations on how to gain insight into the experiences and perceptions that shape teachers' instructional practices that can lead to student achievement when they participate in PLCs.

Discussion of Findings in Relation to Past Literature

Each of the three phases of this study revealed that the participants involved in the PLC respected the allotted time set aside to meet and were willing to participate in the discussions and

share strategies with their team members. Four of the six participants were in their 50s or 60s. However, contrary to what some research indicates about the engagement level of veteran teachers, the PLC members remained engaged and enthusiastic throughout their PLC meetings (Mellor, Gaudreault, & Fadale, 2020).

In addition, the principal provided a high degree of administrative support to the PLC members. She demonstrated skills that the PLC members were asked to develop and use in their classrooms (Cherkowski, 2016). Furthermore, the principal provided the teachers with the needed training or professional development they requested, and these endeavors enabled the teachers to trust her as an administrator (Gillespie, Wells, & Panzer, 2010).

An analysis of the interviews revealed the three themes: (a) the discussion of strategies, (b) collaboration, and (c) the sharing of ideas. The TCAS was utilized to examine the dialogue, decision-making, action, and evaluation components of the PLCs based upon the experiences and perceptions of the participants. A review of the PLC observations revealed four themes most prevalent in the PLC meetings: (a) discussion of TEKS, (b) strategies, (c) progress of students, and (d) achievement of goals. It was determined that the findings from this qualitative descriptive case study support the research questions as related to past literature. Research data collected in this study are elaborated through the responses to each interview question.

Q1. How do teachers describe their experiences in the PLC process in a rural Title I junior high? Research question one is answered by reviewing the interviews and TCAS results. The interview results showed that the participants (a) valued the strategies gained, (b) appreciated collaboration opportunities, (c) shared ideas in their PLC, (d) learned from one another, and (e) gathered new teaching strategies.

The dialogue component ranked areas of the TCAS based on participant input. The highest ranked areas were (a) the decisions the teachers make are clearly and directly related to the improvement of instructional practice, (b) the improvement of student learning is directly related to the improvement of instructional practice, and (c) team members regularly identify specific instructional practices that they will initiate or maintain to increase student learning.

The analysis of the data revealed that the participation of the teachers in a PLC afforded them the opportunity to collaborate, share strategies, and exchange ideas. The collaboration and sharing of strategies are essential and can contribute to school improvement as well as promoting stronger relationships between educators (Harmon, 2017).

Q2. How do teachers describe how they incorporate or not the ideas from the PLCs in their teaching in a rural Title I junior high? Research question two is answered by reviewing the interviews, TCAS, and PLC observation notes. Incorporating strategies was the most talked about topic during the interviews. The topic of strategies was brought up 15 different times during the interview portion of the study. Participants confirmed they (a) incorporated new ideas in their teaching as they would report back the results to the committee each month; (b) gained new ideas that they can try with their students; (c) reported that the decisions they made clearly and directly related to an improvement of their instructional practices; (d) were able to clearly identify strategies that they would initiate, maintain, change, or discontinue; and the observation notes (e) confirmed that the discussion and sharing of strategies was one of the key factors that took place at every PLC meeting.

Incorporating new ideas that drive instruction are a key component in the successful maintenance of a PLC. Student learning is increased when new information is provided to PLCs and acts as the driving force to increase learning and promote changes (Jones, 2013).

Q3. How do teachers describe their perceptions of the value of PLCs, if any, in shaping their instructional approach in a rural Title I junior high? Research question three is answered by reviewing the data from the interviews and TCAS results. While participants may have valued the information shared, they did not necessarily put into action the instructional practices they learned during their PLC meetings, even though they claimed that they learned and implemented new strategies.

Limitations

The analysis of this qualitative descriptive study is comprised of data gathered through the use of the interviews, the TCAS, and observations as well as current research about professional learning communities. Even with reliable data, four limitations were identified: (a) the small group sample size, (b) the unexpected or unforeseen conditions of dealing with six participants, (c) the influence of researcher biases along with personal beliefs and experiences on data interpretation and ultimately the results of the study, and (d) the attitudes of the participants toward the study or their willingness to participate.

Small group size. The most significant limitation in this study is the small group sample size since only the English, language arts, and reading department teachers were included. However, as mentioned earlier, Yin (2018) argued that a small group size could yield valuable results. Considering the duration and the number of participants at each meeting along with the data that were collected and recorded with fidelity, I feel quite confident that the data gathered and the analysis are fair representations of the experiences and perceptions of the teachers at this rural Title I junior high.

Unforeseen or unexpected conditions. There were six participants in the study, but their schedules or health issue at times kept some of them from attending all of the PLC meetings.

Even with this factor, I was able to observe anywhere from four to six members at every PLC meeting. Therefore, the overall data collected was substantial and stable.

Researcher bias. Biases, along with personal beliefs, values, and experiences, may influence data interpretation and, ultimately, the results of the study. To combat this possibility, I documented all PLC meetings and used the Dedoose software to determine themes that emerged. In addition, I had all participants review their interview transcripts to make sure that I documented their thoughts properly.

Attitude and willingness of participants. The attitudes of the participants toward the study may directly impact the study. It was difficult to get all the participants to complete the interview and survey portions, and I had to contact two of the participants several times in order to complete their interviews and surveys. However, I was able to complete all the required components successfully.

Recommendations

This study substantiates that professional learning is crucial for teachers to increase student achievement (Prenger, Poortman, & Handelzalts, 2019). To understand better the impact of PLCs in education, (a) the experiences and perceptions of the teachers that participate in them must be examined, (b) school districts need to provide a framework on which to conduct their PLC meetings, and (c) administrators and teachers should be provided with the necessary training, resources, and skills to help them better facilitate effective PLCs. Administrators hoping to implement PLCs successfully should consider the following recommendations for practical application. These recommendations were developed from the analysis of the data from this qualitative descriptive case study.

Recommendations for practical application. This study shows that research has been

conducted on how to implement PLCs and how they can be successful when they are run with fidelity. However, implementing and sustaining an effective PLC requires that (a) the administrators and teachers are actively involved and engaged, (b) connections are made among participants, (c) teachers are empowered to take ownership, (d) PLC planning time is extended, (e) partnering with neighboring districts is facilitated or professional development is provided, and (f) veteran teachers are paired with less experienced teachers.

Actively involved members. Implementing and sustaining an effective PLC requires empowering teachers to take ownership in their learning (Long, Zhao, Yang, Zhao, & Chen, 2019). To increase the ownership in learning, the administrators and teachers are given opportunities to be actively involved and engaged.

Connections among participants. The perceptions and experiences that the participants feel can lead to a positive or negative impact on the students and school. Understanding the background knowledge of each PLC member is a useful tool on which to build a foundation and assist in making connections among participants.

Empower teachers. Rather than always having the administrator determine the agenda, I would recommend that the teachers take turns leading the meeting while the administrator is there to support and provide guidance. This simple gesture will empower the teachers to take ownership and require that they are actively involved and engaged.

Extended planning time. Providing an extended PLC planning time that is longer than the normal conference period would allow the team members more time to dig deeper into the data they gather. Increasing the allotted time would also provide the participants with a chance to study the data and develop formative assessments together that they could use to evaluate student success.

Professional learning. Based on the small size of the district, another recommendation would be to partner with a neighboring district and allow the teachers to get together to share ideas and strategies. If that is not an option, I would recommend professional trainers be brought on-site to assist the team members on how to polish and refine their PLC interactions among the members.

Team building. Finally, to address the lack of members taking action related to individual and team learning as a result of the team decision-making, I would suggest team-building exercises. I would pair up the less experienced teachers with the more experienced teachers to create a bond to assist them in learning from each other. During one of the PLC meetings, one of the younger teachers made a comment to one of the older teachers that she knew she did not like her. This type of relationship is volatile and only leads to resentment and a lack of team building, which ultimately hurts the students. Team-building exercises may help alleviate those types of feelings.

Recommendations for future research. The recommendations are based upon the examination of the experiences and perceptions of the participants that participated in a PLC at a rural Title I junior high. This qualitative case study is intended to add to the research on professional learning communities. Even though PLCs have been studied in great detail, there is limited research on the experiences and perceptions of the participants. This study could serve as a guide for future studies to examine (a) the extent that experiences and perceptions of PLC participants impact student achievement and teachers' efficacy, (b) the implementation of any of the recommendations from this study to determine its impact on the effectiveness of a PLC, (c) the difference in findings if a much larger PLC study group were examined, or (d) the comparison and contrast of multiple PLCs in similar schools to identify the similarities and

differences.

Conclusions

The qualitative descriptive case study of the rural Title I junior high ELAR PLC provided insight into how the experiences and perceptions of PLC team members can shape their instructional practices. Research in education has provided extensive research into how to form and maintain PLCs (Brown et al., 2018; Brodie, 2013; Doolittle et al., 2008; DuFour, 2004, 2014, 2015; DuFour et al., 2006; DuFour & Fullan, 2013; Easton, 2015). However, this study portrayed the importance of how the experiences and perceptions of PLC members can impact teacher growth. Ell and Major (2019) suggested that “understanding the processes and dynamics of a group” helps in transforming the group and increasing the potential for “expansive learning” (p. 117).

This school implemented PLCs in 2013–2014 as an attempt to create better communication and to give the teachers a chance to get to know one another better. Each year an additional area of focus was added to the PLC. In order to increase connection among the grade levels, grade level vertical alignment was added. Next, the implementation of teaching strategies to assist in improving teaching techniques among the teachers was incorporated. Then, the strategy of analyzing student data to determine areas of strengths and weaknesses was added to the PLC platform.

The principal reported that the development of the PLCs at this school is still a work in progress and that they are adding a new component each year as they determine what areas need to be addressed. At one time, this school was a targeted school, according to the Texas Education Agency (TEA), but at this time, they are not a targeted school anymore. Targeted schools are identified by TEA when a school has three subpopulations that score below the state average.

The principal attributed the achievement of not being a targeted school to the utilization of PLCs to analyze data and assist teachers in collaborating together. In addition, the principal succinctly stated her expectations at each meeting and made it clear that the PLC was sacred time and made sure that the participants stayed on task and followed their monthly agenda.

This qualitative descriptive case study was designed to determine if the perceptions and experiences of the teachers and the administrator who participate in a professional learning community at a rural Title I school in East Texas play a role in shaping their instructional practices. As a researcher and a principal, I am extremely thankful to the administrator and teachers that willingly completed the TCAS, participated in the interviews, and allowed me to observe their PLC meetings. By allowing me to conduct the research, I was able to gather data that will benefit education, other researchers, and also the PLC groups at my school.

An analysis of the interview data revealed that the teachers and administrator that participated in the ELAR PLC saw an increase in identifying strategies, collaborating with peers, and the sharing of ideas that would benefit them as teachers and increase student achievement. A review of the observation notes showed that every PLC focused on a review of TEKS, strategies, progress, and a review of the goals they set. The TCAS data demonstrated that decision-making was the strongest area of strength for the ELAR PLC. The second highest score was that of dialogue. The PLC exhibited a healthy dialogue during every PLC meeting observed. Healthy and meaningful dialogue has the strongest potential to produce robust and productive PLCs (Schaap & de Bruijn, 2018).

Developing and implementing PLCs requires an organized plan and a diligent effort by all parties to be a successful team. I believe that the ELAR PLC at this school was successful because the administrator empowered the teachers to be active members of the group.

Furthermore, the principal reaffirmed the expectations for each PLC meeting at the start of each session. As part of the effort to create and sustain productive PLCs, school districts need to take a close look at the perceptions and experiences of the individuals that participate in the PLCs. By acknowledging these experiences and perceptions, the foundation can be built to determine what areas of professional development are needed based on the information gathered. The ultimate result will be an increase in student achievement when the local program uses the data gathered to personalize professional development to increase teacher learning as well as student achievement.

Implementing PLCs requires that teachers learn, analyze student data, and differentiate instruction. An important component of developing an effective PLC is to acknowledge the experiences and perceptions of the teachers involved because it is through these opportunities that the overall performance of the school regarding student learning is increased when teacher effectiveness is enhanced through the use of professional development catered to the needs of the teachers (Muñoz & Branham, 2016).

The results of this study complement other research on the importance of PLCs and reinforce the need to determine the appropriate type of professional development that staff members need to enhance their instructional methods. The results also reiterate the need to empower teachers to take ownership of their learning and encourages the importance of building strong PLCs that afford every participant the opportunity to take a leadership role in the group.

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Appendix A: Teacher Collaboration Assessment Rubric (TCAR)

Teacher Collaboration Assessment Rubric	
Authors	Woodland (2016)
Citation	Woodland, R. H. (2016). Evaluating PK-12 professional learning communities: An improvement science perspective. <i>American Journal of Education</i> , 37(4), 505–521.
Purpose	This rubric operationalizes and measures the effectiveness of professional learning communities using an improvement science approach.
Population	The rubric was designed for PK-12 teachers participating in professional learning communities but may also be used as a tool to measure other collaborations. The article mentions multiple applications of TCAR but does not provide detail covering the number of participants.
Administration	Professional learning community participants respond to each item on the 26-item rubric. Each item includes three response options (2,1,0). The form is unique in that it asks participants to choose the process for administering the TCAR. It could be recollection and reflection by team members, a video observation, an in-person observation, a review of meeting agendas/minutes, or an administrator consultation with team members.
Description	The 26-item rubric assesses four aspects of professional learning communities: Dialogue, Decision-making, Action, Evaluation (DDAE).
Reliability	Reliability data were not reported.
Validity	The rubric operationalizes professional learning communities and each aspect of DDAE. It appears to have face validity.
Strengths	This paper contributes an instrument for measuring professional learning communities, which may be used as a measure of leadership or of the effectiveness of PLCs themselves. The rubric is trying to prevent “collaboration lite,” a trap common among PLCs in which participants gather and have congenial, imprecise conversations instead of conversations focused on improving instruction and student outcomes. The paper further describes how the rubric may be used in developmental, formative, and outcome evaluation.
Weaknesses	The paper mentions numerous applications of the instrument but does not provide reliability data that would indicate robustness.

Teacher Collaboration Assessment Rubric (TCAR)

Name of Team/Group: _____

Team Members: _____

Date: _____

Group/Person Completing the Assessment: _____

DIRECTIONS:

1. Choose a process(es) for administering the TCAR (see below).
2. Review the criteria for *Dialogue*, *Decision-Making*, *Action* and *Evaluation* on the following pages.
3. Circle one response per row that most accurately reflects the current quality/attributes of team functioning.
4. Total the scores for each section and summarize results on the cover page.
5. Use findings for developmental and/or formative assessment purposes and for resource allocation.

Process Used for Administering the TCAR: (check all that apply):

<input type="checkbox"/> recollection and reflection by a team member <input type="checkbox"/> observation of team meeting(s) (via video) <input type="checkbox"/> observation of team meeting(s) (in person) <input type="checkbox"/> review of meeting agendas/plans	<input type="checkbox"/> review of meeting running record/minutes <input type="checkbox"/> administrator consultation with team member(s) <input type="checkbox"/> other _____
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Measure

Team - Collaboration Assessment Scores	
I. Dialogue	/14
II. Decision-making	/14
III. Action	/12
IV. Evaluation	/12
Total	/52

Areas of Strength:

Areas for Improvement:

Resources Needed:

Figure 2. The Teacher Collaboration Assessment Rubric.

DIALOGUE			
Circle one box per row			
	2	1	0
a	An agenda for team dialogue is pre-planned and accessible to all in advance of every team meeting.	A written agenda for group dialogue is provided for most team meetings.	There is no pre-planned agenda for group dialogue/team meetings.
b	The team meets regularly and all meetings are attended by all members.	The team meets with some regularity and most meetings are attended by all members.	The team meets sporadically, or full attendance at team meetings is rare.
c	Team meetings are always structured. Protocols are used to facilitate and guide team dialogue.	Team meetings are somewhat structured. Occasionally protocols are used to facilitate and guide team dialogue.	Team dialogue/meetings are generally improvisational, unstructured, and not purposefully facilitated.
d	Team dialogue consistently addresses essential questions of practice, instructional quality, and student learning.	Team dialogue occasionally addresses essential questions of practice, instructional quality, and student learning.	Team dialogue does not address essential questions of practice, instructional quality and student learning.
e	Inter-professional disagreements about issues of practice are typical - these disagreements are expected, openly examined and thoughtfully discussed.	Inter-professional disagreements about important issues are not typical, often go unexamined, or remain addressed.	The group avoids conflict, tends to confirm present practices, or inter-professional disagreements are said not to exist.
f	Team members participate equally in group dialogue; there are no hibernators or dominators.	Most team members contribute to the dialogue, but there are some hibernators and dominators.	Team members contribute unequally to the dialogue; there are regular dominators and hibernators.
g	An accurate record of team dialogue, decisions, and subsequent actions is recorded and accessible to all members.	A record of team dialogue, decisions, and intended actions exists.	No accurate or accessible record of team dialogue, decisions, and subsequent actions exists.
Dialogue Total		/14	
DECISION MAKING			
Circle one box per row			
	2	1	0
a	Team members regularly identify and determine specific actions that they will take to improve instructional practice and student learning.	Team members occasionally identify and determine actions that they will take to improve instructional practice and student learning.	Team members do not identify or determine specific actions that they will take to improve instructional practice and student learning.
b	The team uses a specific process for every decision it makes (e.g. consensus, majority, or some other decision-making structure).	The team occasionally uses a process for making decisions (e.g. by consensus, majority, or some other decision-making structure).	The team does not use specific processes for making decisions.
c	Decisions made by the team are clearly and directly related to the improvement of instructional practice and student learning.	Decisions made by the team are occasionally related to the improvement of instructional practice and student learning.	Teams decisions are not related to the improvement of instructional practice and student learning.
d	The team regularly makes decisions about what specific instructional practices it will initiate, maintain, change and discontinue.	The team occasionally makes decisions about what specific instructional practices it will initiate, maintain, change or discontinue.	The team does not make decisions about instructional practices to initiate, maintain, change and/or discontinue.
e	All team decisions are informed by full group dialogue.	Most team decisions are informed by some level of group dialogue.	Team decisions are not informed by group dialogue.
f	All team decision-making is transparent; each member knows what the decisions are/were and how and why they were made.	Decision-making is somewhat transparent; members are aware of team decisions and how they were made.	Group decision-making is not transparent; members are not aware of how group decisions were made.
g	The team regularly determines what specific instructional practice and student learning information it intends to obtain and analyze.	The team occasionally decides what specific instructional practice and student learning information it needs to obtain and analyze.	The team does not determine instructional practice and student learning information it needs to obtain and analyze.
Decision-Making Total		/14	

Figure 2. (continued)

ACTION - Circle one box per row			
Circle one box per row			
	2	1	0
a	Team members know the specific individual actions that they should take as a result of group dialogue and decision-making.	Most team members know the specific individual actions that they should take as a result of group dialogue and decision-making.	Team members are unaware of specific actions that they should take as a result of group dialogue and decision-making.
b	Intended actions to be taken by team members are high leverage (i.e. team members believe their actions will directly improve instructional practice).	Intended actions are somewhat high leverage (i.e. team members believe their actions could contribute to the improvement of instructional practice).	Intended actions are not high leverage (i.e. team members don't know how or if their actions will improve instructional practice).
c	Team members actions are specific and measurable/observable.	Team members actions are specific or measurable/observable.	Team members actions are not specific, nor measurable/observable.
d	Team member actions are coordinated and interdependent.	Team member actions are coordinated or interdependent.	Individual team member actions are independent and coordinated with one another.
e	Action-taking is equitable among members (i.e. every member acts to improve individual instructional practice and group performance as a result of team decision-making.)	Action-taking is somewhat equitable (i.e., most members regularly take steps to improve individual instructional practice and group performance.)	Action-taking is not equitable (i.e., some members take most of the action, some take very little or none.)
f	The group has clear, continuous, and accessible documentation of the instructional practices that they have stopped, started and/or changed over time.	The group has some documentation of the instructional practices they have stopped, started and/or changed over time.	Little, if any, documentation exists of the practices that the group has stopped, started and/or changed over time.
Action Total		/12	
EVALUATION			
Circle one box per row			
	2	1	0
a	Team members collect/have access to data about the quality of their instructional practices and their students' learning.	Team members collect some/have some access to data about their instructional practices and their students' learning.	The team does not have access to data about quality of their instructional practices and/or student learning.
b	The team regularly analyzes the quality of their students' actual work (i.e. work completed by their students in response to their instruction).	The team infrequently examines the quality of their students' actual work (i.e. work completed by their students in response to their instruction).	The team does not examine the quality of their students' actual work (i.e. work completed by their students in response to their instruction).
c	The team regularly analyzes the quality of their classroom-based instructional practice.	On occasion the team will analyze the quality of their classroom-based instructional practice.	The team does not analyze the quality of their classroom-based instructional practice.
d	Team members regularly observe each other's classroom instructional practices, either in person or indirectly via technological means.	Team members occasionally observe each other's classroom instructional practices, either in person or indirectly via technological means.	Team members do not observe each other's classroom instructional practices, either in person or indirectly via technological means.
e	The team consistently generates targeted, specific, and timely feedback for team members about how to improve instructional practice and student learning.	The team occasionally generates some ideas for how team members might improve quality of instructional practice and student learning.	The team does not generate targeted, specific, and timely feedback about quality of instructional practice and student learning.
f	The group has clear, continuous, and accessible documentation and substantiation of how their instructional practice affects their student's learning.	The group has some documentation of how their instructional practice affects their student's learning.	The team does not document or substantiate the effects of their actions on student learning.
Evaluation Total		/12	

Figure 2. (continued)

Response Format

Response scale: 2,1,0.

Appendix B: Teacher Collaboration Assessment Survey DDAE Scale Items

1. Dialogue

- a. The purpose of our collaboration is to systematically improve instruction to increase student learning.
- b. The membership configuration of my primary teacher team is appropriate—the right people are members of the group.
- c. Team meetings are consistently attended by ALL members.
- d. Agenda for team dialogue is preplanned, written, and accessible to all in advance of meeting.
- e. Team meetings are purposefully facilitated and employ the use of protocols to structure and guide dialogue.
- f. A thoughtful, thorough, and accurate account of team dialogue, decisions, and intended actions is recorded.
- g. Every member has access to running records of team dialogue, decisions, and subsequent actions to be taken.
- h. Inter-professional disagreements occur regularly—these disagreements are welcomed, openly addressed, and led to new shared understandings.
- i. Team members participate equally in group dialogue; there are no “dominators” or “hibernators” in the group.
- j. Our dialogue is consistently focused on examination of evidence related to performance and the attainment of goals.
- k. The topic of the dialogue is focused on our instructional practices and not other issues (e.g., school schedules, textbook purchases, fund raising, discipline, students’ family issues, chaperoning).

2. Decision-making

- a. My team regularly makes decisions about what instructional practices to initiate, maintain, develop, or discontinue.
- b. All of our decisions are informed by group dialogue.
- c. The process for making any decision is transparent and adhered to—everyone knows what the decisions are/were and how and why they were made.
- d. The decisions we make are clearly and directly related to the improvement of instructional practice and the improvement of student learning.
- e. The team uses a specific process for every decision it makes (e.g., consensus, majority, or some other decision-making structure).
- f. Team members regularly identify specific instructional practices that they will initiate or maintain to increase student learning.
- g. Team members regularly identify strategies they will change or discontinue.
- h. Our group regularly determines what information about instructional practice and student learning needs to be obtained.

Action

- a. Each group member takes actions related to individual/team learning as a result of team decision-making.
- b. As a result of group decision-making, each one of us makes meaningful (pedagogically complex) adjustments to our instructional practice.
- c. Actions are directly related to student learning.
- d. Each member knows what actions (related to learning) to take next at the end of the meeting.
- e. Team member actions are coordinated and interdependent.
- f. Each individual teacher employs specific instructional strategies that will increase student learning.
- g. Each individual teacher discontinues less effective strategies.
- h. Actions that are taken after or between meetings are distributed equitably among team members (i.e., every member takes steps to improve individual or team learning).
- i. Each member can name some aspect of instruction that we have stopped/started or changed as a result of the group decision-making.
- j. Each member of the team commits to carrying out team actions.

Evaluation

- a. As a group we regularly collect and analyze quantitative data (e.g., numbers, statistics, scores) about member teaching practices.
- b. As a group we regularly collect and analyze qualitative data (e.g., open-ended responses, interviews, comments) about member teaching practices.
- c. As a group we regularly collect and analyze quantitative data (e.g., numbers, statistics, scores) about student learning.
- d. As a group we regularly collect and analyze qualitative data (e.g., numbers, statistics, scores) about student learning.
- e. We observe the classroom instruction of our colleagues.
- f. We collect information on the quality of the instruction during our observation.
- g. We analyze data collected through peer observation of classroom instruction.
- h. We use student performance data to evaluate the merit of our instructional practices.
- i. We regularly share evaluation data on the effect of our instruction in our primary team.
- j. The accomplishments of our team are publicly recognized.
- k. Our team can accurately and thoroughly articulate and substantiate its accomplishment related to student learning over time.

Woodland, R. H., Lee, M. K., & Randall, J. (2013). A validation study of the teacher collaboration assessment survey. *Educational Research & Evaluation, 19*(5), 442–460. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13803611.2013.795118>

Appendix C: Creswell's Interview Protocol for Collecting Data During an Interview

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

(Briefly describe the research study, confidentiality, and informed consent)

I am conducting a study on the experiences and perceptions of teachers that participate in professional learning communities. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study and for signing the consent. Please be advised that during this study, your identity will be kept confidential. If at any time you decide you do not want to participate in the study, you are free to leave. Once again, thank you for signing the consent form stating that you are aware of your rights as a participant in this study.

Interview Questions

1. Please tell me a little bit about who you are as an educator and your background in education.
2. Based on your understanding, what is a professional learning community?
3. Please describe your understanding of the purpose of the content level professional learning community that you participate in on your campus.
4. Describe your experiences in the content level professional learning community you participate in? Please elaborate on any strengths or weaknesses that you observe or experience.
5. What are your views on collaboration with your peers?

6. Describe how new ideas shared in professional learning community meetings are incorporated in your teaching.
7. What is your perception of the value of your participation in the professional learning community and how participation has shaped your instructional practice?
8. How has the participation in the content level professional learning communities impacted the decisions you make regarding instructional practices?
9. What suggestions or recommendations, if any, would you have for your content level professional learning community?
10. Do you have any additional information that you would like to share?

Appendix D: Permission to Use TCAS

1/26/2020

myACU Mail - Re: TCAR

**Re: TCAR**

9 messages

Rebecca Woodland

Tue, Oct 23, 2018 at 12:18 PM

To:

Hello Pam,

You can access the most recent version of the TCAR (now the TCAS) in the following article:

Woodland, R. (2016). Evaluating PK-12 professional learning communities: An improvement science perspective. *American Journal of Evaluation*. (37) 4, 505-521. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1098214016634203> *

You have permission to use the TCAS, as long as you provide full attribution and citation.

Please send me a copy of your dissertation prospectus after your committee has approved it. I'd be very interested to see how you are using it.

All best,

- Rebecca Woodland

Department of Educational Policy, Research and Administration
College of Education | University of Massachusetts Amherst

See my latest publication about: [Teacher, Teams, and Ties in EAQ](#)

On Sat, Oct 20, 2018 at 11:00 AM Pam Gambrel
Dr. Woodland,

I am a doctoral student, and I am working on my Dissertation Prospectus. During this process, I have discovered the TCAR. I believe this would be a wonderful tool to utilize during my study. The purpose of my qualitative descriptive case study is to describe junior high school teachers' perceptions concerning the role PLCs may play in shaping their instructional practices in a rural Title I junior high in Texas.

Would you be able to assist me in using this wonderful tool? What is the fee to use it, and who all do I need to obtain permission from? I really appreciate your time and consideration in this matter. Feel free to share any other information that you think may be of assistance to me. Once again, thank you for your assistance. My cell phone number is listed below should you need to reach me.

Pam

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Attitude determines altitude.

Appendix E: IRB Approval Letter

ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103
325-674-2885



August 27, 2019

Pam Gambrel

Department of Organizational Leadership

Abilene Christian University

Dear Pam,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled "Experiences and Perceptions of Rural Junior High Teachers Participating in a Professional Learning Community",

was approved by expedited review (Category 7) on 8/27/2019 (IRB # 19-068). Upon completion of this study, please submit the Inactivation Request Form within 30 days of study completion.

If you wish to make any changes to this study, including but not limited to changes in study personnel, number of participants recruited, changes to the consent form or process, and/or changes in overall methodology, please complete the Study Amendment Request Form.

If any problems develop with the study, including any unanticipated events that may change the risk profile of your study or if there were any unapproved changes in your protocol, please inform the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs and the IRB promptly using the Unanticipated Events/Noncompliance Form.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

Megan Roth

Megan Roth, Ph.D.
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs