

TEACHER PERCEPTIONS REGARDING THE IMPLEMENTATION  
OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES  
AT THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LEVEL

by

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## ABSTRACT

LAUREN L.FINLEY. Teacher perceptions regarding the implementation of the professional learning communities at the elementary school level.  
(Under the direction of DR. ROBERT RICKELMAN)

The purpose of this study was to describe elementary school teachers' perceptions of Professional Learning Communities and how they believed participation in a PLC impacts their professional development and classroom instruction. This study utilized organizational theory as a framework in order to better understand how changes in an organizational structure – the implementation of Professional Learning Communities – might influence elementary teachers' perspectives on collaboration, instruction, and professional development. This learning theory provided a lens through which to view and understand how schools change as teachers add to their pedagogical knowledge during a school improvement process (Scribner et al., 1999). The case study participants were six teachers from different elementary schools in Richview County. Four were primary grade teachers, and two were upper elementary school teachers who had a range of teaching experience. The findings in this study afforded a detailed picture of the six teachers' perceptions regarding the role of the Professional Learning Community in their daily teaching, instructional planning, and professional development. Patterns in the teachers' beliefs about the Professional Learning Community model were also exposed. The in-depth details and patterns revealed in this study provided a deeper understanding of how teachers' beliefs and actions related to collaboration and teaming impact instruction in their classrooms and the school climate.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Teaching is viewed as an isolating profession. From the tradition of the one room school house to current school architectural designs, individual classrooms are separated by doors and walls that keep teachers isolated from each other during the school day, reinforcing a sense of separation and autonomy (Hargreaves, 2000). Teaching in this atmosphere contributes to stagnation in the learning process for teachers as well as teacher burn-out (Margolis, 2008). Teacher work occupies a continuum; on one side is total isolation - the teacher who spends day after day in a school without speaking a handful of words to colleagues. Without easy access to other professionals, teachers may feel reluctant to admit problems or ask for help (Feiman-Nemser, 2003).

On the other side of the continuum, however, there are teachers whose days are filled with conversations with colleagues in which teachers see themselves as member of one of more professional communities. These range from small partnerships to wide-ranging professional networks (Little, 2002). Research suggests that working in this type of collaborative atmosphere promotes teacher learning and job satisfaction (Margolis, 2008). Thinking of schools as communities elicits notions of belonging and connectedness, which may be powerful in contradicting teachers' experiences of isolation (Achinstein, 2002).

In the early 1990's, the concept of a learning organization for teachers began to emerge articulating the relationship between the "reflecting individual" and the "active



collective” in the learning process. This “communities of practice” model was largely based upon the work of Etienne Wenger, and in this model, professional learning is seen as the refinement of practices and knowledge occurring within the specific, collective actions of a particular community. Individuals learn as they partake in the daily activities of their communities (Wenger, 1998). The focus in the “communities of practice” model is not on the isolated experiences that shape each worker within a system; the focus lies instead in the relationships that bind workers together (Fenwick, 2008).

Teachers are no different than the workers of which Wenger speaks in his “community of practice” model. Teachers, individually and collectively, possess values that shape their professional practice. The content of a teacher community ideology, particularly as it pertains to values about education, schooling, and students, is important. These conceptions frame how school is enacted (Achinstein, 2002).

Given the current educational climate of reform that has been driven by No Child Left Behind [NCLB] (2002) and Race to the Top [RTTT] (2013), there are higher expectations for teachers to rethink their own practice, focus on student outcomes, and teach in ways that they have never taught before (Sunderman & Orfield, 2006). This change in the educational climate requires teachers to learn not only new teaching methods, but it also demands that teachers adapt to new philosophies regarding student learning and teaching. Reform of this nature cannot be actualized through the use of traditional staff development that is delivered in a “top-down” or one day format.

Rather, professional development in a climate of reform needs to provide teachers with time to think critically about their practice and to develop new knowledge, practices, and beliefs about content, pedagogy, and learners (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin,

1995; Lowden, 2005). The No Child Left Behind Act describes “high quality” professional development as activities that both improve and increase teacher knowledge of the academic subjects they teach (content focus) and that are sustained and intensive and are aligned directly to state standards (NCLB, 2002). In short, the new model of professional development for teachers will need to reflect the “community of practice” model espoused by Etienne Wenger. Building this sense of community in schools leads to shared vision, constructive changes in school culture and ultimately, an improved capacity to serve students (Huffman & Jacobson, 2010).

### 1.1 Professional Learning Communities Defined

Unfortunately, the isolationist model of teaching has had plenty of time to take root. American schools created by the colonists in the 1600’s were one room school houses. The teacher was responsible for classroom instruction as well as the general maintenance and upkeep of the building. Gradually, as the profession evolved, the teacher became less of a building custodian but the sense of isolation remained. Once the classroom door closed, the teacher was solely responsible for the students and their learning (Wise, 2007). Loneliness and lack of support also contribute to a teacher’s feelings of isolation (Rogers & Babinski, 1999). Studies have shown that many talented, new teachers are leaving the profession early in their careers due to feelings of isolation (Heider, 2005).

Ideas about teaching that reflect a “community of practice” attempts to change this model of isolation; new research regarding communities of practice in general and Professional Learning Communities (PLC’s) in particular have the potential to change

teaching practice in the current climate of educational reform and accountability (DuFour et al., 2006).

The concept of the professional learning community has its foundation in the work of Wenger and his concepts of “communities of practice” and also the business sector in research regarding the capacity of organizations to learn (Feiman-Nemser, 2006). Professional Learning Communities are defined by DuFour et al. (2006) as “collaborative teams whose members work interdependently to achieve common goals linked to the purpose of learning for all.” The collaboration is the means to an end – not the end itself. An underlying assumption of PLC’s is that if the organization is to become more effective in helping students learn, then the organization itself must also be continually learning. Therefore, arrangements must be created within the organization to ensure that staff members participate in high quality, job embedded learning as part of their typical work routines (DuFour et al., 2006). The Professional Learning Community brings teachers together on a regular basis to engage in collaborative planning, curriculum study, and the development of student assessments. The PLC, however, is more than group work; the language of the PLC also promotes the ideals of democratic schools and schools as relationally bound communities (Servage, 2008).

The Professional Learning Community is one model within a collection of models and theories characterized by a set of core beliefs:

- Professional development is critical to improved student learning;
- This professional development is most effective when it is collaborative and collegial, and

- This collaborative work should entail inquiry and problem solving in the authentic context of daily teaching practices (Servage, 2008).

Vescio et al. (2008) expanded upon this notion in their definition of Professional Learning Communities which is built upon two premises: the assumption that knowledge is situated in the day to day experiences of teachers and is best understood through critical reflection with those who share similar experiences. It is also assumed that involving teachers in a PLC will increase their professional knowledge, change their practice, and ultimately improve student learning (Vescio et al., 2008). It is this concept of the Professional Learning Community as defined by Du Four et al. (2006) and how it changes instruction in the classroom that will be the focus of this study.

## 1.2 Statement of the Problem

Improving professional learning for educators is a crucial step in transforming schools and improving academic achievement. To meet federal requirements and public expectations for school and student performance, schools need to foster and support the continuous improvement teacher skills and knowledge to ensure that every teacher is able to teach increasingly diverse learners, is knowledgeable about student learning, competent in complex core academic content, and skillful at the craft of teaching. To accomplish this, schools need to be sure that professional learning is deliberately planned and organized to engage all teachers regularly and to benefit all students. This requires high-quality, sustained professional learning throughout the school year, at every grade level and in every subject (Hirsh, 2009).

In the current climate of school reform, high stakes testing, and budget decreases, schools systems have been mandated to make changes in professional practice that will

not only improve test scores but will also provide high quality professional development for teachers. Teachers are a primary school-based link to student growth, and pedagogical decision-making is a key lever in the teacher-student dynamic. Therefore, a school system's support of teacher professional improvement represents a logical and important investment. For school-based leaders working to maximize student learning and achievement, identifying opportunities to encourage and support classroom level teacher improvement in a cost effective manner is a top priority (Graham, 2007).

One cost effective way to provide professional development to teachers is to situate their professional learning within the day to day context of their jobs. Researchers refer to this practice as embedded professional development. Embedded professional development, for the purposes of this paper, refers to ongoing, job-related learning that occurs within the confines of the school, rather than in off-site locations. In short, working and professional learning occurs simultaneously (DuFour, 2004). Research indicates that this type of embedded professional development has a more positive effect on teaching quality than the one-day, six-hour staff development has in changing teaching methods (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Lowden, 2005).

Embedded professional development may assume various forms: co-teaching, mentoring, formal lesson reflection, or group discussions surrounding student work or instructional tasks. Some of the most powerful learning experiences for teachers may occur in their own classrooms through self- or observer examination of a lesson (Desimone, 2009).

The growth of the Professional Learning Community model has allowed schools to shift their professional development to a model of integrating teacher learning into

communities of practice (Vescio et al., 2008). One example of a state school system that embraced the model of PLC's is North Carolina which, during the 2009-2010 school year, changed its process of teacher evaluation from the Teacher Performance Appraisal Instrument Revised Version (TPAI-R) to a new method of evaluation built largely upon a model of organizational and collaborative learning (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2009). The move to this new evaluation system has been a significant time and dollar investment for North Carolina school systems in terms of training both teachers and administrators, but in the long run, the change could be more cost effective in the money that might be saved on outsourcing professional development for teachers.

In order to structure embedded professional learning into the school schedule and provide teachers with opportunities for collaboration that is a part of their evaluation criteria, schools have restructured their days. Some schools delayed school start times to give teachers collaborative meeting time before students arrive. Others opted to restructure the master schedule, placing two elective classes back to back so that teachers have the opportunity to collaboratively plan on a regular basis. Still other schools arranged for coverage of large groups of children either in the morning or afternoon to allow collaborative planning time for teachers (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; DuFour et al., 2006).

With all the recent focus that has been placed on collaborative instructional and learning environments for teachers, one has to wonder if education's shift to the Professional Learning Community model has affected teachers, and if so, then in what ways. As stated earlier, student learning is one focus within the Professional Learning

Community framework. Second, however, and equally important is the presence of an ongoing, supportive learning environment for teachers.

### 1.3 Organizational Learning Theory

Every organization is a product of how its members think and interact (Senge, 2000). The difficulties faced by schools are influenced by the relationships within the system. If a school system needs to be improved, one must first look to the ways teachers think and interact before the rules are changed.

Teacher work is embedded in school organizations and schooling. This study utilized organizational theory as a framework in order to better understand how changes in an organizational structure – the implementation of Professional Learning Communities – might influence elementary teachers' perspectives on collaboration, instruction, and professional growth. This learning theory provided a lens through which to view and understand how schools change as teachers add to their pedagogical knowledge during a school improvement process (Scribner et al., 1999).

Organizational learning is more dynamic and complex than individual learning. Issues of motivation and reward, which are integral parts of individual learning, become more complicated at the organizational level. An organization learns through individuals and is ultimately affected by individual learning. Simultaneously, organizations have shared assumptions that protect and perpetuate the status quo. This quality prevents individuals from presenting challenges or asking questions, thus hindering learning from taking place (Kim, 1993).

A part of this individual learning, to which Kim (1993) refers, is rooted in reflection. In order to improve their practice and ultimately improve organizational

functioning, teachers need to spend time thinking about the results of their actions. They must reflect upon the success of some of their efforts and the failure of others. Not only do teachers need to reflect after the fact, but they need to bring this reflection to a problem at hand (Schon, 1998).

The issues that teachers encounter in their day to day practice are at times uncertain, unique, and conflicting. These problems cannot be solved by relying on technical or procedural knowledge. These ambiguous zones within the teaching practice are, however, the most central to a teacher's professional work (Schon, 1998).

Educational practice must be informed by this critical reflection. Most experienced teachers have a wealth of knowledge pertaining to their craft, but that knowledge does not come from their classroom experiences alone. This type of critical reflection is more complex than reflection alone; it is reflection that ties practice and theory together (Schon, 1998).

It is important to mention here that there are different types of organizational learning. Some tend to maintain stability and status quo, while some result in ongoing inquiry and elemental change. Learning that results in a reactive or adaptive change falls into the status quo category. Members of the organization respond to changes in their work environment by detecting problems that can be fixed and undertaking small changes while maintaining practices that have traditionally been in place. In contrast, learning that results in creating new insight to change behavior and routinely question values, guide organizations to a more critical type of learning. Such inquiry develops a sense of the nature of conflict, its causes and consequences, resulting in an organization that



governs action (Achinstein, 2002). This topic will be discussed in greater length in the literature review.

When people are exposed to new experiences (such as a change in an organizational structure), they begin to experience a paradigm shift, assuming new practices and approaches. This is the crux of organizational learning theory. If organizational changes need to be made within a school system, the ways in which people think and interact must be studied first. If this step is omitted, then new organizational structures will fade and the organization will revert, over time, to the way in which it operated before (Senge, 1994). Many times, trendy new topics are introduced because they involve the latest “buzzword” in education and activities are scheduled because “that’s the thing to do.” Links to previous initiatives are rarely shown; therefore the attitude of “this too shall pass” creeps in. This perception of “this too shall pass” can be extremely detrimental to organizational learning (Mann, 1998).

Schools are typically viewed as rational institutions whose lines of communication and command structures follow a linear pattern. This bureaucratic (“top-down”) structure shapes how schools are understood and how the work that happens within schools is undertaken. Contemporary school reform efforts, however, propose a shift from the dominant view of the bureaucracy to an image of schools as communities (Huffman & Jacobson, 2010).

This theoretical change, then, necessitates the examination of the term ‘community.’ In practical terms, community and bureaucracy lie at opposite ends of a continuum. A sense of kinship and commonality replaces the hierarchical, linear structure that is characteristic of bureaucratic organizations. Shared identity, trust,

mutual dependence, and support are essential elements in the discussion of community. Although community is an abstract concept, it is this concept that dominates current school reform literature. A school culture that promotes expert inquiry, risk taking among teachers, and shared leadership provides an excellent framework for the development of a professional learning community (Scribner et al., 1999).

Like students, teachers need the benefit of learning by doing (DuFour et al., 2006). Collaboration with other teachers, examination of student work, critical reflection, and the sharing of ideas allow teachers to make a leap in their practice from theory to application. Teacher learning requires settings that foster inquiry and reflection, allowing time for questions and concerns. If sustained change in teacher practice is a desired outcome, then a sustained investment in the alteration of organizational structures is also needed so that both teachers and organizations will grow and change over time (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995).

#### 1.4 Personal Perspective

I began teaching in the mid-1980's as a high school English teacher. Once per week, our department would meet to plan and discuss instruction. Meetings that took place early and late in the school year focused on supplemental text selection and instructional pacing. The meetings that took place in the middle months of the year involved detailed instructional planning as well as addressing any difficulties that teachers were encountering with teaching the course material. This model drove my impression of instructional planning for the next two decades; I believed that this model was practiced by much of the teaching population. My beliefs were affirmed through my

experiences while working at two elementary schools. The conversations at grade level meetings involved instructional pacing and strategies.

I began working at a third elementary school (my current school) as an assistant principal in August, 2006. Upon arriving at the school, I discovered that instructional, grade-level planning was not a firm expectation. Some grade levels met routinely and some (particularly the teachers in grades three through five) were scheduled to meet weekly, but if other commitments arose for the teachers, they often did not participate in planning meetings. Instruction at this school appeared to be driven by the county pacing guide; teachers paced their lessons similarly, but rarely met to share instructional strategies or the effects of the strategies on student learning.

I first heard the term “professional learning communities” at a conference in March 2006, which was sponsored by the North Carolina Reading Association. A team of teachers from a school in Guilford County spoke about how their school used the PLC model to support new teachers in their building. The model this school followed was an after school meeting that was open to interested people at the beginning of the year, but closed to staff members after a certain point in the year. The PLC in this building offered help to new teachers in the way of classroom management and instructional strategies. This PLC’s rationale for closing the meeting to new staff members after a certain point in the year was driven by their need to protect the trust factor that initial team members developed within their group, which they did not want disrupted by new members.

The PLC’s discussion model presented by the group followed strict guidelines. If a teacher came with a problem to discuss, the other members of the group were expected to listen without judgment and then offer a possible solution to the problem. The

expectation for the teacher who presented the problem was to try at least one shared solution for three weeks and then report back to the group on the strategy results. While I was intrigued by this model, I had concerns regarding the exclusivity with which it operated within the school building because the term “community” appeared to be at odds with this school’s exclusionary model.

In the fall of 2006, I had the opportunity to visit another elementary school. Our group was visiting the school to learn more about the school’s second language program, but while I was there, I had the chance to review the school’s master schedule that offered each grade level a planning period within the school day. It was this school visit and its innovative master schedule that launched my formal interest in professional learning communities.

In my previous experiences as a teacher and school administrator, teachers came together to talk about lesson planning, but neither experience involved discussions of the student learning. It was not until I attended a seminar sponsored by Rick and Rebecca DuFour in December 2007 that the student learning piece began to take shape for me. The DuFour’s focus on student learning and embedded professional development for teachers generated the research questions that drove this project. I firmly believe that teacher participation in a Professional Learning Community shapes their beliefs in some way. My goal was to shed insight into teachers’ beliefs and perceptions on this specific topic so that other school administrators may have a better understanding of how teachers are impacted by administrative decisions regarding the implementation of Professional Learning Communities.

### 1.5 Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to learn from teacher participants about the dynamics that impact teachers participating in Professional Learning Communities in elementary schools. This study also seeks to gain a better understanding of the factors that contribute to the success of PLC's in these schools. I believe that teachers have specific perceptions about Professional Learning Communities and their implementation within schools that the research has not fully explored. My goal was to examine, what these perceptions were and also, the manner in which teachers believed their participation in a PLC has impacted their professional growth and classroom instruction. Therefore, the research questions that drove this study were:

1. What perceptions do teachers who participate in Professional Learning Communities have regarding the PLC model? In particular, what do they identify as factors that contribute to the success of PLC's and factors that hinder their success?
2. What do teachers who participate in Professional Learning Communities say about changes in their classroom instruction?

From personal experience as a school administrator, I have seen instruction at the elementary school level undergo substantial changes recently. I studied how these changes manifested themselves through teachers' work within the Professional Learning Community context.

### 1.6 Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study was to describe elementary school teachers' perceptions of Professional Learning Communities and how they believed participation in a PLC

impacts their professional development and classroom instruction. Much of the literature related to Professional Learning Communities focuses on the structure and the benefits of the model with respect to student learning and job embedded professional development for teachers. Few research projects, however, that were examined for this paper gave voice to teachers regarding any transitions they underwent when exposed to job-embedded professional development in the form of Professional Learning Communities. By conducting several in-depth interviews with teachers who worked in a school district that has implemented Professional Learning Communities, I hoped to provide an in-depth understanding of which factors within Professional Learning Communities shape teachers' pedagogical practices and influence their classroom practices.

#### Summary

This study examined teachers' perceptions of the Professional Learning Community model and its perceived impact on their classroom instruction at the elementary school level. Chapter One introduced the historical and current concepts of the Professional Learning Community and established a theoretical framework for the study. The research questions developed to guide the study and the study's significance were also presented, along with my personal interest in the topic. Chapter Two synthesizes the literature related to this study and further develops the overriding theoretical framework.

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### Organization of the Literature Review

As mentioned in Chapter One, when people are exposed to new experiences (such as a change in an organizational structure), they begin to experience a paradigm shift, assuming new practices and approaches. This is the nature of individual learning. In order to better understand how organizations learn and develop, one must first understand the context of learning within the workplace. Therefore, the review of the literature for this project will discuss the parameters of workplace learning initially. Subsequently, adult learning and career stage learning will be explored in order to better understand the differences between how adults learn at various stages in their careers. Finally, professional development, and how this concept relates to Professional Learning Communities will be discussed in order to show the relationship between how and what individuals learn within the context of a Professional Learning Community and then, how that learning develops and changes an organization.

The phrase “professional learning community” is not a recently coined term. While conducting a search of the literature, I found the term was used in journals and articles as early as 1990; however the manner in which the term is used has changed in the past twenty years. As I explore individual learning contexts, it will also be important to understand how the term Professional Learning Community has changed over the past two decades. This literature review will also examine the manner in which the term has

changed over time as well as specific stages of development that Professional Learning Communities pass through in order to illustrate define Professional Learning Communities function in schools as well as how the professional learning community model operates in an age of accountability. Understanding current literature on professional learning communities is essential to this study; once current research on the topic is better understood, one will be able to discern the link between current research and the way in which this study will add to the current body of research on professional learning communities in educational settings.

## 2.1 Workplace Learning

In the text, *The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge begins his chapter on team learning with an interview that was conducted with Bill Russell, former player for the Boston Celtics. According to Russell, the team's performance not only depended upon individual excellence but also how well the group of individuals worked together (Senge, 1994). In the field of education, teachers are traditionally seen as isolated workers; once the classroom door shuts, the teacher becomes responsible for delivering information to a specific group of students. New research, however, shows that the more effective teachers are those who work on teams with other teachers in order to meet the needs of their students.

As mentioned in the introduction, the concept of "a learning organization" emerged in research literature; researchers attempted to discern the relationship between learning at the individual level and the learning that took place within the collective group. Etienne Wenger (1998) focused on workplace learning that that involved the ongoing refinement of practice and knowledge that took place in a specific community.



Two seminal studies were reviewed in order to provide a more accurate framework for workplace learning – a study completed by Davis and Samura (2001) and a comparative study conducted by Achinstein (2002). The literature that was reviewed for this section of the proposal is divided into two categories related to workplace learning in order to provide a contrast between the two models of workplace learning. The first category is the learning network perspective which focuses on individual learning driven by daily tasks and challenges; this type of learning demonstrates itself in the day to day operations within an organization (Poell et al., 2009). Davis and Samura's study involving the MacKenzie school is an example of a learning network perspective. Achinstein's study contrasts workplace learning in two separate schools. Her qualitative study details how these schools manage organizational change and conflict as well as what the teachers in these schools learn throughout the process.

## 2.2 Learning Network Perspective

In their study, Davis and Sumara detailed how one school, that began as a disjointed group of displaced teachers became, over the course of a year, a learning system whose members adapted collectively to their circumstances. The MacKenzie School began its school year with a new staff due to some personnel changes made by the local school board. Davis, Sumara, and their team of researchers studied the teachers throughout the year to see what changes took place in the staff with regard to adult learning. Through their study, Davis et al. wanted to know: "What was learned? How was it learned? Who (or what) learned?" (Davis & Sumara, 2001).

What these researchers discovered was that as the year progressed, teachers, who at the beginning of the year made very individualized statements about their needs and

wants, began to change their pattern of discourse to reflect a collective identity. At the MacKenzie School, the teachers' organization was the result of a series of interactions. Leaders emerged on the basis of their strengths and gradually, a learning system emerged in the workplace. The authors likened this transformation to the stock market or a change in an ecosystem where the system adapts itself to changing circumstances (Davis & Sumara, 2001). When the shift from the individual to the collective took place, the organization resembled a team rather than a group of individuals.

This learning network perspective is very similar to the description of Washington Middle School that Achinstein provides in her study. A major difference between the MacKenzie School and Washington Middle, however, was the fact that the group of teachers at the MacKenzie school was a newly formed faculty. The Washington Middle School faculty had a core group of teachers who had worked together for many years.

Over time, the Washington Middle School teachers had developed a collective view that schooling should promote citizenship for students and offer them opportunities for advancement based on their individual ability. The teachers at this school were a tightly knit group who discouraged conflict by relegating it to private discussions or transferring it to the school principal for arbitration. There was a learning system present at Washington Middle School, but it reflected a system that favored unity within the school and opposed those (including students and faculty) who were a threat to the status quo. By maintaining this approach to conflict, the public perception of unanimity among the staff was maintained (Achinstein, 2002). Washington Middle School appears to be what the MacKenzie school could become over time. After the initial phase of

community development takes place, the school could become a community of like-minded professionals who work to maintain that community and the status quo.

### 2.3 Critical Pragmatist Perspective

Peter Senge's work is an example of the critical pragmatist perspective. Senge's work emphasizes organizational and communicative learning espoused by critical pragmatists and results of this approach allow liberating structures to occur in the workplace (Poell et al., 2009). Peter Senge has also focused on systems theory in his research regarding workplace learning; his discussion on workplace learning centers specifically on teams in the workplace and how highly effective teams function. Achinstein's description of Chavez Middle School exemplifies this critical pragmatist perspective on school communities.

In his chapter on team learning, Senge explored the differences between dialogue and discussion in the workplace – dialogue was defined as “the free and creative exploration of complex issues” and discussion was defined as different views being presented and defended (Senge, 1994). He examined the role that each of these types of conversation played within team dynamics and how a team's inability to distinguish between the two types of conversation impeded a team's progress toward a specific goal.

Finely tuned teams, according to Senge, develop synergy, which is illustrated by a shared vision and commonality of purpose. These teams confront difficult issues because they have developed a relationship that allows them to communicate effectively with one another and not be defensive regarding what may be said during a discussion. As Bill Russell stated in the beginning of Senge's (1994) team learning chapter, “it's not

friendship; it's a different kind of team relationship" that defines a highly effective team (pg. 233).

Achinstein (2002) described this confrontation of difficult issues with respect to Chavez Middle School. Unlike Washington Middle School teachers who sought to maintain the status quo, Chavez teachers embraced conflict. Due to declining test scores, the school underwent a mandatory restructuring, which involved the hiring of 90% new staff members. Once the hiring was complete, the staff signed on to a "Consent Decree" of philosophical tenets which emphasized teacher responsibility for student success and equitable education. The Chavez faculty maintained a focus on collective inquiry, critical reflection, teacher teaming, inter-dependent work, and consensus-based decision making, school-wide standards, high expectations for all students, and a commitment to respecting cultural diversity. While this approach supported open dialogue and discussion between staff members, the conflicts alienated new staff members who were not able to deal effectively with the tense environment. The Chavez environment, however, supported organizational change.

The description of the Learning Network Perspective and the Critical Pragmatist Perspective in workplace learning is not an attempt to value one approach over the other. Whether one assumes a learning network or critical pragmatist perspective, it is essential that this type of collaborative work is present in a school in order for teachers to meet the needs of all their students and to continue as learners themselves. Each perspective had its role in fostering the work of the school community. The work that has been done regarding Professional Learning Communities (PLC's) builds upon learning networks theory because when teachers are part of a PLC, individual learning is driven by daily

tasks and challenges. Simultaneously, the professional learning community embodies the organizational and communicative learning that critical pragmatists see as essential in learning organizations.

#### 2.4 Learning Within the Professional Learning Community

In a PLC, educators are committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students that they serve. PLC's operate under the assumption that the key to this improved learning for students is continuous, job embedded learning for educators (DuFour, 2004).

In a Professional Learning Community, the focus shifts from teaching to learning; it is not a matter of whether the teacher taught the material but whether the students learned what they were taught. Teacher planning is guided by four questions: What will be taught? How will I know if the students have learned what I have taught? What will I do for the students who did not learn the concept? What will I do for the students who already know the concept? (DuFour, 2004). These four questions are very similar to those posed by Davis and Samura (2001) in their study of the Mackenzie school as the learning organization.

Teachers in these Professional Learning Communities hold each other accountable for their team's results. Often, when one thinks of a team, one thinks of a group of people who come together for a common purpose. The accountability piece, however, places a different focus on a team's function. This team becomes more like the team that Bill Russell describes at the opening of Senge's chapter on team learning – “a

team of specialists, and like a team of specialists in any field, our performance depended both on individual excellence and on how well we worked together” (Senge, 1994).

PLC’s offer an example of job embedded learning, which is the contextual and situational understanding that is a product of workplace experience and learning (Hager, 1999). When teachers operate as a professional learning community, they have the ability to reshape classroom instruction. Learning in this context becomes job-embedded because teachers are provided with opportunities to learn from each other.

Once the PLC structure is in place within a school, the accountability piece emerges from within the team and not from a supervisory structure that imposes mandates in a top-down fashion. Learning goals are set by the team, and they are driven by student needs. Professional Learning Communities embody what Fenwick calls “the community view,” which avoids critical analysis of structures and politics. In the community view, power is viewed as a benevolent energy, exercised through the mobilizing of individuals around a shared vision, mutual engagement and a sense of belonging (Fenwick, 2008).

This “benevolent energy” does not however evolve on a team without conflict. Active engagement or dialogue involving differences is an essential dimension of teacher communities. Communities are often outcomes of conflict because they require substantial change in school norms and practices. Communities challenge existing norms of privacy, independence, autonomy, and power groups within schools (Achinstein, 2002).

In his article on workplace learning, Hager (1999) asks, “Is learning for work or work for learning?” The crux of the argument in this paper is that if there is a

Professional Learning Community within a school building, it is not necessary to choose between these questions. Knowledge that teachers learn from one another within the context of their work informs their practice and ultimately improves the quality of their teaching and student outcomes. Since learning becomes job embedded in this context, the workplace becomes the center of learning as well. As a result, both of Hager's questions may be answered within the context of the Professional Learning Community. Individuals learned within the context of their day to day activities with the objects and purposes that were embedded in their jobs (Fenwick, 2008; Trilling & Fadel, 2009).

### 2.5 Adult Learning

Teachers learn from one another as they are immersed in the professional learning community model; the nature of that learning is different for individuals depending upon age and/or career stage (Trotter, 2006). In order to understand how teachers learn from one another, one must first understand the concept of adult learning and how age impacts learning styles.

The best known theory of adult learning, andragogy, was introduced by Malcolm Knowles in a research article in 1968 (Merriam et al., 2007). Andragogy focuses on the adult learner and his/her life circumstance, and is based on a number of understandings about the adult learner. Knowles originally advanced the following four assumptions:

1. As a person matures, his or her self-concept moves from that of a dependent personality to one of a self-directed human being.
2. An adult accumulates a growing cache of experience which is a valuable resource for learning.

3. The readiness of an adult to learn is closely tied to the developmental tasks of that person's social role.
4. There is a change in time perspective as people mature from future application of knowledge to closeness of application. Therefore, an adult is more problem-centered than subject-centered in learning (Knowles, 1980)

In later works, Knowles added fifth and sixth assumptions:

5. The most potent motivations for adult learning are internal rather than external.
6. Adults need to know why they need to learn something. (Knowles et al., 1984).

From each of these assumptions, Knowles developed numerous implications for the design, implementation, and evaluation of adult learning activities. For example, as adults mature, they become more independent and self-directing, thus participating in the diagnosis of their own learning needs. Therefore, adult learning environments should embody that "adulthood" both physically and socially; adult classrooms should enable adults to feel accepted, respected, and supported. A classroom climate of joint inquiry should also be present (Merriam et al., 2007). Self-directedness in one's learning is an essential part of adult life.

For the adult learner, the impetus for learning begins with a motivation to learn something new. Adults, however, are not one dimensional in their approaches to learning, and adults engage in learning for more than one reason. Adults also draw from a wide variety of experiences and perspectives that shape their learning (Cambiano et al., 2001).



In the context of the Professional Learning Community, this motivation may be internal (teacher-driven) or external (policy or administration-driven). Once the motivation to learn is activated, adult learners must assume control over the learning situation so they can achieve goals and objectives. Adult learners must also self-monitor their learning during a process, using a variety of metacognitive strategies to construct meaning from their experiences (Merriam et al., 2007). In the PLC context, the self-monitoring phase would most typically occur in the embedded professional development sessions with colleagues. As mentioned earlier, during embedded professional development sessions, educators work collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students that they serve (DuFour, 2004). Therefore, the model of self-directed learning is fulfilled within the PLC framework of ongoing inquiry.

Adult learning frames the work of the Professional Learning Community; however, there is a broad range of ages within schools. Teachers, during different stages in their careers, learn differently, and in order for the Professional Learning Community to be successful, these different learning styles must be acknowledged and embraced by the PLC.

Teachers are not defined just by their age alone; they are also defined by their career stage. Age and career stage all shape teachers' experiences and reactions to educational change (Hargreaves, 2005). Therefore, the career stages of the participants in this study are a valuable piece of information in answering this project's research questions regarding the Professional Learning Community model.

## 2.6 Career Stage Learning

Teachers function as adults, individuals, and members of professional communities. They range in ages from early 20's to late 60's. Much like the children they teach, educators pass through different developmental states in their careers from trying on new roles in early adulthood to the acceptance of one's career longevity in mid and late adulthood. These career stages are not fixed; rather they are representative of life patterns. Each stage has its tasks and challenges. Some stages represent periods of balance and stability, while others are marked by crisis, disequilibrium and conflicting adult roles (Lieberman & Miller, 2002).

In a review of PLC research conducted in 2008, Vescio et al. examined 11 studies on the impact of Professional Learning Communities on teaching practice and student learning. Some of the studies included in the review discussed teacher perceptions on the effects of PLC's and others explored the PLC's impact on teaching and student learning. None of the studies used age and career stage learning as a framework to show which teachers are most impacted (either positively or negatively) by PLC implementations (Vescio et al., 2008).

In an earlier study, Snow-Gerono, interviewed veteran teachers in a professional development school to ascertain what cultural elements are necessary in a Professional Learning Community for inquiry to thrive. This study omitted the viewpoints of the newer teachers who may have offered a different perspective on the PLC model (Snow-Gerono, 2005).

There are several career stage learning models discussed in the literature on teacher development. For the purposes of this paper, however, David Berliner's five

stage model of pedagogical expertise (1986) broadly frames the discussion. Pedagogical development will also be linked to adult development in order to show how career stages merge with outside life influences and impact teachers' professional development.

The first stage in Berliner's model is the Novice stage. During this time, first year teachers are learning about commonplace tasks related to teaching. Only a minimal skill level is expected during this phase. This time has also been called the Exploration phase, and is marked by high motivation and commitment to teaching. Professional learning activities during this phase of teaching have a positive impact on beginning teachers' morale (Day & Gu, 2007). During this stage, the beginning teacher focuses on survival. Typically, these beginning teachers are young adults who are trying to establish their basic confidence and competence as professionals (Hargreaves, 2005). They strive for acceptance by peers, students, and supervisors in an attempt to achieve a certain level of comfort in handling everyday issues (Maskit, 2011). Since these teachers have no habits or practices to abandon, they most readily implement necessary changes to their practice. They are part of that adaptable generation, working in a sometimes uncertain and insecure occupational environment (Hargreaves, 2005).

The second phase in Berliner's model is the Advanced Beginner phase and corresponds to second and third year teachers. Teachers in this stage are developing strategic knowledge related to classroom practices and the school context is beginning to influence their behaviors. These "advanced beginners" may still have difficulty know when to break or follow rules and established procedures. Teachers in this stage may still not have a sense of what is most important (Levin, 2003). There is much overlap between the beginning and advanced beginner stages with regard to teacher behavior. It

is not until the third year of teaching is complete that the teacher begins a phase of stabilization in his/her career.

This stabilization/competent phase typically occurs between years three and seven in a teaching career. Characteristics within this include a defined commitment to teaching and greater comfort with one's self-concept as a teacher. Teachers in this phase are no longer beginners; therefore administrators' expectation levels regarding their capabilities increase during this period (McCormick & Barnett, 2007). Teachers in this career phase are able to make conscious choices about their pedagogy, set priorities, and make plans based on rational goals. Stabilized teachers are able to distinguish between what is important and what is not important in their classrooms. They tend to feel in control of classroom events and the curriculum (Levin, 2003). During this stabilization phase, teachers seek out new materials, methods, and strategies. They are receptive to new ideas and often regard their work as challenging; they consciously hone their pedagogical skills (Maskit, 2011).

The next career stage for teachers is the Proficient period. Proficient teachers recognize similarities in situations within their classrooms and use strategies to solve problems that they have used before. These teachers are analytical and deliberate in their decision making (Levin, 2003). Diversification and change are part of this phase as well; having mastered their craft, proficient teachers look for ways to experiment with new techniques in their classrooms (Maskit, 2011; McCormick & Barnett, 2007). This phase may last anywhere from eight to fifteen years; during this career phase, teachers' focus often becomes divided by life demands as well. Marriage, children, and community responsibilities, as well as their job demands, occupy their time. These additional

responsibilities may challenge teachers' capacities to manage their roles as teachers (Day & Gu, 2007).

In the stabilization and proficient phases, promotion and additional responsibility begin to play a significant role in teachers' motivation, commitment, and sense of effectiveness. Support from colleagues, school/departmental leadership, and pupils continue to be important. Mentoring younger teachers may also sustain a teacher's professional development when he/she is in these career phases (Margolis, 2008). Professional activities that focus on building a professional identity are also important to teachers in these career phases as well (Day & Gu, 2007).

The final stage in a teacher's career is called the Expert phase. These teachers are fluid and flexible in their thoughts and actions; they have achieved mastery and flow of their pedagogical practices. Expert teachers are quick to diagnose problems in students and in their classrooms and act quickly to solve the issue (Levin, 2003). Although expert teachers have reached the pinnacle in their teaching skills, according to the Berliner model, their career path in this phase may assume four separate trajectories.

Some teachers in this phase continue to experience renewal and are able to find opportunities to challenge themselves and continue to learn. These are the "positive focusers," who choose to spend their remaining years in the profession improving their craft within their classroom. These teachers are not embittered; they merely choose to focus their waning energy on making their classroom the best that it can be (Hargreaves, 2005). These teachers are not strong collaborators and may have difficulty assimilating into the PLC model.

Many other teachers, however, experience declines in their energy level and their abilities to manage tensions between their personal and professional lives (Day & Gu, 2007). Decreased motivation, commitment, and perceived effectiveness are dominant emotions for teachers during this career phase. It is during this stage that teachers may express resentment over new initiatives; their identities during this phase are constantly challenged by their perceived need to adjust (Day & Gu, 2007; Hargreaves, 2005). Teachers in this stage of development are typically the “negative focusers,” who can be the bane of an administrator’s existence.

Negative focusers are highly resistant to change. During the course of their career, these teachers have typically pursued a more restricted version of professionalism, one that benefits their interests rather than the students. As these teachers age and gain more influence within a school, they facilitate easier schedules for themselves with easier students, and also find ways to undermine change and improvement efforts. This group has typically committed themselves to two or three large scale reform issues, only to be let down when the focus shifted, resources were withdrawn, or leadership changed. For this group, the magic has left their teaching and they are coasting to retirement (Hargreaves, 2005; Levin, 2003; Maskit, 2011).

## 2.7 Professional Development

The topic of workplace learning is highly related to teacher professional development, and much research has been done on this topic. In order to better understand how Professional Learning Communities contribute to a teacher’s professional development, one must first understand what constitutes effective professional development, how that effectiveness is embodied within the Professional

Learning Community model and finally how this type of professional learning translates itself into classroom practice.

Recent literature on professional development emphasizes the importance of changing the form of professional development because traditional approaches are perceived as less effective than reform approaches. Traditional formats (the one-day, six-hour workshop) are criticized for not providing teachers with the time, activities, and content necessary for increasing their content or pedagogical knowledge. Reform approaches, however, appear to provide the sustained learning environment that is necessary for improving classroom practice (Birman et al., 2000). For the purposes of this paper, reform approaches to professional development may be described as sustained professional development that is intended to improve a teacher's content and/or pedagogical knowledge over time (Birman et al., 2000; Fogarty & Pete, 2010; Guskey, 1995).

## 2.8 Models of Effective Professional Development

As mentioned earlier, teacher learning requires settings that foster inquiry, allowing time for questions and concerns (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). In a study of more than 1000 teachers, Birman et al. (2000) identified three structural features of effective professional development. The first structure was form; the second was duration, and the third structure was participation.

With respect to form, Birman et al. (2000) described effective forms of professional development as those that assumed a specific structure – study group, teacher network, mentoring relationship, committee, task force, internship or research project. The duration of the activity related to how many hours the participants spent in

the activity and over what span of time the activity took place. Finally, with respect to participation, effectiveness was determined by the manner in which teachers were grouped for the professional development – same school, department, grade level, or across school settings.

In addition to structural features, Birman et al. identified three core features that also described effective professional development: content focus, active learning, and coherence. Content focus related to the degree that the professional development activity focused on improving teachers' content knowledge. The second core feature, active learning, was associated with the opportunities that teachers had to actively engage in meaningful analysis of teaching and learning. These opportunities were characterized by the amount of time devoted to reviewing student work or receiving feedback on their teaching. Finally, the third core feature was coherence, which gauged if the professional activity encouraged continued professional dialogue between teachers and also incorporated experiences that were tied to teacher learning goals and state standards and assessments.

These structures and features detailed in the study conducted by Birman et al. are very similar to seven learning protocols that Fogarty and Pete detail in an article from 2010 that describes effective professional learning. While the Birman study primarily relied on survey and case study data to define the effectiveness of professional development, Fogarty and Pete ground their definition of high quality professional development in adult learning theory.

The first protocol described by Fogarty and Pete was Sustained Professional Learning, which relates to the structure of duration that Birman et al. described and is



also echoed by Guskey and Yoon (2009) in an article on effective professional development. Adult learners are self-directed and need options for learning and support during the practice phases of learning as well. When these supports are provided, the adults involved will ultimately take charge of their own learning paths. This sustained support is inherent in the Professional Learning Community model because the model promotes team meetings, collaborative work sessions, and professional dialogue that continue over time (Fogarty & Pete, 2010; Guskey & Yoon, 2009).

The second tenet of effective professional development, as described by Fogarty and Pete, is job-embedded learning that affords teachers help when it is needed. This aspect of effective professional development is described by Birman et al. as structure. Curry (2008), Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995), and Guskey (1995) are four researchers who also point to the benefits of job embedded learning for teachers because this type of learning occurs in a natural environment that lends itself to immediacy and consistency.

According to Knowles et al. (1998), adult learners want to work with colleagues. This fact was echoed in Birman et al.'s description of participation as well as the work of DuFour (2004). According to Fogarty and Pete (2010), the implications for professional development through collegial, professional conversations are deep. In order to foster these types of professional discussions, time must be allotted to teachers. This protected time may occur in the form of regular team meetings, vertical teaming, or sustained professional development that involves teams of teachers rather than individuals.

The fourth tenet of effective professional development is characterized by interactivity (Fogarty & Pete, 2010), which is also described in the Birman et al. study as

participation. Knowles et al. (1998) portray this type of learning as non-theoretical and non-hypothetical. In practical terms, this type of learning may be described as “hands-on,” and it is very much valued by adult learners. Professional development that is continual, application-oriented, and interactive results in the participants’ ownership over the learning and new practices. Other critical components to this interactivity are roles and responsibilities for the participants. Internal leadership, clearly articulated expectations, and full participation of all group members are also essential elements of effective interactivity in professional development (Fogarty & Pete, 2010).

Fogarty and Pete’s fifth protocol for effective professional development – differentiated - is detailed in the Birman article, and it is also aligned with Knowles’ tenets of adult learning that relate to self-directedness. In order for professional development to be effective, it must be differentiated through its delivery. Book studies, action research, data analysis, collaborative planning, and reflective questioning are just some of the forms that differentiated professional development may assume. Birman et al. referred to this quality as form.

Adult learners are also pragmatic; they need to know that what they are learning is going to help them do their job (Fogarty & Pete, 2010). According to Guskey (2000), professional learning initiatives are successful when teachers are instructed, encouraged, supported and held accountable for the new practices that are being implemented. Teachers come to believe that the change in practice is beneficial when they realize that the change helps them do their job more effectively. This practicality may be one of the most difficult tenets of highly effective professional development to implement because what is relevant and practical to one individual may not be to another. One way to

navigate through this difficulty is to allow time during each professional development session for teachers to make connections to their everyday work (Fogarty & Pete, 2006).

Finally, because adult learners are goal-oriented, professional learning opportunities must be data driven. When student learning is successfully influenced, the proof will be in the student data or outcomes. Teachers will be more likely to embrace changes in their practice when they see results in their classrooms (Fogarty & Pete, 2010).

Tenets four through seven, as described by Fogarty and Pete, describe elements that are inherent to effective Professional Learning Communities and also support effective adult learning practices. The final tenet—data driven professional development—has become more prevalent since 2002, when NCLB was passed. As mentioned earlier, there are higher expectations for teachers to rethink their own practice, focus on student outcomes, and teach in ways that they have never taught before (Sunderman & Orfield, 2006). By examining the historical perspective of the term Professional Learning Community, one will better understand how changes in the community philosophy have been shaped by changes in the level of teacher accountability.

### 2.9 Professional Learning Communities—Historical Perspective

As mentioned in this paper's introduction, in the early 1990's the concept of a learning organization began to emerge articulating the relationship between the "reflecting individual" and the "active collective" in the learning process. From the 1990's until the present, however, the concept of the Professional Learning Community has undergone a change. In the early 1990's, the literature emphasized the term "professional communities;" it is significant that in more recent literature, the word

“learning” appears between professional and community because the insertion signifies a shift in the emphasis away from a focus on a process to an objective that is driven by adult and student learning (Stoll & Lewis, 2007).

A comprehensive review of the literature written on Professional Learning Communities is too large to include in a literature review for this dissertation. Therefore, I have selected representative pieces of literature from the 1990’s through the early 2000’s which illustrate the shift in focus that literature on Professional Learning Communities has experienced during the era of high stakes accountability and school reform.

For example, Seely-Brown and Duguid (1991), in an article on organizational learning and communities of practice, analyzed how the concepts of work, community, and innovation intersect. These authors opined that if organizations viewed these three qualities as symbiotic rather than isolated elements, organizations would be able to improve productivity. This particular article is highly theoretical in nature and provides few practical steps that organizations can take in order to develop as a professional community.

Sergiovanni (1994), however, in *Building Communities in Schools*, details steps that schools can take in order to become communities. His explanation of how schools become communities is an example of the process text that dominated the early literature on Professional Learning Communities. According to Sergiovanni, schools can become purposeful communities if “members make a commitment to the continuous development of their expertise and to the ideals of professional virtue.” Collective inquiry dominates the professional community in Sergiovanni’s literature. While improved student learning

is mentioned as an outcome of the professional community in this work, it is not the main purpose of the learning community.

In 1995, however, when Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin wrote about the Professional Development School model, they equated the learning community model with improved student performance. Their article, “Policies that Support Professional Development in an Era of Reform,” uses the collective inquiry tenets from Sergiovanni and introduces specific school processes that support professional communities and, as a result, improve student achievement. According to Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995), teachers need blocks of time to plan collaboratively, share what they know, discuss what they want to learn, and then have time to reflect on the effectiveness of what they teach. The role of the teacher is that of a researcher, according to Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin. This teacher role is very different from the worker role assigned in the Brown/Duguid article and the virtuous professional of which Sergiovanni writes.

By 2002, the role of government in educational policy more prominently entered the literature on Professional Learning Communities. Fullan (2000) discussed the need for teachers to participate in professional learning communities in order to become “experts on the external standards that are now inside the school.” “They must move toward the danger by entering the fray and by participating in the debate about the uses and misuses of achievement results” (pg. 4). In Fullan’s view, teachers need to be politically savvy and use this skill within a Professional Learning Community to protect the teaching craft against narrow accountability standards. This type of Professional Learning Community has the effect of building capacity in schools through collaboration

between teachers which, in turn, stimulates innovation in the teaching practice. Unlike the earlier works that discussed Professional Learning Communities in a collegial context, Fullan's work is highly politicized; he sees the roles of the Professional Learning Community as integral in counteracting the formulaic teaching that exists in the current climate of high stakes accountability.

Finally, the current definition of the professional learning community incorporates the concept of data driven instruction. Once teachers have agreed on core content within a subject, the professional learning framework includes expectations for common formative assessments and the analysis of those assessments in order to ensure that all children will master content learning objectives. Teachers are expected to analyze the data from those common formative assessments and then devise a plan to provide remediation for the students who fail to master the concepts as well as enrichment for the students who knew the concept prior to receiving formal instruction on the topic. This data analysis is directly aligned with the expectations of the No Child Left Behind Act, which demands that the learning needs of each child be met along with the expectation that each child will meet grade level standards. This type of data driven instruction represents a shift in teaching philosophy from pacing guide driven instruction that requires teachers to cover topics and then move on to be sure that all content is covered, to a more individualized style of instruction which is tailored to meet student needs (DuFour et al., 2006).

#### 2.10 Stages of Development Within Professional Learning Communities

Studying the change process that Professional Learning Communities go through is in an early stage. In one study, researchers examined the PLC progression from

initiation to implementation to institutionalism as a way of explaining the growth that schools experience as they seek to become PLC's (Stoll et al., 2006). DuFour et al. expanded upon this general continuum of PLC development to include four stages of development that they believe all groups pass through on their way to becoming full functioning PLCs (DuFour et al., 2006). These stages of development are:

- Pre-Initiation Stage
- Initiation Stage
- Developing Stage
- Sustaining Stage

In the first stage, practitioners work together, but there is no systematic coherence to their work. Teams in this stage may have informal discussions regarding students or curricular plans, but these teams lack a formal process to address student needs. The second stage (Initiation Stage), is characterized by a formal structure place that allows teachers to address student learning needs, curricular plans, expectations of each member as to how that person will participate as a team member, and timelines for work completion.

This second stage appears to be the stage in which school administration is most present. The PLC structures are provided by the school administration in terms of set goals, meeting times, and the manner in which team data will be disaggregated in order to address the needs of students who are performing below, at, or above grade level.

During the third stage (Developing Stage) of development, PLC's use the structure that has been provided to them by the school, and they begin to make adjustments to the structure based on the needs of the team and/or the students that are

served by the team. The way in which teams in the Developing Stage operate is more systematic; team members examine district and/or school initiatives and work as a team to support those initiatives as part of their work. This work may include grade level objectives that need to be met by the end of a school year. Teams in this stage are beginning to develop a sense of identity as a PLC. More than likely, teams in this stage require some assistance from school administrators regarding wants and needs, but they are also becoming more independent.

Finally, in the last stage of development (Sustaining Stage), the work of the PLC is embedded in the work of the school as a whole. PLCs in this stage are self-managing; members may receive updates and or guidance from school administrators, but the team members accomplish all of the PLC expectations independently. It is in this Sustaining Stage that the teachers' professional development is carried out at a high level. Since teachers are operating their PLC's independently, they are responsible for creating the atmosphere of inquiry within their teams that supports continual professional growth.

### Summary

As stated earlier, this study will add to the body of research on Professional Learning Communities because of the new focus that it brings to teachers' perceptions regarding the model as it is being implemented in their workplace. Regardless of age or career stage, the need for professionals to learn and grow in order to meet the needs of their students is essential. In order to better understand the research that was done for this study, one must also recognize the tenets of organizational, workplace, and adult learning. These tenets also relate to the definition of the term "professional learning community," its historical context, and the stages that these learning communities pass



through as they develop within schools. Throughout the development of the PLC concept, one element has remained constant – the need for teachers to engage in collective inquiry in order to learn from one another in order to improve their practice. The data collection methods used in this project gathered evidence regarding the implementation of the Professional Learning Community concept within a school system. By gathering and examining this evidence, I showed the extent to which teachers have embraced the PLC concept and how their practice has been impacted by this organizational model.

Chapter 2 explored the literature related to Professional Learning Communities and further developed the theoretical framework for the study. A detailed perspective of workplace learning helped frame the discussion in the context of organizational learning theory. Chapter 2 also explored a prominent theory of adult learning which extended into a discussion of career stage learning and professional development for teachers in order to show how learning at the individual level ultimately impacts organizational learning. In addition, Chapter 2 illustrated how individual (teacher) learning is impacted by the professional learning community model, how the professional learning community model changes organizations, and finally how the professional learning community model functions in the age of accountability. Finally, the literature review explored the historical context of Professional Learning Communities as well as stages of development through which Professional Learning Communities pass as they become embedded in school cultures. Each of these topics in the literature review will provide the reader with a lens through which to view the work that was done during the actual study and is discussed in the subsequent chapters of this paper.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This study examined teacher beliefs regarding the implementation of the Professional Learning Community model within a specific school system. Furthermore, the study describes how the implementation of the PLC model has impacted teachers' professional development and classroom instruction. Two questions guided this study:

1. What perceptions do teachers who participate in Professional Learning Communities have regarding the PLC model? In particular, what do they identify as factors that contribute to the success of PLC's and factors that hinder their success?
2. What do teachers who participate in Professional Learning Communities say about changes in their classroom instruction?

In order to answer these questions, I used a survey from a larger group of elementary school teachers in the district who were using PLC's as a model for their planning sessions. This survey provided information about teachers' experiences involving Professional Learning Communities in their schools. The survey provided valuable perspectives about PLC's, including demographic information, insights about the allocation of resources, teaching strategies and assessment, and some information regarding impact on teachers and students.

The survey yielded valuable useful information about PLC's in the district that was studied, but did not yield the rich, descriptive data that can provide a nuanced and more contextual understanding (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006). In order to better understand how teachers' professional growth and classroom practice has been impacted by the implementation of the Professional Learning Community model, this study primarily focused on the qualitative descriptions gleaned from answers to interview questions provided to the study participants.

Qualitative research includes an assortment of practical resources such as case studies, historical events, documents, life stories, and personal encounters that provide a descriptive picture of specific events or moments-in-time. According to Creswell (1994), qualitative research is an inquiry process that facilitates the understanding and holistic description of an individual or social phenomenon. Researchers who engage in qualitative inquiry investigate incidents in their naturally occurring contexts in order to understand or interpret their meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). This chapter details the research design: procedures used for the quantitative and qualitative methods, the participants, and the instrument.

### 3.1 Survey Data

Quantitative data was gathered through the use of an anonymous survey that was specifically designed to gain an overall perspective of teachers' current experiences involving Professional Learning Communities in their schools. The survey allowed me to capture elementary teachers' demographic data along with overall opinions regarding the Professional Learning Community implementation in Richview County Schools (pseudonym). The survey provided information that helped me shape the research

questions that this study aimed to answer in addition to the interview questions posed to each teacher.

Each survey respondent received an e-mail invitation to participate in the anonymous survey; this e-mail included an introduction, an explanation of what the project proposed to accomplish. Each invitee was informed of his/her rights as volunteer research participants and assured that their responses would be stored and treated with strict confidentiality.

The review of the literature suggests that professional development models like PLC's contribute to organizational and personal growth for teachers. Therefore, the survey was primarily used to gather baseline information on teacher demographics, the characteristics of school-based PLC's, and current information regarding teacher perceptions of the Professional Learning Community model. This information served as a lens through which the qualitative data was viewed, providing a rich description of teachers' perceptions on the implementation of the PLC model within their school system.

### 3.2 Survey Instrument

I used a software program called K-12 Insight to collect survey data. This software was purchased by the Richview School District, and has been used regularly to collect data from school employees. The survey was launched with the understanding that the responses would be completely anonymous; all electronic identifying information about the participant (email address/IP address/response date and time) were removed from the responses. The survey administrators did not know any details about participants, including whether or not an invitee participated. The anonymity disclaimer

at the bottom of the survey indicated that no electronic identifying information was visible from the survey administrator's end, and it was not shared with them at any point in the process. Survey administrators were not able to associate a particular response with a respondent. I disaggregated the data according to teacher perceptions and evaluated the results with the whole sample responses in order to draw comparisons among teachers to see what they were saying about PLC's in their schools.

Collecting this information provided me with general information and allowed me to begin to consider themes regarding how PLC's were being implemented and perceived within this specific school system. I created the survey using PLC attitude/perception questions taken from the reproducible section of the text *Learning by Doing* (DuFour et al., 2006). A similar survey was used in the Wake County (NC) Public School system in 2009 in order to obtain data related to the status of PLC implementation efforts within the district (Jackl, 2009). A copy of the survey is included in Appendix A. Questions 1 through 5 capture demographic information. Questions 6 through 9 addressed the level of support and resource allocation the teachers receive to complete work in the PLC structure. Questions 9 through 21 assessed instructional strategies and interventions that the teams put in place through their work in their PLC's. The last six questions in the survey evaluated the impact that the work in the PLC had on teacher perceptions and attitudes.

Four hundred forty-seven survey responses were returned, which was a response rate of approximately 21%. A common concern among teachers in the Richview School district was the extensive need for survey data at the end of each school year. The PLC

survey was one of at least six surveys that were deployed at the end of the 2011-2012 school year. This could have been the reason that some teachers did not respond.

Most of the teachers who responded to the survey indicated they have common planning time to meet with their PLC's. The majority of survey respondents said that their PLC met weekly for 30 to 60 minutes. Most PLC meetings lasted over 60 minutes. When asked how teachers perceived the mission and the vision of a PLC, many placed themselves in the Developing Stage. The Developing Stage indicated that members of the school team have a shared vision and also ownership in developing the school vision goals as well as the school vision. Shared core values, which tie to the school's vision, were also part of the Developing Stage. Staff members worked together to establish long- and short-term school improvement goals. A smaller numbers of teachers believed that they reached the Sustaining Stage in their PLC development, which is characterized by a team's self-directedness, advocacy, focus on improving student learning, and holding each other accountable for outcomes.

Teachers were asked about their perceptions regarding a PLC's focus on assessing results and student learning. Most placed themselves in PLC's in the Developing Stage, which review state standards and district curriculum guides. They set curricular goals for their students and then establish pacing guides. These teachers used the same assessments to gather data on their students. Then, they used the assessment results to plan classroom instruction and intervention and enrichment plans. A smaller number of the teachers rated themselves in the Sustaining Stage, where teachers work in collaborative teams to build shared knowledge. As a result of their collaboration, they

established essential learning outcomes for each curricular unit, criterion to grade assessments, and then provided additional instruction based on results.

A number of teachers rated themselves in the Sustaining Stage when asked about team members holding each other accountable for student success. The collaborative team process is viewed as a form of job embedded professional development that helps each team member become more effective in meeting the needs of students.

In short, the questions that elicited the most ratings in the Sustaining Stage were related to defining clarity regarding what students must know and be able to do. The responses suggested that certain teachers in Richview County have reached a point with the work in their PLC's that they can report that they understand the core purpose of the organization and have also clarified, in their work, clear guidelines for student success. Those in the Sustaining Stage reported shared knowledge based on collective inquiry, which results in the establishment of essential learning for each unit of instruction. Teachers know the criteria that they will use to judge student work; teachers in this stage demonstrated high levels of commitment to the curriculum, their students and teammates.

The survey also probed the quality of a team's collaboration. Teams in the Developing Stage have established norms, which are guiding principles under which these teams operate. These norms are ground-rules or practices that govern the group. When individuals on a team work through a process to create norms, they increase the chance that they will begin to operate as a collaborative team and not a group of individuals who come together frequently to discuss topics that they have in common (DuFour et al., 2006). These questions probed how a team responds to conflict and also how it decides upon criteria by which it judges student work. In order for a PLC to

function at a high level, team members must be able to confront one another honestly and objectively in order to gain consensus regarding the quality of student work and essential learning for a particular subject or course (DuFour et al., 2006). Most of the survey respondents rated themselves in the Developing Stage relating to conflict response. A smaller number rated themselves in the Sustaining Stage. These numbers suggested that some teachers within PLC's were comfortable confronting team members and managing conflict within their PLC's; while many were not, viewing positive working relationships over confrontation in order to move the team forward on initiatives.

I used this survey and its results to frame my research questions and identify potential elementary school sites and teachers to invite into this study. As mentioned previously, it also provided a valuable context about PLC's in elementary schools in the Richview County school district. In short, the survey provided me with a fuller understanding of PLC's within the district. I share a summation of the results of this survey in this chapter in the discussion of the research site.

### 3.3 Qualitative Research Design

Qualitative research searches for patterns within a phenomenon; its context is naturalistic in that the qualitative research does not create a research environment. Instead, the qualitative researcher enters an environment and exposes relationships within that environment through the use of rich description (Glesne, 2006).

Case study research also provides an in-depth analysis, involving a single bounded case or multiple cases. It is often used to answer research questions that probe how or why a phenomenon occurs or works.



The major assumptions that the case study design addresses are, first, that humans act toward things on the basis of meanings that these things have for them. Second, the meaning of these “things” is derived from the social interactions of on with others. Finally, these meanings are /modified through an interpretive process used by people in dealing with things that they encounter (Yin, 2003).

A case study research design was particularly appropriate for the purpose of this research as I sought to understand and describe how teachers’ perceptions of their work within the framework of a Professional Learning Community influence their classroom instruction and support their professional growth. This particular case study was instrumental in nature as it included in-depth interviews to provide rich discussion of the participants’ beliefs.

Specifically, the research design for this investigation was both a within case analysis of the individual informants and a cross-case study, which involved the collection from more than one case and analysis that included comparisons between the cases (Merriam, 1998). A cross-case design was appropriate for this study because this particular study design attempts to better understand teacher beliefs regarding their involvement in the Professional Learning Community model. The interviews enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of teachers’ beliefs regarding Professional Learning Community model. In this case, the advantage of the case study is that it afforded an opportunity for the findings to be authenticated through repetition, while the comparisons and contrasts between cases led to a deep understanding of the experience (Yin, 2003).

### 3.4 Research Site

This investigation was conducted with elementary school teachers who work in a mid-size school district in the southeastern region of the United States. The school district, Richview County Schools (a pseudonym), has total population of 28,465 students and an elementary population of 13,785 students in kindergarten through fifth grade. There are approximately 900 elementary school teachers in the Richview district. Twenty-eight percent of these teachers hold advance degrees, and 15% are nationally board certified. Twenty-two percent of the elementary school teachers in this district have taught between zero and three years; 37% have taught for 4-9 years and 42% have taught for 10 or more years. The district is economically, ethnically, and linguistically diverse. The population is approximately 55% White, 22% Black, 21% Hispanic, and 1% Asian. American Indian students make up slightly less than 1% of the population and less than 1% is multi-racial. Thirty-two percent of the total school system's students qualify for free or reduced lunch, and 35% of elementary school students qualify for free or reduced lunch. The district, which prides itself on setting concrete goals to become a top ten Local Education Agency (LEA) in North Carolina, is comprised of 19 elementary schools (grades K-5), seven middle schools (grades 6-8), five 9-12 high schools, and Early College High School and a Performance Learning Center high school.

The research site was chosen for several reasons. First, in August of 2010, the district launched a Professional Learning Community initiative that included a total school system meeting that was facilitated by Rick and Rebecca DuFour, who are prominent researchers in the PLC field. The DuFours returned two additional times

during the 2010-2011 school year to meet with building level Professional Learning Community leadership teams to gauge the progress of the system's PLC implementation.

Second, in the school years of 2010-2011 and 2011-2012, district accountability standards regarding the PLC implementation in schools took a prominent focus. District benchmarks for PLC implementation were provided to school principals, and the principals were given the responsibility for implementing the PLC processes within their buildings. Since the district focus for two years had been on the implementation of PLC's, research participants would be able to provide adequate information on teacher perceptions regarding the framework. Conducting research on the topic of Professional Learning Communities in this system at an elementary school seemed more likely to yield useful data about PLC implementation than in middle or secondary classrooms because the elementary master schedule lends itself naturally to collaborative planning due to the number of extra-curricular courses that are embedded in the school day.

I have been a school administrator in the Richview County School District for 10 years. This experience has both advantages and disadvantages. It provided me with a personal knowledge of the district's Professional Learning Community journey. This knowledge allowed me to quickly establish a rapport and trust with the administration and staff within the Richview district. I realized, however, that my long-term relationship with the Richview School District could have influenced my research in other ways.

Acquaintance with the staff could affect some teachers' responses. For instance, teachers may have limited the amount of detail given in the open-ended survey question or in the interviews because they assumed I had prior knowledge. Some teachers may have been reluctant to answer interview questions honestly because of my role as a

school administrator. They may have believed that their answers to interview questions could be used by their supervisors in an evaluative manner. In addition, the familiarity with the research site could have influenced my analysis. It is my belief that with careful monitoring I avoided this kind of researcher bias, and well-planned interview questions elicited detailed description from the participants. The benefits of access and cooperation from participants, I believe, lessened the effects of any potential bias within the research study; careful analysis and data triangulation moderated any effects of bias within the project.

### 3.5 Data Collection and Participants

In order to conduct the research in this district, I first gained permission from the superintendent. They were also informed that they could refuse to take part in the study if they chose to do so.

Once this information was collected from the survey participants, I analyzed the responses, cross referencing to identify specific themes and patterns. I looked specifically at teachers' perceptions of the PLC model and how they reported that the implementation of the model impacted their classroom practice. I wanted to see if the amount of support and resource allocation affected teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of a Professional Learning Community. Finally, I examined the data to determine how teachers perceived their participation in the PLC model as influencing their professional development.

Participants for the qualitative phase of this study were six teachers from different elementary schools. Each teacher constituted a case; the teachers' Professional Learning Community was the bounded system (Tellis, 1997). I contacted elementary school

principals, explaining the need to interview six teachers in order to collect responses regarding the implementation of Professional Learning Communities in the district. Interview participants were selected using a nonrandom, deliberate method, principally appropriate for qualitative research studies (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003). According to Merriam, this purposeful selection of participants allows for the type of rich information to be gathered that furthers an in-depth study of research questions and serves as one way to establish trustworthiness within the study (Glesne, 2006). I asked principals to forward my e-mail to their teachers asking if anyone was willing to participate in the interviews. I chose teachers with whom I had never worked before. I was able to gain a representation of both Title I and non-Title I schools in the county as well as varied levels of years of teaching experience.

Once interview candidates were secured, I conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant at two different times (one interview in the spring and one in the fall). A common concern among teachers in the Richview County School district is the overuse of data collection at the end of each school year. By interviewing the same teachers twice, I was able to examine the differences and similarities in their responses at different times of the year. I used the survey questions as a guide for determining the interview questions, but also incorporated more open-ended questions that were guided by the interviewees' responses. The interview questions are included in Appendix B. The interview questions used in the second interviews were driven by the responses that were gathered in the spring. The answers that the participants provided in the first interview stimulated the need for additional questions that I used when I met with these teachers in the fall.

After the recorded interviews were complete and transcribed, I used a within-case analysis, followed by cross-case analysis to examine the data. Eisenhardt (1989) describes this analysis combination as advantageous for several reasons. Within-case analysis allows the researcher to become close to each case, allowing patterns to emerge while still maintaining the distinctive identity of each case. In order to accomplish this, the interview data within each case was examined first in order to prepare an overview document of the teachers' beliefs regarding Professional Learning Communities. The transcriptions were coded to identify important statements and quotes relating to the research questions. Important quotes were also highlighted for later use. Initial codes, their sources, and their meanings were recorded in a log. The transcripts were read repeatedly to revise codes, identify emerging patterns and establish categories. The repeated reading ensured that important data was not overlooked and assuaged potential bias caused by my insider status. According to Eisenhardt (1989), following this procedure helped inform the next step, which was cross-case analysis.

During cross-case analysis, Eisenhardt (1989) recommends using multiple strategies for examining data in order to avoid drawing conclusions that are false or premature; therefore, interview transcripts across cases were studied for significant similarities and differences. Those similarities and differences were recorded and searched for patterns, categories, and concepts (Eisenhardt, 1989). Afterward, categories were examined for intergroup differences.

A cross-case analysis was conducted using data from the interviews and surveys, using a constant comparative (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) approach, which allowed data collection and analysis to be an ongoing process in which each informed the other.

Categories were connected by comparing statements and categories from one data source with those from other sources. This allowed me to gain the deep understanding needed to address each research question.

### 3.6 Trustworthiness

Several steps were planned to insure the trustworthiness of this study. First, the research design was purposefully selected to answer the research questions. Multiple data sources, both quantitative and qualitative, were used in order to provide triangulation. In addition, the selection of multiple case studies improved the external validity of the study (Merriam, 1998). A combination of within-case and cross-case analyses allowed the cases to preserve their distinctive identities while increasing the likelihood that no false or premature conclusions were drawn (Eisenhardt, 1989).

First, I examined the survey responses to look for themes. Then, the interview transcripts across cases were compared for significant similarities and differences. Those similarities and differences were logged and then examined for patterns, categories, and concepts as recommended by Eisenhardt (1989).

Member checks were employed to ensure accuracy and as an additional source of triangulation to affirm and discard my interpretation of the data. Member checks were completed by conferring with participants and allowing them to check the analysis of the interview data to see if they agreed with the interpretation of the data. Participants were asked to examine the final analysis of data and conclusions before the completion of the study (Glesne, 2006).

### 3.7 Ethical Considerations

An ethical consideration that was taken into account was the relationship between the researcher and the research participants, to ensure that all participant information remained confidential. Only those associated with the study had access to the information that was collected. In addition, pseudonyms for each teacher were employed to maintain the anonymity of the participants. All data was stored securely in my office files in both hard and soft (password protected) format. In order to assist participant's willingness to candidly respond, they were informed that all of their responses would be kept confidential.

There is always the risk of the researcher's subjectivity influencing data analysis (Glesne, 2006). I, as a researcher and school administrator, had an interest in the subject under investigation which may have constituted bias. To reduce the influence of my personal biases and subjectivity, I participated in ongoing reflection and data analysis. Additionally, I consulted with members of the dissertation committee, with the goal of reducing bias and subjectivity.

As mentioned in Chapter One, I firmly believe that teacher participation in a Professional Learning Community shapes their beliefs in some way. The goal of this study was to offer insight into teachers' beliefs and perceptions on this specific topic so that other school administrators may have a better understanding of how teachers are impacted by the implementation of Professional Learning Communities. The methods detailed in this chapter assisted me in answering the research questions and added, in a significant way, to the research that has been conducted thus far on this topic.



## Summary

Chapter 3 discussed this study's methodology and survey results regarding teachers' perceptions of Professional Learning Communities in Richview County. The survey probed teacher perceptions on a large scale in order to better understand the level of PLC implementation in the county and how the implementation is currently impacting classroom instruction and teachers' professional development. Based on the responses to the survey questions, most teachers saw themselves in the Developing Stage regarding PLC's.

Overall, this stage is characterized by strong supports and parameters for successful implementation. The groundwork for PLC implementation appeared to have been set in Richview County; since the school year 2011-2012 was the second year of implementation within the county, the ratings in the Developing Stage were not surprising. The ability for the county to move its teachers to the Sustaining Stage will be discussed in the final chapter of this paper when implications for practice and further research are discussed.

## CHAPTER 4: INDIVIDUAL CASE STUDY FINDINGS

Case studies were planned in order to provide the detailed description necessary for a deep understanding of the participants' perceptions regarding the implementation of Professional Learning Communities in their school buildings, and how participation in a PLC impacts their instruction. I selected teachers who had more than three years of classroom experience so they could discuss their experiences both before and after the implementation of Professional Learning Communities. I also chose teachers who worked in schools other than the one where I am currently an administrator. I did not want my position to influence the teachers' responses.

I first used within-case analysis to examine the unique qualities and patterns of each case. Once this step was completed, I conducted a cross-case analysis in order to explore significant similarities and differences across the six interviews. The results of the cross-case analyses are presented in Chapter 5. All names used are pseudonyms.

The qualitative methods used in this portion of the study were designed to answer both of the research questions; therefore, I organized the findings around the research questions. For each case study, I outlined the teachers' perceptions of the PLC model (Research Question 1), and teachers' beliefs about how the PLC model impacted their classroom instruction (Research Question 2).

#### 4.1 Case 1—Linda

Linda is a second grade teacher with 17 years of classroom experience. The first interview that I conducted with her took place in her classroom in late May of 2012. According to Linda, her PLC meets once every six days for 90 minutes. During their meeting time, Linda's PLC determines what major, curricular objectives need to be taught within a certain time period; they discuss interventions for struggling students, assessment data, and lesson pacing. Every other meeting, the school's lead math or literacy teacher participates in the PLC meeting to help the teachers plan math or readers' workshop units.

By Linda's account, the grade level's Common Formative Assessments guide the PLC sessions. Common Formative Assessments (CFA's) are a piece of the PLC process that help teachers know which students need extra help with objectives that are being taught as well as which students may need enrichment if they have already mastered an objective based on the results of the CFA. According to DuFour et al. (2006), the teachers' work within a PLC is directed by four questions:

1. What do we want our students to learn?
2. How will we know when they have learned it?
3. How will we respond when they do not learn it?
4. How will we respond if they already know it?

The teachers look at what the students should know by the end of a quarter; design assessments that capture the major learning objectives, administer the assessments to students throughout the quarter, disaggregate the results, and then design their

instruction based on the assessment results so that students are receiving the type of instruction that they need to master the objectives.

For Linda, this type of planning enables her team to be more cohesive. She believes that her team is “on the same page,” teaching the same objectives at the same or relatively similar times. Since there is more unity on the grade level, the teachers are able to have deeper discussions about objective and goals.

When asked how this type of planning differed from previous grade level sessions prior to the implementation of PLCs, Linda responded that previous planning focused on grade level events such as field trips, classroom activities, and a more general outline of what material was being covered in a classroom. She referred to a previous team’s use of a reading basal to discuss what story all the teachers were “on” to align their pacing.

Linda was asked which structure was the easiest to implement as part of the PLC process as well as the most difficult to implement. For Linda, the easiest part of the process for her to implement was the meeting time. The administration at Linda’s school allotted a 90 minute time block every six days for a grade level to meet. This structure provided Linda with what she called “sacred time.” Unless a team member was sick, Linda was able to count on touching base with all members of her grade level team every six days.

While the predictability of the meeting times was a positive aspect of the Professional Learning Community process, the time at which the meetings were held was the most difficult adjustment piece, according to Linda. The school administration required the teachers to arrive 15 minutes earlier than required on their PLC days. During the time that the teachers were meeting, their students went to Encore classes

(Art, Music, PE, etc.). When the PLC time finished, the teachers returned to their classrooms, and as Linda indicated “hit the ground running.” There was no time to “get yourself pulled together before the kids are back” in the classroom.

Once I had a better understanding of Linda’s perceptions regarding the PLC process at her school, I asked her how she believed her work with her PLC impacted her instruction. She alluded again to the fact that her she and her teammates’ instruction was now more clearly aligned with grade level standards and was consistent across classrooms. Team members have held each other responsible for bringing ideas, which brings a new freshness to her classroom instruction. Since the state is implementing the new Common Core Standards, the teachers have been able to “unpack” the curriculum standards together and discuss how they are going to teach the new curriculum.

The PLC process has helped Linda delegate more responsibility to teammates. She said that there appears to be an atmosphere of cohesiveness within this grade level that allows them to collaborate and share instructional tasks because each team member has an assigned duty for each meeting. She also said that the team has been able to effectively share responsibilities so that when PLC meetings are finished, each teacher has an instructional plan that can be used in the classroom.

I met with Linda again in September of 2012 to ask if she had reflected on any pieces of her work with her PLC in preparation for the new school year. According to Linda, she had been reflective regarding her PLC’s work and she was positive about the way the team discussed reading and writing instruction and also the team reflection regarding the effectiveness of their instruction. She thought the team’s discussion regarding “word work” and their team decision to pilot the *Words Their Way* (2000)

program showed the responsiveness of the team to do what was best for their students rather than working in isolation. By Linda's account, not all member of the team were in favor of using the new vocabulary program, but they were able to make the decision to do so and move forward as a team.

Linda's state that her role in the grade level PLC was more complicated this school year because she was assigned to teach a grade one/two combination class. Because of her schedule, she was allotted to the second grade meetings, but Linda also perceived the need to know the content of the first grade meetings so that she could pace the instruction for the first grade students in her class to that of the rest of the team. At the beginning of the school year, Linda tried to attend the first grade PLC meetings, but logistically this was not possible due to the lack of classroom coverage and the amount of time that it would take away from her classroom instruction. Linda had to be honest with the first grade teachers, telling them that her absence from meetings was not due to a lack of interest; it was due to her schedule.

Linda also indicated that this year her team needed to address the issue of shared responsibility with regard to material sharing. No new team members joined the grade level at the beginning of the school year, but the team was trying to balance its need for relationship building with team member accountability. At team planning sessions, not all members arrived with items to share, and it was putting a burden on those team members who continually came to meetings prepared with instructional items and/or strategies. Since no new members were added to the team, Linda believed that the comfort level between team members would allow for this type of discussion, but she was not looking forward to the conversation.

Linda saw her team as having a high comfort level among team members that allowed them to have deep discussions, but she worried that the high comfort level would lead to a backward progression in their team performance. I asked if Linda believed in her team's ability to hold each other accountable for the collective work of the team, and her answer reflected a complex relationship among her team members. While Linda's team was very comfortable with one another, their weakness in holding team members accountable was over a "worry about stepping on someone's toes." She saw that inability related to youth, inexperience and a fear of "making waves." "What is someone going to think of me? What are the others going to think about me now if I do that? They are not going to like me. I want them to like me, because I want the others around to like me, and then I want the admin to like me as well. So...."

I tried to probe this area with Linda by describing a scenario from another teacher interview and quoted the teacher who said that her team got along with one another in order to place the children first, but they may or may not have liked one another personally. This team decided that if they were going to be productive, they had to have those hard conversations that put personal feelings aside. Linda indicated that this scenario was taking place in her building due to what she had been hearing about other teams. In her view, "tears may need to be shed at times, but there are some issues that have to be addressed in order for us to be an effective team." Her answer moved from the impersonal to the personal, leading me to believe that there still were some unresolved issues on Linda's PLC. Her final comment cemented this perception when she stated, "and if you're the one bringing materials and prepared for a meeting, you're going to get tired of carrying the load." Her idea for addressing this problem was to

discuss with the team the topic of assigning each team member a task and have each team member responsible for bringing something specific to each meeting so that the work load was more equitable. Their team had not done this yet, but it appeared to be a viable solution to the problem the team was experiencing.

My final question to Linda involved her team's Common Formative Assessments. During the interview in May, Linda stated that much of the team's work began with the analysis of the grade level's formative assessments. I asked if there was as great an emphasis on these assessments as at the beginning of this school year. According to Linda, their team had been told that they would be giving these assessments and that the expectation was that they were to be given more frequently. At this early stage in the year, however, Linda's team had not administered their first assessment due to the fact that there were other screenings and assessments that needed to be done in order to assess student's overall reading and math levels. Since Linda was also assigned to a combination class, she wondered how she would fit into this assessment model since her classroom contained students from two grade levels. It appeared as though Linda was waiting for administrative direction but "we've just not gotten into that part yet."

Linda was clearly in the expert phase of her career. At the time of the study, she had been teaching 17 years, and until this year, had always taught the same grade level. Her experience was being tried this year with the additional responsibility of the combination class, and the conversation reflected her uncertainty regarding her skills in managing this new endeavor. She was unsure about where she fit in the organization, and the added responsibility brought frustration when other team members do not accept their responsibility to help the team function optimally.



With respect to her team, Linda's team typified the Learning Network Perspective that was mentioned in Chapter 2. As time has progressed, the teachers on Linda's team became less individualized about their needs and wants, and their pattern of discourse changed to reflect a more collective identity. This was exemplified in the discussion regarding the grade level adoption of the *Words Their Way* instructional model. At Linda's school, the teachers' organization was the result of a series of interactions. Team leaders emerged on the basis of their strengths and gradually a learning system emerged in the workplace. This transformation was very similar to a change in the stock market or a change in an ecosystem where the system adapts itself to changing circumstances (Davis & Sumara, 2001). When the shift from the individual to the collective took place, Linda's PLC more resembled a team instead of a group of individuals.

Linda's team, however, has not been able to make the shift to the Critical Pragmatist Perspective that is exemplified by synergy, a shared vision, and commonality of purpose. Teams that operate with a more critical lens confront difficult issues because they have developed a relationship that allows them to communicate effectively with one another and not be defensive regarding what may be said during a discussion. As Bill Russell stated in the beginning of Senge's (1994) team learning chapter, "it's not friendship; it's a different kind of team relationship" that defines a highly effective team (pg. 233). By Linda's account, her team had not been able to do this because there were team members who were still concerned with preserving a relationship between team members. This will be an essential step for Linda's team in order to improve its overall function within the school and ultimately, the organization (DuFour, et.al., 2006).

Four themes emerged from the interview that I conducted with Linda – structure, cohesion, accountability, and problem solving. With respect to structure, Linda indicated that the structure of her grade level planning sessions did not differ from meeting to meeting. A specific time was designated for the team to meet; the school's lead teachers helped the teachers plan lessons in reading and/or math; the teachers on Linda's team disaggregated the results of the student assessments, and then they planned their instruction based on those results. Linda's team focused the majority of their discussions on four guiding questions that are central to the PLC model.

It appeared that the inherent structure of these meetings facilitated a cohesive atmosphere between the members of Linda's PLC. The grade level assessments were administered to all students on Linda's grade level so the team had to be prepared each week to plan lessons that addressed the needs of all students within that grade. Instead of teachers planning in isolation or exchanging ideas for instructional activities, Linda's team targeted their planning sessions to student need. Each member of the team was responsible for bringing lessons to share with the team, and the team had also begun the work of unpacking the new state standards. These core activities bonded Linda's PLC in a way that was very different from previous teams on which Linda had worked.

The shared responsibility between team members also increased the team members' accountability to one and other. Linda alluded to a frustration that she was feeling when a team member did not come to meetings prepared, which equated to not bringing resources which she had been assigned to gather in time for the next meeting. Linda intimated that this frustration was nearing a point in which team members would have to discuss how this lack of responsibility was impacting the team as a whole.

Finally, the last theme of problem solving was clearly seen in Linda's interview responses that focused on processes that her team used to make decisions. For example, some members of Linda's grade level were interested in using *Words Their Way* as a core component for teaching vocabulary to students. Not all team members were familiar with the program, and it also appeared as though some team members were not in favor of adding the program to the daily schedule. Through a process of discussion (and possibly some negotiation), the team members arrived at a collective decision to pilot the program and examine its results in order to see if this component would be a consistent part of the grade level's instruction.

On the whole, Linda believed that her participation in her PLC allowed her to target her instruction to student need. She alluded to a time when her planning consisted of checking a teachers' edition in a reading series to see what units were approaching and what activities were included in the unit. This planning appeared to be disconnected from student data and ability. Under the current model, this was no longer so; the focus on student need allowed team members to engage in deeper discussions about students and curricular objectives.

#### 4.2 Case 2—Bonnie

Bonnie is a fifth grade teacher with 15 years of experience in education; she has seven years' experience as a classroom teacher and the balance has been in another school position. Her varied experience allowed her to make comparisons between PLC processes at two schools. In her former school, only 40 minutes was allotted for each PLC meeting; this short amount of time did not allow for extended discussion or planning. At her current school, there is a dedicated PLC time once per week from 2:00

p. m. until 3:15 p. m., and because of the way the master schedule is structured, this PLC has 40 additional minutes because the students go to Encore classes at 1:20 p. m.

According to Bonnie, much of the focus in her PLC has been on the grade level's Common Formative Assessments. She said that this grade level conducts pre-assessments prior to teaching an objective or unit and then a post-assessment to measure student learning. Prior to administering the assessments, the grade level decides on important skills and topics that require focus. Bonnie's PLC has also examined the wording within curricular objectives to decide what the essential skill is and how it can best be measured. She described the nature of this PLC as cyclical; the team plans the assessment, gives the assessment, and then once the teachers have corrected the CFA, they come back together to discuss results.

According to Bonnie, the team's math assessments are "stronger" because math skills are easy to quantify and assess. The team has also created science CFA's based on the four fifth-grade science standards. According to Bonnie, her team is very good about looking at the assessment data to determine which students are in need of remediation or enrichment, but the team has not reached the level of collaboration that allows them to discuss how certain objectives were taught when students in a certain class out-performed other classes. Bonnie attributes this to the fact that this is the first year her team has worked together. She looks forward to next year as she believes her team will begin learning from each other.

During Bonnie's early teaching career, her grade level team planned together; the teachers would meet to decide what they would be teaching the following week. The discussions were as Bonnie put it, "topic driven." They would decide what skills they

were teaching in math, which pages from the social studies text would be covered, and which notes in science would be taught, and then they were finished. Once the teaching topics were decided upon, the team would come back together and share ideas for the activities that they would use to teach the specific units. There was also some informal sharing of teaching strategies when teachers asked each other how they taught a specific skill. According to Bonnie, though, “it just wasn’t necessarily as organized and targeted because we didn’t have the data to back it up.” Also during Bonnie’s early career, the teachers did give pre- and post-assessments to students. The team on which she worked was departmentalized with each teacher on a grade level teaching a specific subject, so the teacher used the assessment data to skill-group children. There was no sharing of ideas, and by Bonnie’s account, “it wasn’t the true PLC model that we were looking for.”

Our discussion moved on to the least difficult PLC structure to implement. For Bonnie’s team, they have been able to give pre- and post-assessments to children with very little difficulty. Bonnie’s PLC decided beforehand what important objectives needed to be taught during a certain time period and then the assessment data allowed them to skill group their students. This process is linked to the four questions mentioned earlier that drives the work of the PLC.

Conversely, the most difficult process in the PLC framework for Bonnie’s PLC has been entering the assessment data into a spreadsheet that Bonnie’s administrative team requires. Once Bonnie has given the assessment to her students, she can correct the items and have a good sense of the results and how to proceed instructionally. If there is one task that is not typically ready when the teachers come to PLC meetings, it is the spreadsheet. According to Bonnie, the team has had to convince itself that this process is

worthwhile for the students. It has taken concerted effort on the part of the teachers to say, “look here and see what items we are having trouble with.” The spreadsheet results are intended to help the teachers know which children need the most targeted instruction, but the actual completion of the spreadsheet appears to be the most difficult for this PLC.

When I asked Bonnie if her work with her PLC impacted her classroom instruction, she reflected. The most important aspect that Bonnie looked for with any group of teachers with whom she worked is the sharing of ideas and ways to help herself be a better teacher. As part of her work with her PLC, Bonnie has found ways to challenge her students at a higher level. As a result of working closely with a PLC, Bonnie said that she and her team have been able to develop a guided reading map to teach specific reading skills to students. This allows the team to group children based on their skill need and continue to push them forward. This flexibility piece, Bonnie believes, is best for children to keep them learning continually. The flexibility allows students to work at different levels depending upon their strengths and motivates students because they are not always assigned to the highest or lowest skill group.

During this particular school year, Bonnie had several students who excelled on most of the math common formative assessments that were given prior to teaching an objective. This allowed Bonnie to push these children to higher levels of achievement. For some of these students, who had always been able to get good grades easily, math time became a challenge. Bonnie believes that this aspect of the common formative assessments has been beneficial to both the students and to her because she had to continually look for new ways to challenge her students. Prior to working with the PLC model, there was a tendency to give a test and then “walk away,” as Bonnie said.

Currently, she said that classroom instruction is more of an ongoing process that allows for greater examination of student need.

Bonnie perceives her work with her PLC to be part of her professional development. As with any other aspect of life, “if we cut ourselves off from everybody else and do our own thing, we’re going to wander off the path.” “We’re going to get focused on something and miss the bigger picture.” Parts of the PLC can be frustrating, but it keeps the team on a common path; the process helps keep the team focused on what children can do and then where the teachers need to take them next.

Bonnie said that she believes that she has become a better teacher as result of her work with her PLC because she has been able to focus on individual children in her classroom. She keeps better records on her students, which helps with this focus. In Bonnie’s early teaching years, she, at times, would have “a knot in the pit of her stomach” because she felt that she might have been missing something that a student needed. Student diagnostics required extensive studying of papers and student work samples. The data aspect that she said the PLC model provides allows her to better communicate with parents and explain to them what their child’s strengths and needs are. Bonnie is also looking forward to the county’s move to standards-based grading because she believes that this will provide her with even more information on her students.

When I met with Bonnie in October of 2012, I began the interview by asking if there had been any changes to her PLC since we had last met in June. She indicated that there had been tremendous changes to her team since our last meeting. According to Bonnie, the team had not been functioning well during the time that we last met. This information was surprising to me since Bonnie had not indicated directly in our first

interview that there had been discord among team members. While she indicated that the team was functioning superficially, based on the content of her June responses, I perceived that their level of functioning was due more to the new PLC process being implemented rather than as a problem between team members.

In the June interview, Bonnie described a group of teachers who were disaggregating data and making instructional decisions based on the data, which according to DuFour et al. (2006), put these teachers in the Developing Stage of their PLC work. According to Bonnie, the team had not yet reached the point where they could compare test results and share with each other the strategies that each had used to produce high scores on assessments. This, according to DuFour et al. (2006) is a characteristic of PLCs that are in the Sustaining Stage.

By Bonnie's report, in mid-June, an issue on the team "came to a head." She attributed this to the time of year, when teachers are most tired. The team began to get very "short with one another" and its stress was becoming visible in the school community. In each of the teachers' summative conferences with administrators, questions regarding team functioning and dynamics were asked. As a result, the team sat down and talked "everything out." They talked about how they could improve things, came up with new team norms, and decided that when they came back to school in the fall, they would not talk about the previous school year unless they did so in a positive manner. Once school was back in session, Bonnie has seen a tremendous difference in the team's level of ability to plan together, rely on one another, share ideas, and be willing to ask for help when needed.



Bonnie went on to say that coming to the school in September 2011, she was prepared for the change in environment due to her change in location. This was a stressor for her. What she did not realize, however, was that her teammates were encountering similar stressors due to the change in the school's demographics and new instructional focus. All the teachers were new as a team, and this brought an additional level of stress.

I reminded Bonnie of her comments in June that alluded to the fact that her team could talk about what they were teaching but could not reach the level of depth to converse about what teaching strategies were most beneficial in producing strong assessment results for students. Bonnie remembered her comments and attributed her team's change to the critical conversation that took place, but stated that the adoption of the Common Core State Standards as their new curriculum also facilitated the change on the grade level.

She said that the new curriculum placed the team in new territory and on a more even footing regarding their level of knowledge. The team has discovered that they need to rely on each other more because of this shift. Bonnie also indicated that her child has moved on to another grade, and she believes that this has also improved the dynamic because the relationship parameters among colleagues have been simplified. She was very reflective about her latter statement regarding her child, saying that it was not fair for her to ask someone who did not know her (since she was new to the school and team) to take on both the role of colleague and in some ways, critic as her child's teacher. With the triple change in the situation, (critical conversation, new curriculum, and clearer relationship parameters), Bonnie's team was now able to engage in conversations about their instruction, and ask questions about which instructional strategies produced the best

results and how each teacher is affecting growth in their students. Bonnie attributes some of this to the fact that the team is now in its second year of working together. Team members have a better idea of each other's strengths and weaknesses and they are trying very much to play to those strengths and compensate for the weaknesses.

Bonnie went on to say that her team had not given their post-assessment on their first unit in math yet, so she was still unsure about her results. I reminded her of our conversation in June when she stated that her team appeared to struggle with the data entry piece of their assessments. Bonnie said that she was still entering her data, but she was not sure of her teammates' practices. She went on to say that her team had not received information from their administrators as to whether the spreadsheet would be continued during the school year. Since she was in charge of setting up the spreadsheets, Bonnie continued the practice of her data entry.

I asked Bonnie what since her team was not spending as much time on the data entry, they were able to focus on instead. Bonnie indicated that this "found" time was spent on learning the new curriculum (adjusting to the new pace and order) and finding materials to support the change. The team was not feeling like they had substantial extra time, but the removal of the clerical piece was allowing for the curricular discussion to take place. In order to hold each other accountable for planning, the team had divided responsibilities and each team member was charged with bringing certain items or strategies to each PLC meeting so that each team member contributed an equal share.

Bonnie believed that this change in their team practice allowed her to be more deliberate in finding materials and strategies to teach the new Common Core standards. Since each team member brings items to the meetings now, the team is able to fill in its

planning schedule and leave meetings with a plan for what will be taught in the coming weeks. This has decreased stress levels and allowed them to use their outside time for other activities of their choice.

In terms of career phase, Bonnie was very much like Linda. They both have been teaching for a long time and have seen the changes that the PLC model has brought to their grade level planning sessions and to their teaching craft. Unlike Linda, however, Bonnie's team has been able to have the critical conversation between team members that has allowed the team to function at a new level. Finely tuned teams, according to Senge (1994), develop synergy, which is illustrated by a shared vision and commonality of purpose. These teams confront difficult issues because they have developed a relationship that allows them to communicate effectively with one another and not be defensive regarding what may be said during a discussion.

While it did not appear to me, based on Bonnie's statements, that her team had achieved synergy, the team did appear to have a common purpose, which was focused on the students. Many times in our conversation, Bonnie alluded to the team's newness by which she meant a new state of collegiality after the critical conversation rather than to a newness in its organization. The new curriculum appeared to add a new dimension to the team's functioning which prohibited the team's synergy from being solidified. So while Bonnie's team had been able to put personal feelings aside in order improve the team's function, this issue appeared to still be on the horizon for Linda's team as they worked together during this new school year.

There were similarities in the themes that emerged in Bonnie and Linda's interviews; however, the evidence of these themes was very different for Bonnie and her

teammates. For example, Bonnie's team also had specific time allotted to them for PLC meetings, but the way in which those meetings were structured was very different from Linda's meetings. Bonnie's school administrators expected teachers to enter student data on a spreadsheet after every assessment. According to Bonnie, this data entry was often tedious for the team members and the task fell by the wayside. The team discussed student results and knew how students across the grade level had performed on assessments, but it appeared that the team did not place the same value on completing the spreadsheet as school administrators did.

By Bonnie's own admission, her team had not reached the same level of cohesion as Linda's team. The team was comfortable discussing their assessment results, but they did not have the same comfort level with respect to which teacher used a specific strategy to teach a specific objective. The dividing of responsibility after their critical conversation at the beginning of the school year allowed the team members to leave each meeting with specific plans in hand, which in turn, decreased stress for the team members because they did not have to find additional time outside of their work day to plan student activities.

According to Bonnie, the PLC process has impacted her classroom instruction in a positive manner. She heard new ideas from her team members which allowed her to bring new strategies into her classroom. Bonnie also stated that the focus on student data that is inherent in the PLC model allowed her to know what her students needed to know as well as what they already know. Prior to working in the PLC model, Bonnie said that she continually worried that she might be missing something about a student or

that she was not teaching a student something that he/she really needed to know. The increased focus on data has all but eliminated this worry for Bonnie.

#### 4.3 Case 3—Kelly

At the time of the study, Kelly was a fourth year teacher. She taught three years in her current grade level and one year in Kindergarten. Kelly has a masters' degree and an additional add-on teaching certificate in Academically and Intellectually Gifted (AIG). She was conducting what she called a “push-in” AIG class for second grade. This model allowed her to teach the AIG students in her class, extending the regular curriculum rather than sending her students out of her classroom to be served by an AIG teacher.

Kelly's PLC met once per week for 45 minutes. An administrator was present for each of these meetings and the teachers were provided with an agenda. Typical agenda items were School Improvement Team (SIT) topics, new rules that were coming from the county, and the filling out of forms. Kelly referred specifically to “blue cards,” which are assessment cards that are kept in individual student files. During this PLC time, the teachers also discussed their common formative assessments.

Based on Kelly response to this and subsequent questions, she was frustrated by the PLC model as it was implemented in her school. Frequently during the interview, Kelly expressed frustration over her inability to share ideas with teammate or plan instruction because of the structure of the PLC meeting and the focus on data and policies. No time during the PLC meeting was devoted to planning. If teachers wanted to plan together, then it needed to be done on another day or after school. The teachers in the building had what Kelly called “working lunches” once per month. During this time,

teachers talked about upcoming units. Planning for the grade level typically occurred on Friday afternoons when the team stayed until six o'clock.

When I asked Kelly how the PLC model impacted instruction in her classroom, she stated that she believed her creativity had been taken away because time that could have been taken to plan “wonderful lessons” has been spent analyzing data. For Kelly, the PLC model was a formality, “just another hoop to jump through.” The common formative assessments were something that her team had always done, but now they have to “write it down for someone else to see.” Kelly said that her team continued doing interventions until all students met the set target, but the common formative assessments did not make the data more concrete for her. By her account, the children who needed the most intervention were ‘already on the radar’; teachers did interventions with these children all year long.

According to Kelly, her lesson planning at another school, prior to being a part of the PLC model was different. Teachers were expected to meet two hours per week and each person on the team was responsible for planning one portion of a lesson plan. This time was allotted during school day when students had back to back special classes, like Art, Music, and PE. Kelly believed that this schedule model was more helpful to teachers because it gave them time to plan collaboratively within the normal school day.

Much of Kelly’s conversation revolved around time. She talked about wanting time to analyze data and then additional time to plan lessons with her grade level, stating that her current schedule did not allow for this. Time constraints within the current schedule made it difficult for Kelly’s team because her administrators had certain times

within the school day that they wanted their teachers to meet. Teachers had also been given the option to come in before school to meet.

My final two questions related to whether the PLC model supported Kelly professionally. Kelly responded that she does professional development on her own time, but she is not much learning through her work in her PLC. Kelly's teammates do book studies together; they blog, and co-author articles. But these activities take place primarily on weekends. Kelly went on to state that there are over 200 teachers who subscribe to her blog. She is also part of a new social media website called Teachers Pay Teachers.

When I asked Kelly if she was a better teacher because of her work in the PLC, she responded that the model actually hindered her because she does not have time during the school day to create great lessons for children. She believes that she has wonderful ideas, but can only share them if she is doing this on her own time. Teachers staying late, doing planning outside of school, and spending their own money on supplies are three aspects of education that Kelly believes contributes to high teacher turnover rates. Teachers come to the profession because they are creative and have good ideas, but no time is given to support those ideas.

Kelly is one of the teachers who did not respond to my second request for an interview. I contacted her once in August and then again in September to follow up on our earlier interview.

Kelly's interview responses were very typical of someone in her career stage. As a teacher in the sustaining phase of her career, Kelly was very confident and comfortable with her teaching practices. She appeared to embrace her creativity as a strength and

believed that, without constraints, she could be a master teacher. Rather than seeing her collaborative work during the school day with her team as a way to develop professionally, Kelly believed that the low level of work the team was doing hindered her professional growth.

Kelly was not averse to being a part of a team; Kelly obviously was a learner. As she stated, she had a masters' degree and an add-on certificate to her teaching license. Kelly enjoyed working with colleagues outside of the school day, stating that some of the best work her team did was outside of the school, occurring late on Fridays or over dinners. Unfortunately, the constraints that school administrators placed on Kelly and her colleagues during their appointed PLC time hindered Kelly's professional development. As Kelly stated in her interview, she was beginning to understand why teachers left the profession, and she attributed the exits to the lack of time and administrative constraints.

Kelly's experience with her PLC adhered to the tenets of the Learning Network Perspective as discussed in Chapter 2. Kelly and her team, according to the interview, built their relationships (or organization) through a series of interactions. Leaders emerged on the basis of their strengths and gradually, a learning system emerged. These teachers' learning system, however, was located outside of the workplace. This transformation was very similar to changes that occur in the stock market or changes in an ecosystem where the system adapts itself to changing circumstances (Davis & Sumara, 2001). When the shift from the individual to the collective took place, Kelly and her team's organization was tightly bound by a collective purpose that a group of isolated individuals do not have. Kelly's team of teachers embodied some aspects of a PLC; unfortunately, her group of teachers could not engage in productive, pedagogical



discussions within the school day because of scheduling and the administrative constraints that were placed upon them.

As with the two previous cases, Kelly's interview responses illustrated the themes of structure and cohesion. The themes of accountability and problem solving were not present in Kelly's responses. Possibly the reason that these last two themes did not emerge was because they were not allowed given the strict structure that Kelly's administrators imposed on each PLC meeting. In order for team members to hold each other accountable for work, time must be allotted for conversation and dialogue. The same is true for problem solving. Based on Kelly's responses, her PLC time was dominated by agenda items that administrators brought each week.

Unlike the other teachers that were interviewed, Kelly was able to draw a comparison between being part of a PLC that had a looser structure with her current one driven by administrative topics. In her former school, Kelly's PLC structure was very similar to Linda and Bonnie. She expected the structure to be similar when she joined her current school's staff. The fact that she enjoyed her former school's PLC structure appeared to make her adjustment to her current school's PLC format difficult if not impossible.

With respect to structure, minimal time was allotted for Kelly's PLC to plan within the school day. Teachers were expected to find their own time to create the structure that would allow for collaboration. Kelly did not refer to a sense of cohesion that developed between team members within the structure of her PLC; instead the cohesive spirit between her team members developed when work tasks became combined with social and entrepreneurial tasks outside of the school day and on their own time.

The PLC model, according to Kelly, impacted her classroom instruction in a negative way. The heavy emphasis placed on the PLC structure and data analysis within Kelly's school stifled her creativity. Kelly wanted more time to plan engaging lessons for her students; unfortunately, the time for this was not allotted within Kelly's workday. As Kelly stated, the PLC model gave teachers "another hoop to jump through."

#### 4.4 Case 4—Kate

When the study was conducted, Kate had seven years of teaching experience. Three of those years were in another county and she has been in Richview County for four years. For six years, Kate has taught first grade and she taught one year in a grade one/two combination class.

Kate's PLC met weekly on Monday afternoons from 2:30 to 4:00 p. m.; this was after the close of school. The team discussed areas in which students were struggling as well as topics in reading or math. The team also discussed their SMART goals. SMART goals, like Common Formative Assessments, are a PLC tool. SMART is an acronym for Strategic, Measureable, Attainable, Results-oriented, and Time-bound. The goals were a strategy for building the capacity of a team to work toward a common goal. Rather than planning individual activities for students which focus on what teachers will do, the team focused on what students will do to reach a specific goal (DuFour et al., 2006).

Kate's team also created common formative assessments and discussed the results in order to create intervention and remediation groups. Once the groups were created, the students moved on to different teachers who worked on specific skills; these students may or may not have been part of the teacher's class. Kate's team also tried moving teachers to student groups when the children had a difficult time with transitions to other

rooms. After a week of remediation, the team gave the common formative assessment again and then looked at the results to plan instruction for the following week.

Prior to using the PLC model for planning, Kate's grade level had one hour of planning each week. Kate said the teachers decided what skills needed to be taught the following week and then the teachers would go and teach what they had agreed upon. "We weren't doing any team planning, no teacher sharing documents. It was just okay, in math we're going to teach fractions, and in reading we're going to teach, you know, this story with this skill, and go off and plan it, and that's it." According to Kate, when her school first implemented the PLC structure, it seemed that it was just another meeting to attend. The first meetings tended to be paperwork driven and Kate did not see how it benefited students. As the process evolved, however, Kate was able to see more clearly what students needed to know, what the class needed to know, and what the grade level needed to know so the teachers could meet student needs on a timely basis.

Kate said that the least difficult structure for her team to implement was the planning times. Kate's team underwent some changes during the school year with one teacher retiring and one teacher resigning, but the members of the team pulled together very well. She stated that at the beginning of the new school year, the team's planning sessions were more like those that Kate described from her previous schools. With teachers being added to her team, her group worked together to create common formative assessments and units that they would use. Other than being on campus until 4:00 p. m. on meeting days, the meeting structure went very well. Kate stated that she and one other team member were responsible for creating math units and the other teachers on the grade

level created reading units. Once the unit documents were created, the team shared what they had done and as a result, there was no planning to do on weekends at home.

By Kate's account, the most complicated structure for her team to implement was the intervention groups. As mentioned earlier, Kate's team decided to move students between teachers in order to have skill groups across the grade level. The team believed that they were losing instructional time during transitions because some of the students did not move quickly and then some had difficulty behaving for another teacher. She said that once the teachers decided to move classrooms and go to their groups, transition difficulties were diminished and productive instructional time was gained.

Kate believed that the work with her PLC impacted her classroom instruction in a positive manner. The team started by looking at a curricular strand and then they developed lessons to go along with that strand. They planned center activities, Smart Board presentations, guided and independent practice activities; as the students completed the activities, the teachers recorded anecdotal records that helped them document student progress on reports. The teachers used these records as a springboard for their discussions during grade level meetings. According to Kate, this process allowed the team to see what skills students needed in order to keep moving them forward. If students were lacking in a skill, the teachers could see it and then remediate immediately. According to Kate, this process ultimately made her team's classroom instruction more effective.

Kate also believed that her work with the PLC was an important part of her work as a teacher. Her PLC created a "healthy" environment where teachers bounced ideas off of each other and were able to find out which strategies worked with students and which

did not. She related this strategy work to the team's common formative assessments as well because teachers were able to see what worked as they gauged students' progress.

I responded to Kate's answer by asking what job embedded professional development meant to her. Kate reflected that the time her team spent discussing their strategies or students, whether it is at lunch, on the playground, or in a meeting, kept her team focused on student learning. They were learning on the job daily because their discussion was focused. As Kate put it, she is a believer in the model; "I love it and we work very, very well as a team."

When I met with Kate again in mid-October, I had the chance to reflect on her interview in order to prepare some follow-up questions. One topic that concerned me in our first interview was the skill focus of the grade level's reading groups and how the teachers were providing instruction to those students in order to provide them with necessary reading skills. I did not have to probe this area in-depth because my first interview question allowed Kate to elaborate on the topic that had been of most concern to me. I began by asking what changes Kate's PLC had undergone between the end of last school year and the present.

According to Kate, her team spent the majority of their time last year getting children to understand the eight parts of a story – character, setting, plot, etc. Through reflection and her school administration's new focus on the Common Core State Standards, Kate realized that the level of instruction they were providing to students last year was not deep enough to address the expectations for understanding that are inherent in the new curriculum. Therefore, Kate's team realized that they needed to make adjustments in their instructional plan. The team's focus this year, in Kate's words, is

“journaling.” Based on her description of this practice, I came to understand that Kate was referring to writing across the curriculum, which entails incorporating writing in all content areas in order to strengthen student understanding.

I reminded Kate that based on her interview answers from last year, one practice that she believed her team did well was the intervention groups based on the story structures. Now that a new element had been introduced by her school administration, I wanted to know how that change had impacted intervention. This year, instead of focusing on story structure during intervention time, Kate’s grade level had decided to provide reading intervention to those students who were still experiencing problems with decoding words. Within the different group levels, Kate’s team is also working on “word families” and specific reading strategies. It is the team’s goal to be able to move into higher order thinking questions and comprehension by the end of the year, but in first grade, the team believed that they needed to address students’ reading skills first.

In the May interview, Kate disclosed that her team had undergone some major changes with respect to personnel midway through the school year. The changes that took place on the team last year impacted the team’s work. At the start of this year, however, all team members that were present at the end of last year returned, providing stability to the team dynamics. Kate perceived that the continuity on the team was beneficial. She alluded indirectly to the team’s ability to handle disagreements by stating that the new year had been a fresh start – “We work very well together and it’s okay if I don’t like her ideas or she doesn’t like mine. We work it all out.”

We then moved on to the topic of common formative assessments because this had been an area of focus in the May interview. Kate stated that the team had changed its

process somewhat with respect to its common formative assessments. Last year, the team determined “where they needed to intervene” and they would devise something “out of the blue” to match the skill. This year, the team decided what they are doing already that they could use so they are not creating extra work for themselves. Kate used the example of the team’s work with place value in math. Instead of creating a brand new test as an assessment, the team found an activity and had all the students complete the same activity, and they used that as their formative assessment. Kate believed that by doing this, the team was working smarter and not harder.

In this interview, I also touched on the accountability piece in order to determine if Kate’s team members were able to hold each other accountable for results. Kate framed her response in terms of how the team perceived their relationship with the students who are on that grade level. Instead of each teacher seeing themselves as responsible for the students in her class, all teachers viewed the students on that grade level as their students. There was a shared responsibility for each teacher to be sure that every student in that grade was making growth toward or achieving grade level standards.

I probed the area of intra-team accountability – did the team define its roles, and in the case of tasks, was the weight shared by all team members? The reframing of the question appeared to assist Kate with her response. Last year was Kate’s first year as the grade level chair, and she believed that the position carried with it the responsibility of certain administrative tasks. This year, she realized that she could carry the weight of these tasks alone, and she asked her teammates for help. She began to delegate tasks, and as a result, her teammates also started to ask if they could help or offered to take tasks from her. According to Kate, part of the accountability on this team was the fact

that they have each other's cell phone numbers. They checked in with each other to make sure that work products were done in time to meet deadlines and meeting timelines.

Overall, Kate still appeared to be pleased with the PLC process and the way that it worked at her school. In her words, "it works, and I think it's good for the kids. I think it's good for the teachers, too. Because it lets us touch base on what the kids really need, what we need to be working on."

I have spent time reflecting on both interviews that I completed with Kate, and of all the interviews I completed, hers were the most perplexing. With respect to the PLC model, Kate's team was fulfilling minimal expectations. The team met regularly; they provided formative assessments to their students and then intervened based on the assessment results. It appeared as though the team communicated regularly both in school and out of school. The team focused its conversations on students and how to improve their learning.

Upon reflection, what I believe was missing from these conversations was the "why" of the PLC. I sensed no passion relating to her work within the PLC framework. While I believed that she wanted to see her children succeed, and that she had a reason for teaching, she was unable to communicate that to me in the context of her answers. She answered my questions much in the same manner as she described the work with her team – as if completing my interview was an item to be checked off a list.

This was very similar to the way in which she described the work of her PLC. This may have been an issue with rapport or lack of rapport that I had built during the interview. Based on her responses, it appeared as though her work that was influenced by the PLC model, both in her classroom and with her teammates, was driven by



something into which she had been given no input. Kate said that she saw how the PLC process had changed at her school from its inception to its current state, but there appeared to be, based on her answers, that there was no personal investment in the process. The PLC work was a task for her, not a core belief.

Kate was not as critical about the PLC process as Kelly was. Unlike Kelly who could, on some level, see what the capacity for a PLC could be when it functioned effectively, Kate seemed to lack an ability to see what the deeper work of a PLC entailed.

Like the other three teachers, Kate's PLC adhered to a structure that had been put in place for them by the school administration. The times of their meetings did not fall within the regular school day as it had for the other teachers, but Kate's team seemed to have adjusted to the expectation of planning after school on Monday. Like Kelly, Kate alluded to a more informal planning structure that existed outside the confines of the school. Kate discussed an informal network between the teachers on her grade level that helped them keep each other accountable for work that needed to be completed within a specific time frame.

This accountability issue was the only reference that Kate made during her interview. Unlike Bonnie and Linda, there did not appear to be any issues between the team members that placed an undue burden on some members of the team. By Kate's account, though, the team's composition was still new. Team members left during the previous school year, and it appeared as though the teachers were still forming working relationships. By all indications, Kate's team was relatively cohesive. The teachers worked together to solve problems related to results on student assessments. They flexibly grouped students and then worked together to solve a management problem

when students were experiencing difficulty moving between classrooms for intervention groups. The teachers decided instead to go to the students instead of having the students move from room to room.

Like the three previous teachers, Kate believed that her work within the PLC framework had positively impacted her classroom instruction. She appeared to enjoy her team's dynamic and used that positive relationship to converse with her colleagues both in and out of school about students and pedagogy. Not only was Kate's team a cohesive group, but they also took advantage of their positive relationship and extended a unified approach to their grade level activities. This strategy helped to build a consistent, student knowledge base across the grade level.

#### 4.5 Case 5—Caroline

When the study was conducted, Caroline had been teaching for 11 years. She taught at three schools during those years, mostly in lower elementary grades. She was teaching Kindergarten at the time of the interview and was “very, very happy in my profession.”

Caroline participated in two PLCs at her school; one was her grade level PLC, and the other was a Readers' Workshop PLC that her school instituted to study the effectiveness of its Readers' Workshop implementation. The Readers' Workshop PLC examined student running records; these are individual student reading assessments that give teachers insight into students' reading strengths and weaknesses with respect to the decoding of words and comprehension skills.

Caroline's Readers' Workshop PLC was comprised of one teacher from each grade level. The team met monthly and examined student data as well as the

Kindergarten through fifth grade vertical curriculum alignment. Caroline's school recently implemented Readers' Workshop and the work that this PLC did was one way for the school to determine if Readers' Workshop was the best method of instruction for the students.

According to Caroline, her grade level PLC met once each week for 90 minutes. The focus of the team's work was on the four guiding questions that were mentioned in Interview 1: What do want our students to learn? How will we know when they have learned it? How will we respond when they do not learn it? How will we respond if they already know it? These questions guided the grade level discussion and the team's common formative assessments. Caroline stated that the PLC meetings were very focused and purposeful, but sometimes teachers did not have time to share beyond the four discussion questions. The teachers became so focused on what they were teaching as an essential standard that they lost sight of what else needed to be taught in other subjects during that quarter.

Prior to the implementation of the PLC model, Caroline's grade level team met for 90 minutes once per week and again on another day during the same week. The additional day was provided by administration for the teachers to complete paperwork. Caroline believed that the work her grade level did now was more focused and organized but the team was not getting lesson plans done during PLC time.

I probed this area slightly, and asked Caroline if an administrator sat in on the team meetings. Caroline said that at her school, an administrator would drop by. Caroline attributed their intermittent attendance to her team's strong work ethic. "The administration trusts us that we are going to be able to get our job done. We are very

professional and friendly and everything with one another. So there's not one there unless we have questions...."

In Caroline's opinion, the least difficult structure for her grade level team to implement with respect to PLC's was the meeting times. The time had been previously set aside and the team was accustomed to meeting regularly, so now it was just a different approach to their planning. Conversely, the most difficult was structuring the meetings around the four essential questions that drove the PLC work and completing the necessary paperwork. Caroline believed that some of this difficulty was just getting used to the new processes.

During the school year, Caroline's PLC had become more structured. There was a higher expectation for the completion of common formative assessments and the team was expected to create essential standards for learning. These new structures were the most difficult aspect of the PLC process for Caroline's team. On the positive side, however, these new structures made Caroline's team more accountable for all of the children on the grade level. By using the results of the CFAs, the team implemented a differentiation block where the teachers moved to different groups of children in order to provide either additional help or enrichment on a specific skill or concept. According to Caroline, this time of the school day gave her team more ownership over the grade level as a whole and not just the children in an individual classroom.

By Caroline's account, she learned a variety of new strategies for teaching concepts. Talking with the other teachers on her grade level during PLC time, afforded Caroline the benefit of other's expertise. When listening to how her teammates teach a specific concept, Caroline learned new ways to teach a skill or concept that might be

more effective for her students. As result of her work with the PLC, Caroline said that she felt more professional; the discussions on her grade level moved from “cute activities” to conversations about essential standards, assessments, and teaching strategies.

Caroline was the second of the six teachers who did not schedule a second interview. She actually responded to my first e-mail request with a time and date on which I was not available, and when I indicated that I was not available and requested another time, she did not respond. Her e-mail indicated that she had transferred to another elementary school in the county. In some ways, Caroline’s interview responses were similar to Kelly’s. Like Kelly, Caroline also indicated that the work within her PLC had become very focused on the four guiding questions:

1. What do want our students to learn?
2. How will we know when they have learned it?
3. How will we respond when they do not learn it?
4. How will we respond if they already know it?

While the questions may have brought more focus to the team, the teachers on Caroline’s team were not leaving their planning sessions with actual lesson plans. It appears, based on Caroline’s responses that the teachers had skeletal plans for intervention, grade level instruction, and intervention, but they did not have the plans in a format that specifically showed them how the objectives would be taught.

With respect to her career stage, Caroline was slightly older than Kelly and had taught for over 10 years. At her age and career stage, Caroline seemed very comfortable with her pedagogy. In the interview, Caroline stated that work with the PLC helped her

feel more professional and less focused on “cute activities.” This perception may have come from the fact that Caroline taught Kindergarten, a grade that is sometimes perceived as having fewer traditional instructional activities.

Unlike Kelly’s administrators, who ran each PLC meeting, Caroline’s administrators were often absent from meetings because of a high level of trust that they possessed for Caroline’s team. Therefore, while Caroline may have in some aspects held similar beliefs regarding PLC’s as Kelly did, the absence of administrator domination allowed for Caroline to retain her self-image as a professional.

Like Kelly, Caroline’s team represented the learning network perspective that focuses on individual learning driven by daily tasks and challenges. Caroline’s team learning demonstrated itself in the day to day operations within an organization (Poell et al., 2009). Caroline’s description of her team’s activities showed that conversations were driven solely by assessment results and the teachers’ plans to teach specific skills.

When compared with the other interviews on the topic of structure, Caroline’s PLC meetings appeared to be the least controlled. The teachers on her team had been provided time within the school day to plan and administrators set expectations that teachers use four guiding questions as framed DuFour et al. (2006). Using those guiding questions as a consistent element in their meetings along with assessment data, the teachers controlled the meeting content.

The topic of professionalism was present in Caroline’s interview as it was in both Linda and Bonnie’s interviews. The topic did not surface in Kate’s interview and Kelly alluded to feeling de-professionalized because of the task-driven agendas that were imposed on her team. Caroline mentioned feeling more professional in her teaching

because the team's discussions focused on teaching strategies, assessments, and essential learning standards and not cute activities for the children to complete. Like Caroline, Bonnie and Linda remarked that participation in a PLC had strengthened their feelings of professionalism. Linda's comments centered on the deeper work her team was doing with respect to curriculum planning. Bonnie indicated that her heightened sense of professionalism stemmed from the information that her assessment data provided. Bonnie no longer needed to guess what her students needed instructionally. The assessment activities that she completed with her teammates improved her ability to target her students' strengths and needs.

#### 4.6 Case 6—Jennifer

Jennifer is a fifth year teacher, who spent five years in the Richview school system at the same school in the same grade level. By Jennifer's account, her experience is very "specialized." There are six people on Jennifer's current team. Three team members have been together for five years; two joined the team during the 2011-12 school year, and one teacher arrived the year before last.

Jennifer said that her PLC met daily for 45 minutes. Each session's agenda had a singular focus. One day was spent planning for reading; another day was spent on math. On the third day, the school's assistant principal of instruction met with the team to go over school-wide issues or curricular items. The last two days of the week were usually spent finishing tasks that were not completed in earlier meetings.

The focus of the curricular PLC meetings was typically unit pacing, homework planning, and assignment differentiation. According to Jennifer, it was important to the teachers on this grade level to streamline their instruction so that the parents saw similar

activities coming home from all teachers on the grade level. This streamlining, according to Jennifer, also provided a support system to students, allowing them to contact classmates or others on their grade level for questions or homework help.

The type of work that Jennifer's grade level was doing at the time of the first interview was very similar to what was done prior to the PLC model being implemented. Jennifer stated that certain circumstances within their school building necessitated high levels of collaboration between teachers. Once this collaborative structure was in place, the grade level only had to make minor adjustments to encompass the PLC model. When Jennifer arrived at the school, she was a first year teacher. She did not have extensive resources or background experience; therefore it was essential for her to rely on her teammates for curricular and school culture expectations.

Jennifer said that the first year that her team was together, they met two times each week. The next year, they added an additional day and then built upon that structure so they were meeting daily. According to Jennifer, the PLC model helped them fine tune their processes by setting norms and "focus more on what we are trying to do."

As mentioned earlier, norm setting is also an essential piece within the PLC process. These norms are ground-rules or practices that govern the group. When individuals on a team work through a process to create norms, they increase the chance that they will begin to operate as a collaborative team and not as a group of individuals who come together frequently to discuss topics that they have in common (DuFour et al., 2006).

By Jennifer's account, when the team first started meeting, their purpose was to exchange worksheets. As the team evolved, they began to discuss student outcomes and



teacher expectations. As Jennifer stated, they started by saying, “Okay, let’s talk first about our outcomes, you know, what our expectations and kind of working backwards. Where in the beginning, we started doing one thing at a time, working toward the end and how we were going to assess this. So it has helped us see a better order.”

Jennifer’s said that her team used Common Formative Assessments as their starting point. They gave the same test as both a pre- and post-assessment to gauge student learning. The results of the pre-assessments drove the team’s planning. According to Jennifer, this particular structure was easy for her team to implement; the difference, now that the PLC structure was in place, was that the assessments were given at the beginning of the unit and the results were used formatively. Previously, the team’s assessments were summative measures that contributed to the students’ report card grades.

Jennifer stated that the most difficult structure for her team to implement was talking candidly to one another about their own strengths and weaknesses. These conversations were also part of the PLC structure and related directly to the team’s establishment of norms. Once the Common Formative Assessments are given, teachers should be looking at results and then discussing the results in terms of which students performed well and which did not. Rather than focusing on student weakness to explain low scores, teachers from high scoring classes are encouraged to share with their colleagues which teaching techniques accounted for the students’ greater understanding of a concept. Conversely, the team should be coaching the teacher whose students did not score well on an assessment. The team can then decide whether the high performing teacher will remediate the students from the low scoring class or if the teacher will teach

his/her own students to improve their grades (DuFour et al., 2006). This is the process that Jennifer's team used as they disaggregated their student data.

Jennifer said that her team understood that this aspect of the PLC structure would be difficult for them, but they believed that this step was where they needed to go next. According to Jennifer, there were teachers on her team who had different strengths, and it was time for the team to "tap into those." The difficult part for teachers was realizing that something was not their strength.

Jennifer stated that she believes she "pushes herself" more being part of a PLC than she would on her own, and this positively impacted her classroom instruction. She opined that she had to hold herself to the standards (norms) that her team set, and she also knew that the other teammates were working equally as hard to meet those standards. By her account, she wanted to be the teacher on the team who showed the most growth. It was an internal competition that drove her and kept her planning high quality activities. She stated that prior to her team setting expectations for each other, Jennifer might have had a day when she said that a worksheet would suffice for students. She did not believe that she had that option any more knowing that the other members on the team were "pushing on."

In her words, Jennifer has learned "humiliation" from working in the PLC structure. I was unclear about her use of this term and whether she meant humility or humiliation, but I believed that I would have changed the context of her response if I changed the word to what I believed she intended; therefore, the word was not changed. She stated that she had also learned much about new things to try and things that were not such a good thing to try because some ideas had "totally bombed." Unless she had other

teachers with which to compare herself, Jennifer would go on believing that she was “awesome.” Being able to see someone out-perform her when she thought that she had really done a good job with something had “opened her eyes.” Jennifer said that she was also learning new ways to approach her grade level content through the use of Common Formative Assessments. By seeing where her students were performing, Jennifer was learning how to teach the content for different levels of students.

According to Jennifer, the content knowledge development and learning from her teammates contributed to her professional development. Jennifer believed that she learns from everybody, and that this learning comes mainly through listening. Jennifer recalled one of the team’s norms that only one person speaks at a time. This helped the team members learn from each other when they took the time to listen. According to Jennifer, she can sit in a workshop and listen to someone tell her about an ideal situation, but hearing the same thing from her peers seemed to bring more credibility to the strategy because she was getting the knowledge from people who were in her same situation.

Jennifer closed by stating how lucky she felt to be a part of this particular PLC. She said that it took true commitment to have a good PLC and she considered her team to be “a group of very strong women.” She did not know how the PLC process worked for others who do not have that “fixed commitment,” but Jennifer believed she was fortunate to have found this with her team.

When I met with Jennifer again in October, some aspects of her team had changed. There were still six teachers on her grade level team, but one member was on maternity leave until November. Another teacher was added to the grade level, and this person was new to the school and new to teaching third grade. A student teacher was

also part of this year's team, so in Jennifer's view, fifty percent of the grade level was accustomed to the established work routine and the other fifty percent was still trying to determine what the team was doing and what they were talking about. This new dynamic forced the team to slow its pace and provide background to the new members on the team.

I asked Jennifer how that new team dynamic has impacted the team's work overall, and she again returned to the topic of the slower pace in their planning sessions because of the new members. Instead of seeing this new dynamic as a detriment, Jennifer embraced the opportunity in the situation. With the implementation of the Common Core State Standards occurring simultaneously with the introduction of new team members, Jennifer's team went more deeply into their instructional discussions and dissected the reasons why they teach what they teach and how they teach something in order show the new people the reasoning behind teaching a specific concept in a certain way. Jennifer stated that the depth of these discussions brought new background knowledge to the new members, but it has also forced veteran team members to question their instruction based on whether practices were followed out of expediency or because they were high quality.

These discussions compelled the veterans to change their thinking on certain topics, and Jennifer believed that these shifts would not have taken place if they did not have to justify their practices to someone who did not already know what they were doing and why they were doing them.

I asked Jennifer if she could give me a specific example of this. She said that when it came time at the beginning of the school year for the teachers to give students their first formative assessment, the teachers pulled out the same assessment that they had

given the year before. One of the new teachers questioned one of the assessment items because the item did not reflect the new standards. The veteran teachers said they wanted to leave the item on the pre-assessment because the students would need the information even if it was not part of the new standards; they convinced the new teacher to agree with them, and the item remained in the assessment.

Jennifer stated that once the assessment results were tallied, the team realized that all of the students knew the answer to that test item because the information had been covered in second grade when the Common Core State Standards were implemented in the lower grades the year before. The team realized that they did not need to assess the skill, and they were pleased that they had not spent a great deal of time teaching something that their students already knew. According to Jennifer, the timing of the assessment allowed them to refocus their instructional planning based on not only the new team member's question but also on the assessment results; both resulted in change in their practice.

As part of this conversation, I also examined Jennifer's relationship with her team. In our June interview, Jennifer was one of the six teachers who appeared to have reached a level of understanding with her team that placed more emphasis on the team goals and less emphasis on the relationships between the team members. I asked if the addition of the new team members had changed the team's energy. Jennifer perceived that the team's relationship was not as strong as it had been the year before, and saw its newness as one of the reasons. As grade level chair this year, Jennifer said that she was purposefully putting effort into keeping all team members organized and focused.

Having to provide background information to new team members had, at times, allowed discussions to stray from the task. There had also been times when a new team member did not follow through on something that she said she would do, and this brought new problems to the team because this had not happened in the previous year with the veteran team members. According to Jennifer, the team was addressing this problem, and they had been persistent in solving this problem because in Jennifer's words, "we know how good it could be because it was so easy for us before, that whatever price we have to pay to try to get back there is worth it because we know that we can get there. But it's been uncomfortable to call somebody out, especially when they're new, because we're still trying to build relationships and become a team."

When I asked Jennifer how calling a team member to task was received by the new team member, she said that at times not every member left the meetings in the best mood or with a smile on their faces, but by the next time the team met, the problem appeared to have been fixed and the team members have followed through on their assigned task. Jennifer reiterated a belief that she stated in our June interview. She said that she realized that it was important for her new team members to feel welcome in the group, so she did not want new team members to perceive that the veteran team members did not like them. She, however, stated that she believed all team members needed to understand that the team dynamic was "business." Their focus was not on being friends so their team made time to be together to focus on solely on friendships and then they also came together in the school context to discuss "business." According to Jennifer, the purposeful focus on building relationships separate from the school setting strengthened their team.

Next I asked Jennifer whether there was anything that she reflected upon over the summer with respect to her work with her PLC that caused her to have what I called an “ah-ha” moment. Jennifer took little time to articulate her answer, and stated quickly that this had happened. Jennifer’s team met three times over the summer, and one question that drove their meetings was “what do we want to do differently?” The team’s opinion was that they already were “the best PLC in the school,” but they wanted to take their team to the next level. According to Jennifer, their team’s central motivation was “bragging rights” or the drive to be the best at what they are doing as a PLC.

Jennifer said that not only did the team question what they wanted to do differently, but they also examined what they had not done well the previous year that they could improve. What the team agreed upon was that they were very good at providing intervention to students who struggled with grade level concepts, but they did not do as good of a job at enriching students who showed early mastery of grade level material. Jennifer went on to say that the team divided the curriculum among its members and each member became an “expert” in one aspect of the curriculum. Once they had taken this step, each member was able to provide other members with strategies to provide enrichment to students. By Jennifer’s account, if each team member had tried to do this for all the students in her class in all subject areas, the task would have been overwhelming; but because each member was responsible for a portion of the curriculum, the task became more manageable, and the students benefited in the long run.

My next question to Jennifer probed her team’s motivation to operate at this high level – was the motivation extrinsic or intrinsic, bottom-up or top-down? Her response revealed that this team’s motivation was purely intrinsic and it was fueled by a

competitive nature. The essence of the work that Jennifer's PLC completed was not driven by administrators who dictated a focus for the PLC. Instead, Jennifer's PLC operated at a high level because of their desire to be "bragged upon." This team enjoyed the spotlight at the school, being mentioned in staff meetings or in school communications as a team who was modeling PLC expectations. When other teachers in the building chided the team about continually receiving administrators' praise, the team responded by looking for new ways to improve. Jennifer said that her team did this almost to antagonize their colleagues, and this motivated them.

Jennifer's final reflection on her work with her PLC was that in order for a team to function optimally, team members had to be willing to confront one another and have "thick skin." If team members were not willing to do this, and they placed too much value in their meetings on relationships, then "nothing would ever get done." Jennifer stated that some of her team's best work had been the product of the team's most emotional and difficult meetings, in which someone either cried or left a meeting, only to return to resume the work. Once the team was able to get past the emotional aspect of their work, they were better able to focus on "what they are all there for." Jennifer acknowledged that this was very hard, and the team reminded itself every time it met that their work could not be about personal feelings.

Of the six teachers that I interviewed for this project, Jennifer's team appeared to have achieved the majority of characteristics that are associated with high functioning teams as framed within the PLC model. In order to better articulate this assertion, I used the four categories that framed the questions teachers answered in the survey that was



administered to all Richview County employees in the spring of 2012. The first category was Mission and Vision.

In order to achieve the Sustaining Stage of a PLC, a team must be self-directed (DuFour et al., 2006). The team must also practice advocacy for students and focus on improving student learning. Finally, the team must also be comfortable holding each other accountable for outcomes. Based on Jennifer's responses, her team embodied these characteristics. The team worked diligently to place personal feelings aside, and they maintained student learning as their mission. Jennifer's discussion of how the team worked not only to build new team members' background knowledge but also to examine their long standing practices, demonstrated their focus the quality of instruction over expedience. The teachers' inquiry that took place during this process was an invaluable learning tool.

With respect to a focus on results and learning, Jennifer's team resembled teams in the Sustaining Stage, but based on Jennifer's answers, there was still work that her team needed to complete in this area in order to reach that level. They set curricular goals for their students and then established pacing guides. These teachers used the same assessments to gather data on their students. Then, they used the assessment results to plan classroom instruction and intervention and enrichment plans.

Jennifer's answers on this topic more closely resembled teachers in the Developing Phase because the work that Jennifer described within the team most closely aligned itself with this description.

With respect to results-orientation, Jennifer's team seems to have achieved the Sustaining Phase with because they do maintain a focus on results in their PLC work.

The team has specific structures and processes for teachers to meet regularly to discuss student achievement. Students who need additional assistance are identified and there is time built into the school day to provide certain students with the academic support that they need. The evidence for this rating was found in Jennifer's responses in June with respect to her team's processes for providing intervention to struggling students based on assessment results; then again in October when Jennifer discussed how the team changed some of its focus to enrichment to provide instruction to students who needed intervention on the high end as well as the low in order for the team to be sure that they were meeting the needs of all students.

Finally, Jennifer's interview responses exemplified a collaborative culture that operated effectively within her PLC. Jennifer's team reached the stage in their development where the team members could distinguish between interactions that were personal in nature and those that were uncomfortable but advanced the team's work. Not only did Jennifer's team achieve this objective in June when most of the team had established relationships between the members, but the team members were also able to achieve this status in by October of a new school year when new team members changed the team's make-up and dynamic.

Like the other teachers who were interviewed in the study, Jennifer also discussed the topics of structure, cohesiveness, accountability, and problem-solving. Of all the teachers, Jennifer's meeting structure appeared to be the most time-consuming as her PLC met daily. This structure did not appear to bother Jennifer or her team members. According to Jennifer, the team could predict which topics would be discussed on specific days as well as when their administrator would be present or absent from their

meetings. The premise of the PLC model is to provide extended planning sessions within the school day. While the structure of Jennifer's planning sessions did not meet this criterion because the teachers were only allotted 45 minute blocks, she did not appear to have negative feelings about this.

The cohesiveness on Jennifer's team was closely tied to their ability to hold each other accountable for following through on assigned tasks. Initially, Jennifer's PLC had the most difficulty talking to each other candidly about their individual strengths and weaknesses. Some of this difficulty lessened with time as the team members began to trust each other more, but the difficulty also had to be confronted because it was impacting student success. When new team members were added to the team in the fall of 2012, they had difficulty adjusting to the candor with which the veteran team members discussed personal strengths and needs.

This candor also supported the problem solving processes that needed to be inherent in the teachers' work. Once the team members could discuss student learning problems that they believed were closely related to the pedagogy within specific teacher's classrooms, the team was able to devise instructional strategies that would target the needs of struggling students as well as continue to accelerate those students who had already mastered grade level objectives.

### Summary

The case study participants were six teachers from different elementary schools in Richview County. Four were primary grade teachers, and two were upper elementary school teachers who had a range of teaching experience. The findings in this chapter afforded a detailed picture of the six teachers' perceptions regarding the role of the

Professional Learning Community in their daily teaching and instructional planning. Patterns in the teachers' beliefs about the Professional Learning Community model were also exposed. The in-depth details and patterns revealed in the case studies facilitated a deeper understanding of how teachers' beliefs and actions related collaboration and teaming impact instruction in their classrooms and the school climate.

Four major themes emerged in the interviews – structure, cohesion, accountability, and problem-solving. In addition to these four major themes, other supporting issues also surfaced. These sub-themes included the issue of time and how sufficient time or the lack thereof impacts the implementation of PLC's within a school. The teachers who were interviewed in this study also detailed issues of teacher autonomy, the implementation of common formative assessments, and their professional development within the context of Professional Learning Communities. All of these topics, as they are explored in the cross-case analysis, will address the research questions that drove this study.

The cross-case analysis, presented in the following chapter, elaborates on these recurrent themes that were present in all of the interviews, illuminating significant similarities and differences among the details and patterns of the six case studies.

## CHAPTER 5: CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

As mentioned at the beginning of Chapter 4, the qualitative methods used in this study were designed around answering the research questions; therefore, these findings were organized in terms of the topics of the research questions. For each case study, I outlined the teachers' perceptions of the PLC model (Research Question 1), and teachers' beliefs about how the PLC model impacts classroom instruction (Research Question 2).

This chapter cross-analyzes the results of the teacher interviews in order to draw comparisons and contrasts. It is my hope that once these similarities and differences are articulated, the results will provide insight into the structures of the PLC process that teachers are perceiving as positive and which structures need to be improved so that teachers continue to see the PLC process as one that impacts instruction in their classrooms and contributes to their professional development.

In each of the interviews, I asked teachers about the structure of their PLC's along with subsequent questions that probed which structures were the easiest to implement and which were the most difficult. It was my intention in asking these questions to gain a better understanding of teachers' perceptions of how the structural demands of the PLC model were impacting their day to day activities. By using the terms "easiest" and "most

difficult,” I hoped to gain greater insight into teacher attitudes without asking a question about attitudes directly. I also asked teachers in what ways their work with their PLC’s impacted their classroom instruction and how their PLC time contributed to their professional development. The responses to their questions are organized collectively within themes in this chapter.

### 5.1 Time

In each of the interviews, the subject of time was a dominant theme. All interviewees mentioned how time had been structured within their schools to provide opportunities for teachers to meet with their PLC’s. Three of the six teachers (Linda, Bonnie, and Caroline) reported having extended time to plan within the school day. One teacher reported that her PLC time was after school, and the last two teachers (Kelly and Jennifer) said that their PLC time was a 45 minute block within the school day. The teachers, who reported having time to meet within the school day, saw this as beneficial. Extended time during regular school hours allowed them enough time to disaggregate data results from their assessments and then create meaningful instructional plans for their students. Based upon their responses, the time allotted for the PLC was something upon which they could count – it was consistent time that was protected from other duties.

Kate, who reported having time after school with her PLC, also viewed this time as beneficial. The nature of her PLC discussions was similar to those teachers who had time during the instructional day to meet. While Kate viewed the time after school as valuable, she did mention that having to stay after regular work hours until 4:00 p. m. on PLC days was difficult at times.

Three of the six teachers also reported on themes of time management that they perceived as being a difficult aspect of the PLC model. Linda stated that making the transition from her PLC meeting to the beginning of her school day was difficult because she had not had time prior to the meeting to complete her morning, clerical routine. As mentioned earlier, Kate found staying until 4:00 p. m. difficult. Jennifer stated that her team needed to meet daily in order to fulfill their PLC commitments. She did not perceive daily meetings as a negative aspect of the PLC structure; the daily meetings had merely evolved as the expectations for the PLC process increased.

Bonnie and Caroline did not mention time constraints during the course of their interviews. Bonnie's PLC time ran from 1:00 p. m. until the end of the school day, which allowed flexibility as to meeting end times. Caroline was not specific as to when during the day her PLC met, but she also did not indicate that time was an issue for her team. According to Caroline, the team always had an agenda ready and had guiding questions for the meeting.

It was Kelly who expressed the most critical sentiments regarding the PLC model with respect to time. According to Kelly, 45 minutes was allotted weekly to PLC time for her grade level. That time was dominated by an administrator's agenda that dictated which topics would be discussed during the meeting, and these issues did not relate to PLC issues. This structure was different than those that were detailed by the five other teachers in the study. By Kelly's account, the PLC time was the most protected time during the school week, and the focus on assessment results and school initiatives left the teachers with no time to plan within the school day.

Kelly perceived the scheduled PLC time as stifling her team's creativity to plan "wonderful lessons." All of this team's planning occurred on Friday afternoons or through loosely organized teacher communication networks (e-mailing, phone calls, dinners and lunches, and blogging) taking place outside of the regular school day. This PLC experience was different from her experience in a school in another county where the teachers had extended time during the school day to plan. According to Kelly, this extended time allowed her to discuss students with her team mates and gave her time to create lessons. The 45 minutes that her team was allotted currently for PLC time was not enough for adequate discussion and planning (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; DuFour et al., 2006).

In the second interviews that were conducted in the fall of 2012, the subject of time was not as prevalent as it had been in our earlier conversations. It appeared, based on the teachers' responses, that the majority of their schedules had remained consistent from last school year to this school year, and they were settling into a well-established routine that included regular PLC meetings.

Linda mentioned that she struggled with time because she had been assigned to a grade one/two combination class. The structure of the school's master schedule did not allow her to attend both the grade one and two PLC meetings, and Linda had to get the grade one information at another time. She was disappointed that she could not participate in the first grade planning sessions. Several schools in Richview County had to create combination classes at the elementary level in order to accommodate rising enrollment numbers along with decreased teacher allotments. The creation of these combination (or multi-grade classrooms) posed dilemmas to the teachers who were



assigned to these classrooms. The PLC model assumes that elementary school teachers will collaborate intensively with their grade level teams in order to align their instruction across the grade level and also provide remediation and/or enrichment to students based on the grade level's common formative assessments. This cannot realistically happen for teachers working across two grade levels, who would need additional release time to meet with both teams.

Teachers like Linda, who are assigned to two grade levels, must choose which grade level on which to focus based on the structure of the master schedule. According to Linda, she wanted to attend the first grade meetings, but school administration had assigned her to the second grade team. This assignment, at times, increased Linda's workload when she had to look at second grade plans and modify them for first grade students in order to meet their needs and address first grade curricular topics.

Bonnie's schedule changed from the previous year, and she indicated that her team was still adjusting. While Bonnie's team still had time within the school day to plan, the master schedule had been changed and the team no longer had its planning time at the end of the day. This schedule, according Bonnie, allowed the team extra time for planning because the teachers could extend their discussions with little interruption after the school day ended. The negative aspect of last year's schedule was that it allowed little time for writing instruction. Based on the new master schedule, Bonnie's team was now planning in the middle of the school day. In Bonnie's opinion, this new schedule allowed more time for writing, but it did not allow adequate time for math.

With all the student assessments that needed to be completed at the beginning of the school year, Bonnie's team did not have enough time, with the new master schedule

requirements. In order to complete the assessments, Bonnie's team decided to take personal days and have substitute teachers run their classrooms while they conducted assessments on their children. Bonnie attributed the drive for assessment completion to the strong bond on her team. The team perceived a problem and then came together to decide how best to solve it. The teachers were able to create one set of lesson plans for all the substitutes because their daily lessons were so closely aligned. The substitute teachers were able to come in for three consecutive days and conduct the class, allowing the teachers to complete their assessments. Therefore, Bonnie's perception of time in this second interview, focused as much on time saving and working smarter rather than the schedule and structure of her school day.

In summary, the teachers raised two essential issues related to time – how much total time was allotted each week for PLC meetings and which days and times each week that their PLC's met. All teachers stated that they had time within their work week to plan. Five of the six teachers had time within their regular school days to plan. Only one teacher, Kate, had planning time after the school day had ended. The time factor is essential to understanding the Professional Learning Community concept within schools. In order for teachers to effectively implement the Professional Learning Community model, time needs to be allotted to meet within the school day. When time outside the school day is expected, administrators send two messages to teachers. First, is that their planning time is separate from their work. The second message is that planning is not valued as a critical element of instruction so it does not have to be situated within the regular school day (DuFour, et al., 2006).

DuFour et al. also posit that the planning work during the teachers' PLC time needs to be focused on student need, which is measured by the results of the Common Formative Assessments that are administered. Again, five of the six teachers reported that the work that they were doing during their PLC time was driven by their assessments. Only Kelly stated that no PLC meeting time was devoted to discussions around student need. Kelly's PLC time was dominated by information sharing, and the school administrators created the agendas. Kelly's team discussed student need during another time, and administrators left the burden of finding common time for instructional planning up to the teachers.

Kelly's team faced another problem with respect to time that the other five teachers did not have. Her team's work was impacted by how time was used, and this issue was also closely related to teacher autonomy. In her interview, Kelly stated repeatedly that she did not have time to plan wonderful lessons, and she equated that lack of time to the lack of input her team had with respect to their PLC agendas.

Conversely, Bonnie's team was more autonomous. Her team of teachers was able to negotiate an arrangement with her school administrators to bring in substitute teachers to continue classroom instruction while the teachers completed the assessments with individual students outside of the classroom.

Based on the information that the teachers provided, the subjects of time and autonomy appear to be closely related. Kelly, who struggled to find time to plan lessons, had the least amount of autonomy in her meetings. On the other hand, the other teachers who were interviewed had more control over their PLC agendas. While each of them

alluded to time in their interviews, they did not appear to be as concerned as Kelly was with how the lack of time impacted their work.

## 5.2 Common Formative Assessments

Common Formative Assessments (CFA's) are a piece of the PLC process that help teachers know which students need extra help with objectives that are being taught as well as which students may need enrichment if they have already mastered an objective based on the results of the CFA (DuFour et al. 2006). Each of the six teachers interviewed mentioned Common Formative Assessments as a piece of their PLC processes.

During the school year 2011-2012, Richview County district leaders set clear expectations for the administration of Common Formative Assessments. According to district guidelines, teachers were to administer eight Common Formative Assessments within the school year. Based on the consistency regarding CFA's in the six teachers' responses, school administrators carried the district's expectations back to their schools and the teachers were incorporating CFA data into their PLC discussions.

All of the teachers who were interviewed spoke in detail about how they use the results of the CFA's to drive their team planning sessions. Each teacher uses the data in a different way to address their students' needs, but the focus of the planning is always guided by the assessment results. Kate, Caroline, and Jennifer discussed how they share students across the grade level, by moving students from teacher to teacher or by having the teachers move to students, in order to address specific skills. Linda and Bonnie indicated that they do not share students with other teachers on the grade level, and it was

unclear from Kelly's response as to whether students were moved between teachers for interventions.

Linda and Bonnie also spoke about how the PLC model has made them look more closely at learning objectives. In their PLC's, the teachers were able to carry out deeper discussions about learning objectives and the learning goals for the students. Jennifer mentioned how her work with her PLC had strengthened the instruction across the grade level because the teachers used the results of their Common Formative Assessments to discuss which teacher had the most effective strategy for teaching a specific concept based on the results of the assessment.

All of the teachers noted that the PLC model and its focus on CFA assessment data helped them maintain a stronger focus on student needs. With the exception of Kelly, the remaining teachers discussed that their planning sessions prior to working in the PLC model spotlighted teaching activities that were curricular in nature, but not driven by student need. Linda explained that prior to planning in the PLC model, grade level meetings included discussions about field trips. Bonnie, Kate, and Jennifer said that planning sessions prior to PLC implementation were superficial in nature. Their teams aligned curriculum around pacing guides and then shared the pages from a basal or math text that would drive their instruction. In the interviews, no teacher indicated that, prior to working in the PLC model, she would re-teach specific skills to students when they had not reached mastery, which is common when making data based decisions using CFA's.

Of all the teachers, Kelly and Caroline voiced the most comments regarding how Common Formative Assessments had changed their planning sessions. Kelly indicated

that, even prior to PLC implementation, her teaching teams used the Common Formative Assessment model to instruct students. According to Kelly, the CFA's were the least difficult structure to implement with regard to PLC's because "we pretty much were doing that." Their team based lessons around the results of CFA data, looked at trends, and then decided upon interventions. She went on to say that she did not perceive Professional Learning Communities as a model for instruction; it was more like what she had always done except that now there were more structured rules to it. In her words, "it's just one more hoop to jump through."

Caroline noted that her team's planning sessions were more focused under the PLC model but she expressed a concern that her team was becoming too driven by the four, core questions that drove the work of the PLC. As mentioned earlier, these questions are:

1. What do want our students to learn?
2. How will we know when they have learned it?
3. How will we respond when they do not learn it?
4. How will we respond if they already know it?

Caroline believed that the questions kept her team on topic and their discussions were purposeful, but she also felt that the team did not have the opportunity to share ideas beyond the four questions.

In the second interviews, the topic of Common Formative Assessments (CFA's) was revisited in order to see if the focus on these assessments was as prominent as it had been in the spring interviews. Two of the four teachers who participated in second interviews, Kate and Jennifer, indicated that their team created new Common Formative

Assessments at the start of the school year. For Kate's team, the new assessments were created in order to provide instructional depth that she believed was lacking in the previous year's assessments. For Jennifer, the new assessments had to be created because of a curricular shift to implementing the Common Core State Standards.

It appears that the creation of these new assessments occurred after a collective and reflective process by the teachers on their respective teams. According to Jennifer, the team's initial plan was to reuse last year's assessment because it was expedient to do so. A new team member questioned this plan because she believed that certain questions on the assessment did not align with the new standards. The new team member was outvoted, and the assessment was given. Once the team studied the assessment results and through discussion and reflection, the teachers realized that the old assessment did not align with the new standards. Based on Jennifer's account, the new teachers that were added to her team brought a new perspective and fostered reflection. In hindsight, Jennifer wished that the veteran team members had been more open to listening to the new team members' perspectives sooner because they would not have wasted time on an assessment that did not capture students' curricular strengths and needs.

For Kate's team, the decision to create new Common Formative Assessments was based on a shift in the school's focus to writing across the curriculum (integrating writing into all content areas) and the shift to the Common Core State Standards. Kate recounted how last year her team focused on story structure as the basis for its CFA's. Students were assessed on the literary terms of setting, character, plot sequence, etc. and then intervention was provided to students based on the terms that they did not know.

This year, Kate said that her team chose to go “more big picture” and focus on decoding. The team was now emphasizing “reading strategies” and word families. Kate anticipated that her team of teachers would go into “more meaningful, higher-level thinking questions as far as reading goes.” I had some trouble following Kate’s line of thinking regarding her team’s reading instruction since decoding is not typically considered to be a “big picture” skill. Subsequent questions revealed that Kate’s team was planning on starting with decoding skills in order to provide a solid reading foundation to their students, and then the team was moving on to higher level comprehension strategies.

In the second interview, Kate also discussed her team’s plan for CFA’s in math. Last year, Kate’s team would look at which skills needed remediation, and they would design an assessment to target those skills. This year, the team decided to use skill based assessments that they were already doing in class to determine their students’ needs and then provide remediation or enrichment based on the results. Like Jennifer’s team, the reflective process that the team underwent in the second year of PLC implementation allowed for the teachers’ processes to be streamlined. Both Kate and Jennifer indicated that this year they believed that their teams were working smarter and not harder.

Linda and Bonnie stated that neither of their teams had been able to administer their first CFA because of all the other initial assessments that their grade levels were conducting. Both stated that they knew they would be responsible again this year for creating and administering CFA’s to their students, but at the time of year in which these second interviews were conducted, both teams had placed an emphasis on completing different baseline tests that were required by the county. Both stated that the number of



required assessments given at the beginning of the year had not allowed them time to administer a first Common Formative Assessment. This is possible given the timing of the interviews; Linda and Bonnie were interviewed approximately two weeks prior to Kate and Jennifer.

The analysis of teacher comments surrounding the Common Formative Assessments and their administration raised several matters for further exploration. First, CFA's are administered to students in order to help teachers target their instruction to meet student need. Jennifer's interview, however, illustrated another issue. When Jennifer's team discussed their Common Formative Assessment results, part of their discussion included which teaching strategy garnered the strongest results. Teachers on Jennifer's team were then able to modify their classroom instruction to improve student outcomes. If Common Formative Assessments are viewed through this lens, the assessments are as much about helping teachers improve their instruction as they are about improving student outcomes. Therefore, the CFA's if they are fully utilized might be capable of serving two purposes.

There are also two points to consider when examining Common Formative Assessments. The first point was illustrated in Jennifer's interview when she talked about how changes in the curriculum forced the teachers on her team to re-examine the assessment that had been given to students in the previous school year. For reasons of expediency, the teachers on Jennifer's team decided to use the same assessment that had been given previously. They realized once they examined the results that their students approached the assessment with prerequisite knowledge that students had not had the year before due to changes in the curriculum.

This situation illustrates the need for teachers to engage in the reflective practice as advocated by Schon (1998). Without reflection and discussion, Jennifer's team would have ignored what their students' test results were communicating to them. The assessment results in this case actually could have hindered their classroom instruction because the assessments were not aligned with the curriculum.

The second matter that Common Formative Assessments raise is related to the theme of autonomy. In Caroline's interview, she indicated that the expectation her administrators set for the teachers was to examine their CFA results in the context of four guiding questions mentioned earlier in this section. While she acknowledged that these questions allowed her team to better target their instruction to meet student need, the focus on only these questions and excluding others that the team deemed important diminished her team's autonomy

### 5.3 Collaborative Planning

This section addresses teachers' general impressions of how the PLC, apart from Common Formative Assessments, has impacted their classrooms and how the collaborative planning process impacts teachers' PLC time. As a way of shedding light on these teachers' perceptions regarding the PLC model in general and their PLC's specifically, I have chosen to center my discussion on the adjectives and phrases that the teachers commonly used to describe Professional Learning Communities.

Unity and cohesion appeared to be common terms that were brought up by teachers in the interviews. Linda used these words specifically to describe her PLC's level of functioning. She described the team as improving in their skills of ascertaining what a certain objective for students entailed and then being able to design a relevant

assessment for students. Linda went on to say that her team had become reflective on what class needs were. If one teacher needed to add more time to teach a specific skill, then there was flexibility on the team to allow for that.

Linda used words such as “share” and “delegate” to describe how her team manages the multiple demands of the PLC model. This particular team delegated responsibilities so that each teacher on the team had a specific job duty away from the PLC. When the PLC met at its regularly scheduled time, the team members knew that each teacher came prepared with a work product that was delegated to her.

Bonnie also used the term “sharing” to describe one of her PLC’s actions. She compared team sharing in the time period prior to PLC implementation as the sharing of activities that pertained to a particular unit of study to her PLC’s current model of sharing with a purpose. The team shared activities in order to help teachers meet student needs, but now the activities were designed for particular students, not a whole group. In the days prior to PLC implementation, Bonnie would give a unit test, grade the papers, and as she said, “walk away” to begin a new unit without reflecting on the test results. That no longer happens with Bonnie’s PLC group; now students who needed extra time to achieve mastery on a topic were provided with additional time.

Bonnie viewed her collaboration with her PLC as a challenge to make herself a better teacher. Through her work with her PLC, Bonnie also discovered different ways to challenge her students. Bonnie reported that some of her PLC discussions recently focused on strategies to extend the curriculum for students who had already mastered a concept prior to a unit being taught. This phenomenon was something that was new to

Bonnie, and she looked to her teammates to help her design activities to challenge her students.

Kate, like Bonnie explained how her work with her PLC allowed the team to teach skills and concepts to master before moving on. Prior to working under the PLC model, teachers on Kate's grade level were not highly collaborative. There was no team planning or teachers sharing documents with each other. The team shared the units that they would be teaching in order to pace their instruction and then planning around these units was done individually. Like Bonnie, Kate saw her work with the PLC as providing teachers with the "grade level view." Teachers on the grade level now knew what specific students needed, what classroom clusters needed, and what skills entire grade levels needed in order to better tailor instruction to meet those needs. This level of specialized instruction had not been possible prior to PLC implementation at Kate's school.

Caroline was the only interview candidate who mentioned being part of more than one Professional Learning Community at her school. In addition to being part of a grade level PLC, Caroline was also part of what she called a "correlate team," focused on the implementation of Readers' Workshop. The team was comprised of teachers from every grade level at the school who met monthly to discuss Readers' Workshop effectiveness for this school's students. The correlate team studied running record data from the school in order to determine if their choice to implement Readers' Workshop school-wide has been an appropriate choice for their school. This team also studied the vertical alignment in their reading curriculum from grade to grade so that the team may inform teachers how better to support student skills in reading from grade level to grade level.

The work on this correlate team, as well as the work that Caroline does with her grade level PLC, has allowed her to “feel like a bit more of a professional.” Instead of focusing on “cute activities,” Caroline’s work with both her PLCs allows her to shape instruction based on student need. Caroline has been able to discover teaching strategies shared by colleagues that may be more effective for her students.

Unlike Bonnie, who stated that her team struggled with paperwork completion (especially the Common Formative Assessment spreadsheet) Caroline found that the paperwork required under the new PLC model was easier for her team to embrace. In her words, “I think it’s all just kinda getting used to the new processes.”

In contrast to Caroline’s observation regarding the new processes that PLCs developed, Jennifer viewed PLC implementation as a way to fine tune and bring greater focus to the processes that already existed on her team. Jennifer’s team scheduled additional meeting times incrementally as the demands for PLC implementation increased. Their PLC times were separated into reading discussions, math discussions, curricular topics with their assistant principal of instruction, “unfinished business” from the previous days’ meetings, and then team planning for topics such as homework and differentiation plans so that there was consistency across the grade level for parents.

When her PLC first started meeting, Jennifer called the meetings a “worksheet flop,” where teachers brought the worksheets that they used to teach a specific skill or concept and then the grade level traded those worksheets based on their interest and student ability. From there, the team began to discuss student outcomes and grade level expectations. As the team has honed their craft, they were able to look at standard and student outcomes, design a pre-assessment for a skill, administer the assessment, and then

use the results to guide their instruction. This process has also allowed for greater consistency between classrooms regarding student grading standards. The teachers wanted to be sure that grading across their classrooms was consistent in order to divert parent concerns.

Finally, Jennifer believed that she “pushes herself” more being part of a PLC than she did before the model was implemented. As part of a PLC, she held herself closely to the standards that the grade level set for themselves. On each assessment, Jennifer wanted to have the most growth on her team. For her, it was the internal competition that drove her to make sure that she was “pulling her weight and doing her part.” On days when she might have wanted to look for an easier assignment for students or one that was not as complicated for her to teach, Jennifer avoided falling into that pattern because she knew that her teammates were “pushing on” and she did not want to let them down.

Unlike the five teachers who saw the benefits of working within a PLC, Kelly voiced concerns regarding the model’s impact on her professionalism. In general, Kelly’s responses were more critical regarding the PLC model than her five peers.

Planning, according to Kelly, took place during lunch periods, over dinner with grade level members, or during weekend lunches. Based on her responses, Kelly did not equate her current PLC format with lesson collaboration, and in her words, “I’m not learning anything through that.” Her teammates did book studies independently, co-authored blogs, and wrote lesson plans for a popular website “Teachers Pay Teachers.”

The discussion in this section raises the topics of teacher self-efficacy, collaborative problem solving, and consistency. Most of the teachers indicated that their work with their PLC’s made them feel more effective as teachers. Caroline used the

phrase “more professional,” and Jennifer and Bonnie stated that their work within the PLC made them push themselves more in order to look for high quality instructional strategies or different ways to meet their students’ needs.

This aspect of self-efficacy was also related to the problem solving that took place within some of the PLC meetings. Bonnie and her team had to devise better instructional plans when a large group of students scored high on a pre-assessment, indicating that many of the students had already mastered the skills that were going to be taught in an upcoming unit. Bonnie’s team worked together to design enrichment activities in order to meet these students’ needs.

Finally, the issue of consistency is one that was mentioned by some of the interviewees. When teachers on a grade level plan in isolation, they do not take into account the work of other teachers or students on the grade level. This practice can develop an inequity of knowledge across a grade level. This inequity can affect test scores at the end of a grade and the teachers in subsequent grade levels. It appears, based on the interviews, that the PLC model and its focus on collaborative planning creates consistency between classrooms and a shared expectation for student learning. All of the teachers who were interviewed alluded to this consistency in their interviews, and they believed that it was a positive aspect of the PLC process.

#### 5.4 Collaborative Relationships

When schools are described as communities and groups of teachers as teams, notions of connectedness, collegiality, and relationships are conveyed. For teachers, this aspect of community may be very effective in combating the sense of isolation that is inherent in the teaching profession (Achinstein, 2002).

Each teacher who was interviewed spoke in some detail about their team members. Of all the teachers interviewed for this project, Jennifer offered the most insight into her team's dynamic. There were six people on Jennifer's team; three team members had been together for five years; one joined the team during 2010 school year, and two members were new in 2011. According to Jennifer, the goal of her team was to "identify each other's strengths and area for improvement to help ourselves and each other as a team."

According to Rick DuFour (2004), teachers who engage in the type of professional dialogue that Jennifer describes can help transform a school into a Professional Learning Community and thereby bring about the organizational change. By Jennifer's account, these discussions were difficult for the team, but they had made this decision to target each other's strengths and needs in order to improve instruction on their grade level.

The team began this examination process in each of their meetings by studying student data. Based on the data, which could be focused on assessment results or student growth, the teachers decided which of them had the greatest success in teaching a particular concept and that teacher became responsible for remediating the students on the grade level who did not master that concept. Jennifer characterized her team as a strong group of women who were committed to having a good PLC.

This description, when compared with the other interviews, provided the most insight into the team's collaborative relationship. Linda, Bonnie, and Kate all were part of a team that added new members at the start of the school year or during the school year. Kelly indicated that she was part of a PLC that had a variety of experience levels.



One teacher on this team was due to retire within a year; the others' experience levels were not detailed. Rather Kelly spoke of her teammates in terms of their strengths. One teacher on that team was creative, and Kelly described herself as being good with data, numbers, and research.

Caroline did not speak in detail regarding the composition of her team; she characterized her group as a "strong team that works very well together. There's a lot of trust." Caroline also described her team as professional and friendly with one another. Caroline linked that trust to the relationship the school's administration had with her team as well. The school administration trusted this team to do its job, and therefore was not present at each PLC meeting.

For Linda, Bonnie, and Kate, who were each part of teams who added new members, the importance of the team cohesiveness was mentioned. According to Linda, "for all of them to mesh; that was another goal for us to get over as well." Bonnie described her team's dynamic, stating that since this was their first year together, the team was coming together to discuss their assessments, but they had not reached the point in their collaboration where they could "take the data and learn from one another." Apparently, they had not reached the point where they could share how the more successful teachers, in terms of student results, taught a specific skill or concept.

Finally, Kate, not only had new team members with her at the beginning of the year, but her PLC membership changed again mid-year as well. While Kate acknowledged the change in the team's composition, she noted that the group that was working together, dividing the work by subject matter, creating the plans and then coming back to share what they had done so that their planning for the week was

complete. This was very different from the beginning of the year when the team would discuss the concepts that they were teaching and then planning in isolation.

The discussion of collaborative relationships addressed research question 1 - what do teachers identify as factors that contribute to the success of PLC's and factors that hinder their success? No teacher who was interviewed for this project communicated dislike for their team members. At times, some of them may have been frustrated when a team member did not follow through on a task, but overall, the teachers appeared to genuinely like their colleagues. Therefore, one quality that could contribute to the success of the PLC is the quality of the relationship that exists between its members.

The quality of these relationships appeared to develop over time. Linda, Bonnie, Kate, and Jennifer all discussed how new relationships on their grade level affected the team dynamic. Some teams were able to adjust to the newness more quickly, as in the case of Kate's team. Other relationships took longer to build, as in Bonnie's case when she stated that her team had not achieved a level of trust that allowed the team members to share openly about which instructional strategies benefitted students the most.

These relationships could also counteract the feelings of isolation that can be inherent in teaching (Hargreaves, 2006). Kate acknowledged that her team, as they worked together longer, developed a routine in their planning that combined independent work and collaborative work. According to Kate, this process helped assuage the isolation that had been present on her team previously.

### 5.5 Critical Conversations

“Policy makers should consider naïve initiatives to put teachers in groups and expect them to learn and grow, disregarding the complexity of the collaborative process

and the time needed to navigate differences” (Achinstein, 2002). Three of the four second interviews revealed aspects of conflict that were present on each of the teams. In both of Jennifer’s interviews, she recounted critical conversations between teachers that resulted in team members leaving meetings upset by the discussion. Jennifer stated in both interviews the understanding that her team had about their personal and professional relationships and the necessity for keeping them separate. When I interviewed Jennifer in June, she stated that her team had been together for several years, and they had reached an understanding between the team members regarding personal and professional relationships. Difficult conversations that took place during PLC meetings were necessary in order to keep the team focused on meeting student needs.

This dynamic changed in the October interview because new team members joined the PLC. This change in the dynamics of the team forced the team members to examine its common bonds. Jennifer did not believe that her team was as strong as it had been since new members joined. The team had to take more time to explain its past thinking to new team members who lacked specific curricular work previously accomplished by the team and/or historical team knowledge. Jennifer’s new team was navigating the space between making new team members feel welcome and liked while still holding them accountable for promised work. Lack of follow-through on tasks by some team members was a new issue the team was encountering – a problem that had not occurred with the former team.

Jennifer’s team chose to confront the problem directly. Team members who did not arrive with their promised work were told that the team did not have what it needed to plan on that day. According to Jennifer, the conversations had been uncomfortable, but

the veteran team members were choosing to confront the issue because they knew how well their team functioned previously, and they were not willing to sacrifice the quality of their team to protect relationships. When the problem was confronted, the person who arrived unprepared left the meeting, in Jennifer's words, "not in the best mood or with the biggest smile," but by the next meeting, that person arrived with work that was assigned.

In her second interview, Linda alluded to a very similar situation. Unlike Jennifer, Linda's team remained stable from last year to the previous year; no new team members were present. Since there was stability, Linda stated that there was also a comfort level between team members as well. This comfort level allowed, at times, for deep discussion and informed team decisions on curricular matters. Linda said that the team arrived at a collective decision to pilot a new vocabulary program this year. Not all members were in agreement, but because the team members had solid relationships, they were able to work through the conflict and made the decision to move forward.

The team's solid relationship, however, did not carry over to math planning. Like Jennifer, Linda recounted a problem the team was having with not all members being prepared with materials for every planning meeting. Unlike Jennifer's team who had directly confronted the issue, this topic appeared to be more on the horizon for Linda's team. According to Linda, her team had not yet confronted the problem because team members' lack of preparedness had not been a consistent problem at this point in the school year. Linda believed that because the team had been together for more than a year, the comfort level between team members would allow for more candid discussions, and they would work through this issue. She believed that part of the issue lay in the fact

that the increased comfort level caused some team members to backslide because they were so comfortable with the relationships that were present on the team.

Like Jennifer's team, Bonnie's team had to confront issues of conflict on the team. In our first interview, Bonnie stated that her team was able to align their lessons and disaggregate their assessment data, but they were not able to have discussions about which teaching strategies garnered the best results on assessments. Based on our second interview, it appeared as though Bonnie's team had proceeded tensely through the past school year. End-of-year stresses forced the situation to a head for the team, and they engaged in a critical conversation about their team and how it functioned. This conversation included how they could improve as a team and the creation of new ground rules to govern their work. Part of the team agreement was never to discuss the previous year unless it was in a positive light. This discussion made a big difference in the team's ability to plan cooperatively. They were able to rely on each other, share ideas more openly, and asked for help from each other when needed. This included sharing strategies on how to teach a particular skill or concept; this aspect had been absent from team planning sessions last year.

Jennifer pointed to three other factors that she believed helped the team's function. The first was the move to the Common Core State Standards. The team's unfamiliarity with the new curriculum placed every teacher on the team in new territory. As a result, the team members had to go through a common experience of learning new material together; this had a bonding effect. Second, Bonnie's child was no longer a student on the grade level. Bonnie believed that her joining the team last year and bringing her child to the school created undue stress on her team. The team had to learn

about Bonnie not only as a colleague but as a parent as well. In the previous school year, Bonnie also taught the academically gifted cluster of students as well. When the team created its common assessments, Bonnie's results looked stronger because of her class make-up. At times, this fostered hard feelings. These three factors contributed to the team's dysfunction. Once, however, the team was able to confront these multiple issues, the relationship was strengthened.

While one goal of the Professional Learning Community is to foster collaboration and teamwork between teachers, a deep level of collaboration often cannot occur without conflict. A search for consensus can, at times, raise the level of anxiety. The airing of diverse perspectives in a close setting and raising the expectations for individual input can increase the opportunity for conflict (Achinstein, 2002). It appeared, however, that the teams, who chose to confront the conflict, emerged with a strong relationship and sense of respect among team members. I am curious to see if Linda's team will follow through with the conversation about accountability that Linda believed was due. I am also interested in Kate's team that, by her account, had no difficulties with one another and relied on consistent cell phone communication to make sure deadlines were being adhered to and that the work of the team was being completed.

This issue of critical conversations addressed the first research question with respect to another factor that can contribute to success within a PLC. These conversations can also hinder the success of a PLC, depending upon how these critical conversations are handled by team members. By examining these conversations through the organizational theory lens, it appears as though the conflict that certain groups of teachers are experiencing is influencing how they behave toward one another, and the

conflict in some cases is improving pedagogical discussions, which results in improved lessons and teaching strategies being in the classroom. As mentioned in Chapter 1, learning that results in creating new insight to change behavior and routinely question values, guide organizations to a more critical type of learning. Such inquiry develops a sense of the nature of conflict, its causes and consequences, resulting in an organization that governs action (Achinstein, 2002).

### 5.6 PLC's and Professional Development

An underlying assumption of PLC's is that if the organization is to become more effective in helping students learn, then the organization itself must be engaged in continual learning. Therefore, arrangements must be created within the organization to ensure that staff members participate in job embedded learning as part of their typical work routines (DuFour et al., 2006).

Five of the six teachers interviewed said that they considered the work with their PLC's as part of their own professional development. Linda and Caroline believed that the PLC work improved the focus on their planning. For Linda, she looked at curricular objectives in relation to her students' skills and planned activities that helped them meet those objectives. Prior to doing work in the PLC model, Linda's plans were driven by teachers' editions of textbooks and basal units provided by publishers. Now, all teachers on the team contributed ideas related to the objectives that needed to be taught, and the team was more cohesive.

Caroline echoed this sentiment, stating that she felt more professional because of her work with the PLC. Instead of looking for "cute activities," her team focused on an essential learning standard and created lesson plans that aligned, not only with the

standard, but also with student needs. Caroline's plans focused on "whether every child has got it."

Bonnie, Kate, and Jennifer's answers were similar in that they believed that the collaborative work in their PLC's contributed to their professional development. Bonnie stated that anytime, in any aspect of life, when one is cut off from other people, there is a tendency to "wander off the path." Bonnie's work in the PLC kept her focused and kept her team on a common path. Bonnie believed that she kept better records of her student abilities and she was able to tailor her instruction to meet individual student needs because of the data that her PLC collected regularly.

Like Bonnie, Kate saw her team's collaboration as contributing to her professional development. When Kate had casual conversations with colleagues during the school day, it was part of her learning process because she was hearing other perspectives and sharing ideas with other teachers about how to meet the needs of students. In team meetings, Kate was able to share which strategies worked to help students master a skill and also learn from other teachers which tactics they used with students.

The sentiment of learning from one another was echoed in Jennifer's interview as well. Jennifer stated that she learned from everyone; her entire team learned from one another and they recognized that fact. "I feel like everything I hear just becomes, you know, just goes into the bank of what I need to know to be better at what I do. These five teachers saw that the work with their PLC contributed to their professional learning and that the PLC process enhanced their professional development opportunities.



Their beliefs were very different from Kelly, who saw that she continued to learn and grow professionally in spite of the PLC process because she learned independently. “The way that it (PLC) is implemented here is hindering my ability to be a better teacher because I do not have time in my day to make great lessons. I have wonderful ideas. I have a wonderful AIG (Academically-Intellectually Gifted) teacher with great resources within the school and they are bringing me, constantly, these wonderful things. But it is all on your own time. You’re not sitting down with your team-mates and saying, ‘look at this.’”

As mentioned earlier, Kelly ran a blog with fellow teachers. She contributed regularly to a website called “Teachers Pay Teachers.” Her team members and other colleagues met regularly to discuss educational ideas and topics, but it was totally separate from their work within Professional Learning Community. A regular topic of discussion among Kelly’s peers was the lack of planning time that is afforded to teachers in her school. She saw so many other initiatives “coming down” that her team spent what is supposed to be planning time doing other things and she felt that that did not contribute to her professional learning. In fact, Kelly saw this lack of common planning time as a contributing factor to teacher turnover rate. “Good teachers have to do everything related to instructional planning on their own time. They spend their own money for instructional supplies, and have great ideas for their classrooms, but adequate time is not given within the school day for teachers to plan and then implement.”

As mentioned in Chapter 2, in order for professional development to be effective, it must be differentiated through its delivery. Book studies, action research, data analysis, collaborative planning, and reflective questioning are just some of the forms that

differentiated professional development may assume. Birman et al. (2000) referred to this quality as form.

Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) echoed the same opinion regarding collaboration and reflection. Teachers need blocks of time to plan collaboratively, share what they know, discuss what they want to learn, and then have time to reflect on the effectiveness of what they teach. The role of the teacher is that of a researcher, according to Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin.

When one examines the teachers' responses in this manner, the stories that they tell support the notion that the work that most are doing within the context of their PLC's is assisting with what they consider to be their professional development. All of the teachers who were interviewed stated that their practice had been changed by the PLC process. The majority believed that this change had been positive. It is this change with individuals that ultimately impacts the organization and helps the organization learn, grow, and change.

### Summary

There were additional themes that surfaced as the cases were compared against each other - time, reflection, autonomy, self-efficacy, problem solving, consistency, conflict, and teacher learning. These themes were intricately woven in the teachers' interview responses. A statement that Jennifer made during her interview captured several of these themes simultaneously.

Jennifer offered words of advice to those who are beginning a PLC journey. "You have to go in with your thick skin, and you have to be willing to confront because if we went into every meeting just caring about everyone's feelings, we would never get

anything done. Our best decisions and our best plans have come out of our most emotional meetings that we have ever had. Either someone has cried or someone has stomped out for five minutes and come back. But once we get past that and we bring ourselves back to remembering what we're really there for, we get our best work done. So it's hard. We have to remind ourselves every single time that we sit down together, but it really can't be about personal feelings."

I saved Jennifer's reflections for last because her words appeared to summarize the advantage of the PLC model most concisely. While each of the teachers interviewed alluded to the statement that Jennifer made in her summary, none of them were able to capture the emotion of Jennifer's thoughts or beliefs. In a profession in which it is necessary to build strong relationships with students in order to teach them, it may be difficult for some teachers to confront a colleague and risk damaging a personal/professional relationship. At the heart of the PLC model, however, it is this ability to for team mates to hold each other accountable for the team's performance. The success of the team may just be dependent on the aspect of teaming that is the most difficult for the majority of team mates.

My impression of the teachers' final interviews was that in their own ways, each was becoming accustomed to the school system's expectations regarding the Professional Learning Community model. In the spring interviews, some of the teachers alluded to an absence of autonomy due to "top-down" enforcement of expectations regarding how their team functioned as a PLC and what activities were expected to be present in each team meeting. This aspect was most clearly seen in the teacher interviews regarding the administration of Common Formative Assessments and how the results of that data

would be used to drive planning. The discussion of administrative expectations was almost non-existent in the fall interviews. Rather, each teacher who was interviewed discussed their PLC in terms of how they operated. The absence of administrative expectations could be explained by the time of the year during which the second interviews took place. As at the end of a school year, the beginning of a school year is extremely hectic, and it is possible that administrators in getting schools up and running for the new school year did not have the time to impose and reinforce strict expectations on PLC functions because their focus was elsewhere. The absence of “top-down” compliance expectations, which appeared to afford the teachers with more autonomy, could also signal a move from the compliance phase in the PLC model development to a phase in which collaborative practice had become more embedded and/or a natural part of the schools’ processes.

## CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study was designed to gain a deeper understanding of elementary teachers' beliefs about the role that Professional Learning Communities play and the role of the Professional Learning Community in their daily teaching, instructional planning, and professional learning. Set within the context of a school system that had recently implemented the Professional Learning Community model across the school system, qualitative methods were employed to analyze data. In seeking to better understand teachers' beliefs and practices regarding Professional Learning Communities, the following questions guided this study:

1. What perceptions do teachers who participate in Professional Learning Communities have regarding the PLC model? In particular, what do they identify as factors that contribute to the success of PLC's and factors that hinder their success?
2. What do teachers who participate in Professional Learning Communities say about changes in their classroom instruction?

Survey information provided baseline information on teachers' beliefs. The interview responses provided an in-depth discussion that addressed research question 1. The following discussion is organized around my research questions, followed by a

general discussion of the implications of this study for practice and future research.

While it is important to note that the information gained in a qualitative study such as this may not be generalized to other cases, the information that the interviews provide does offer insight into the successes and limitations of the Professional Learning Community model in this particular school system.

This study is important because it used teacher voices to outline the current successes and areas for improvement within a specific school system. Too often, teacher perspectives and opinions are overlooked in the decision making process when school systems embark on new initiatives (Wenger, 1998). This study incorporated the views of those (teachers) who are impacted daily by decisions that occur both inside and outside of the school building. It is these teachers who ultimately will be responsible for the success or failure of Professional Learning Communities. Therefore, it is essential that their opinions be considered if an organization is to learn, change, and grow (DuFour et al., 2006; Feiman-Nemser, 2006).

#### 6.1 Teacher Perceptions Regarding the Professional Learning Community Model

As mentioned in the introduction to this study, teachers, like students, need the benefit of learning by doing (DuFour et al., 2006). Collaboration with other teachers, examination of student work, and the sharing of ideas allow teachers to make a leap in their practice from theory to application. Teacher learning requires settings that foster inquiry, allowing time for questions and concerns to be voiced. If sustained positive change in teacher practice is a desired outcome, then an ongoing investment in the improvement of organizational structures is also needed so that both teachers and organizations will grow and change over time (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995).

It is apparent, based on the interview responses that PLC practices for most of the teachers were being implemented structurally, but the deeper collaboration associated with long-term PLC's had not yet become embedded in the team's work. With the exception of Jennifer, the five teachers discussed team practices that were either surface level or had become routine for them but lacked depth with respect to critical conversations and team accountability structures that are inherent in the Professional Learning Community model. This facet of PLC implementation is important for school and district administrators to note so that they can provide an on-going district-wide support to move the PLC model to the Sustaining Phase to which DuFour et al. (2006) refer in the literature. Suggestions to provide this ongoing support to help in the implementation of the PLC model will be made later in this chapter.

Time, autonomy, and conflict were recurrent themes in the interviews. Teachers pointed to these themes as factors that could promote as well as hinder the success of Professional Learning Communities in their buildings, depending upon school administrators provided time to them and then how the time was managed. Dissent among team members was also a factor that could inhibit the success of a PLC if the conflict was not managed and/or addressed.

## 6.2 Time

The second core feature of effective professional learning, suggested by Birman (2000), active learning, was associated with the opportunities that teachers had to actively and regularly engage in the meaningful analysis of teaching and learning. Whether it was allotted to teachers within or outside of the school day, the teachers who were interviewed did have time weekly to engage in the work of the Professional Learning

Community. The teachers' responses indicated that their preference was to have time within the school day to plan. Linda, Bonnie, Caroline, and Jennifer all had school schedules that allowed for collaborative planning within the school day, and these four teachers detailed how they used their collaborative time to plan lessons, create assessments, disaggregate assessment results, and share instructional ideas (Fogarty & Pete, 2010).

Based on the PLC framework, I found that planning within the normal school day best supports the PLC structure because teachers viewed their planning time as a critical part of their work since it occurred within the confines of the work day. Planning that takes place before or after school was perceived to be an extra task that prevented teachers from activities of choice (DuFour et al., 2006). Even the best teachers may become resentful if they are required to complete additional school work during their personal time. Therefore, the provision of adequate time for teachers to plan within the regular school day is a factor that contributes to PLC success within a school building.

Linda's problem with respect to time was a unique situation. When she was assigned to teach a combination class of both first and second graders, she found it difficult to navigate the dual schedule. The master schedule assigned her to plan with the second grade teachers, but Linda wanted to also be part of the first grade planning sessions since she was less familiar with the first grade curriculum.

By Linda's account, she tried to join both grade level planning sessions, but the time it would have taken from her classroom instruction would have impacted her students on a variety of levels. She appeared to be managing the situation, but Linda seemed to be stressed over the divided class assignment and how she was going to



manage the demands of the PLC expectations at two grade levels. This is an important point for district and school administrators to consider when creating split class assignments in schools using the PLC model. Ideally, teachers want to be involved in a meaningful way with their colleagues within the grade levels that they teach.

Administrators need to be aware that not allowing for a teacher to meet with a grade level PLC will foster the notion that the teacher is outside of the team and not within it.

Kelly's situation was very different than what Linda described. Based on Kelly's responses, much of her collaborative planning took place over the Internet. Her colleagues blogged and created lessons to post to a for-profit website. Kate mentioned communicating by cell phone with other members of her team in order to be sure that deadlines were met, but the other teachers who were interviewed did not cite electronic conversations as a regular part of their professional planning process.

The lack of electronic communication between members of Professional Learning Communities is a point that warrants further discussion. According to the DuFour model of Professional Learning Communities that has been previously described in this paper, teachers should engage in face-to-face collaborative planning at least once per week within the school day. Richview County leaders set this expectation for school administrators at the start of the 2011-2012 school year. The PLC model, as outlined by DuFour, and as it is currently being implemented in Richview County, overlooks the potential that electronic communication may have for its teachers. Since most of the teachers discussed the lack of time as a problem in their work days, electronic communication may be a possible time saving solution for teachers to engage in professional dialogue, but it has its shortcomings also.

As indicated earlier, all of the teachers who were interviewed for this project discussed the shortage of time with respect to their PLC work. As teachers become more technologically savvy, they could investigate ways that would allow them to communicate with one another outside the confines of a face to face meeting with colleagues. Teachers could use electronic avenues such as Skype, Wikis, or electronic conferences in order to adhere to the meeting requirements that have been set by county and school leaders.

There is a caution that accompanies the use of electronic communication, however. As Kelly indicated in her interview, teachers were being asked to spend money out of their own pockets in order to provide classroom supplies and materials. Both Kelly and Kate discussed how the current PLC model had lengthened their days. For Kelly, her workday had become longer because she was not afforded planning time within the school day. According to Kate, her administrators expected her to remain at school until 4:00 p. m. on Mondays to accomplish work within her PLC. In this case, reliance on electronic means of communication could have a negative impact on teachers' time. Rather than using their work hours to devote to PLC work, the use of electronic means of communication could blur the lines between work and personal time, resulting in even longer workdays for teachers. Consequently, the time saving device (cell phones) that Kate and her teammates used may contribute to PLC success within a school building by allowing teachers to meet work deadlines, but the over-reliance on this method of communication could be a hindrance because they could decrease opportunities for face-to-face collaboration.

As the teachers reported, the best arrangement for PLC meetings was the weekly grade level meetings, which allowed teachers to examine student data regularly and then create lesson plans to meet student need. While there may be technological alternatives to face-to-face meetings, based on teacher report, the need to convene personally with colleagues still allowed them to do their best work.

### 6.3 Teacher Autonomy

As mentioned in the literature review, one core feature of effective professional learning was coherence, which gauged if active engagement in professional activities encouraged continued professional dialogue between teachers and also incorporated experiences that were tied to teacher learning goals and state standards and assessments (Birman, et al. 2000). If the Professional Learning Community model is expected to support professional learning by fostering a climate of ongoing inquiry and dialogue among teachers, then teachers should have the greatest input into which topics are discussed in their PLC meetings as well as which instructional techniques will be used to meet the needs of their students.

Based upon the interview responses, Professional Learning Communities within Richview County schools are not completely self-governing. Kellie's interview responses garnered in the spring of 2012 support the notion that PLC meetings can be dominated by agenda items that are not chosen by teachers. While there may be caches of teachers who are responsible for their PLC meetings from start to finish, as indicated by Caroline and Jennifer's, it appears as though there are groups of teachers who do not believe they are in control of their PLC meetings. This lack of teacher autonomy with respect to grade

level agendas and meeting content were factors that hinder the success of Professional Learning Communities.

In the four interviews that were conducted in the fall of 2012, however, there appeared to be some progress within the PLC's regarding teacher autonomy. The teachers who participated in second interviews in the fall of 2012 articulated stronger feelings regarding autonomy within their PLC's that was not as prevalent in the spring interviews. The structure of their PLC's appeared to be imbedded in their work instead of an artificial structure to which they were trying to conform. It is unclear what may have caused this shift; the comfort may have come from the additional time and practice with the PLC model and its structures of common formative assessments, examination of student work, and disaggregation of student data. The teachers' increased comfort level and autonomous feelings could also have been present in the fall interviews because their PLC functions may not have had time to become firmly embedded in their work of the new school year. At this point in the school year, when the interviews were conducted, teachers may have still been gathering baseline assessment data on their students. These beginning assessments are long standing processes within Richview County, and the experienced teachers would have been very comfortable with their administration.

While it is difficult to illustrate this comfort level with the teachers' exact words, I can only say that the ease with which they referred to the work that their PLC's were conducting indicated a shift in their thinking about the Professional Learning Community model. One can only hope that as the model continues to be followed in Richview County, the teachers will move from a state of compliance regarding implementation of the PLC structures to a state that integrates the model into their system of beliefs because

once the teachers embed the PLC practices into their daily work, the model will sustain their professional learning and foster an ongoing sense of inquiry (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995).

#### 6.4 Conflict

As mentioned earlier, conflict is a natural part of human interaction; teachers who may have used specific criteria to judge student work may have to change their habits and practices in a more collaboratively structured environment (Achinstein, 2002). In order for a PLC to function at a high level, team members must be able to confront one another honestly and objectively in order to gain consensus regarding the quality of student work and essential learning for a particular subject or course (DuFour et al., 2006). When one thinks of a team, one thinks of a group of people who come together for a common purpose. The accountability piece, however, places a different expectation on a team's function. When team members hold one another accountable for the team's performance or results, tension may be present.

The nature of the conflict on Linda, Bonnie, and Jennifer's teams was similar, and yet there were also elements within the conflict that were different. For Linda and Jennifer, the conflict on their teams appeared to stem from team members who did not follow through on assigned tasks. Both Linda and Jennifer discussed the tension that developed on their teams when one person did not come to meetings prepared. Jennifer's team confronted the issue directly, which often resulted in tears and tension, but in the end, according to Jennifer, the team members did not arrive a second time unprepared. Linda's team, in the second interview, had not reached the point where they had been able to confront the issue of being unprepared, but Linda believed that it would be coming

soon because the same people on the team were coming to meeting with items to share and some were not.

Bonnie was not as direct in her description of what precipitated a critical conversation on her team; she only said that the end of the school year brought more tension to the team and “it all came to a head” at one particular meeting. On the heels of this particular comment, she added that having a child on the same grade level that she taught had also been the source of some tension, which speaks to the complicated relationships that may exist on teacher teams, and how that complexity may foster tension and conflict.

Caroline, Kelly, and Kate did not report conflicts within their team structures. Based on Caroline’s responses, conflict seemed to be absent from the grade level because of the team’s professional demeanor and tendency to be focused in their planning. Caroline specifically said that her school administrators were absent from her team meetings because of a high level of trust that those administrators had for the teachers on that team. This absence also addresses the issue of teacher autonomy, thus illustrating the complex nature of how various elements can combine to promote successful or stifling environments within Professional Learning Communities.

The conflict for Caroline appeared to stem from the team’s sole focus on the four questions that should guide PLC work.

1. What do want our students to learn?
2. How will we know when they have learned it?
3. How will we respond when they do not learn it?

#### 4. How will we respond if they already know it?

While she acknowledged that focusing on the guiding PLC questions made the team's work more professional and more child-centered, Caroline did say that sometimes teachers did not have enough time to share beyond the four discussion questions. The teachers became so focused on what they were teaching with respect to essential standards that they lost sight of what else needed to be taught in other subjects during that quarter.

The notion of conflict on a team may carry a negative connotation for some. Teachers often do not like to address conflict with one another because they believe it damages the personal relationships that are essential to a positive work environment. As stated in Chapter 1, schools are viewed as rational institutions whose lines of communication and command structures follow a linear pattern. This bureaucratic ("top-down") structure shapes how schools are understood and how the work that happens within schools is undertaken. Contemporary school reform efforts, however, propose a shift from the dominant view of the bureaucracy to an image of schools as communities (Huffman & Jacobson, 2010).

Therefore, many teachers also believe that when there is conflict on a grade level, it is up to the school administrator to address the problem because conflict, in some way, relates to performance and given the more traditional, linear command structure, it is the school administrator's job to address performance. Using this method to solve conflicts within a team may counteract the feelings of autonomy that teachers perceived as contributing to their PLC success. However, this area of conflict resolution and role

responsibility is important and an extremely difficult space for both teachers and school administrators to navigate.

There are several steps that both school administrators and teachers may take to help resolve conflicts on PLC's. Administrators may not become involved in a team conflict, simply because they are unaware that a conflict exists among teachers or if they are aware of a conflict because they believe that an issue is best resolved by those who are most directly involved. An administrator could also enlist the help of someone outside of the grade level to help mediate a conflict. A lead teacher or another grade level chair could serve as a possible facilitator because either the person in either role would know the people involved but would not have a supervisory relationship with either party.

The success or failure of these steps is highly dependent upon the relationship that exists among teachers and also between teachers and school administrators. Some teachers could perceive administrative involvement as a breach of confidentiality by a colleague and also as a performance issue. It is important for administrators to seek input from those involved in the conflict as to how they want to have the conflict resolved before stepping in to help. Sometimes, teachers just need someone to listen rather than intervene. It is important to note that once teachers become more comfortable addressing conflict within their peer groups, it should signal a change in the organization that resembles the community view as discussed by Huffman and Jacobson (2010).

### 6.5 Common Formative Assessments

In the first set of interviews, teachers spoke in great detail about the impact of Common Formative Assessments on their day to day practice. Whether the feedback was positive or negative, the assessments were shaping the manner in which teachers



conducted instruction in their classrooms. Two of the six teachers who were interviewed (Bonnie and Kelly), voiced some frustration over the additional paperwork that accompanied their assessments. For the others, the Common Formative Assessments provided an important impetus for designing instruction in their classrooms. According to the majority of the teachers, the administration of the CFA's allowed them to specifically target skills that students needed; the Common Formative Assessments also provided consistency of instruction across grade level classrooms.

There is, however, a concern that must be raised with regard to Common Formative Assessments, and this concern mainly stems from comments made in Kate's interview. In both her interviews, Kate indicated that the teachers on her grade level administered a common assessment to their students in order to target specific reading skills. During the last school year, the teachers on the grade level chose story elements as a focus. Students were assessed on setting, character, story sequence, etc., and the results of their assessment determined into which small group they would be placed. Kate was not clear as to how long the teachers on the grade level administered targeted instruction to the students based on their skill or lack thereof in identifying story elements; it is a concern, however, that this focus on skill attainment could have replaced higher level thinking skills that are also necessary for reading comprehension. In Kate's second interview, she referred again to a similar Common Formative Assessment that had been given to students. Kate indicated that the school's focus, related to the implementation of new Common Core State Standards, was writing across the curriculum, but the teachers chose to assess phonetic sub-skills and then provide extensive targeted instruction. This

seems to be a mismatch between information learned from the CFA and subsequent instruction.

As the Professional Learning Community model becomes more entrenched in the day to day activities of Richview County, the quality of teachers' Common Formative Assessments should be monitored closely. Richview County district administrators set an expectation that eight CFA's would be administered to students yearly. The majority of the teachers who were interviewed appeared to use the results of their common formative assessments to drive their instruction. They did not appear to use them to remediate students' skills with low level, memorization activities. While Kate's case could have been an exception to the norm within the county, her team's use of CFA data could indicate a lack of teacher understanding regarding how assessment data should be used.

It could also signal a compliant response to a county level expectation to administer a certain number of assessments rather than an effort to design quality assessments that would help drive classroom instruction. Caroline alluded to a similar issue in her interview when she stated that in many ways the Professional Learning Community had augmented her feelings of professionalism, but at the same time, her team's emphasis on the four, core questions of the PLC model had narrowed her team's ability to be creative practitioners.

Keeping the teachers' preference for autonomy in mind, this issue regarding the complexities of Common Formative Assessments is also one that will be difficult for school administrators to navigate. I would recommend that the school administrator assume a more facilitative stance to help teachers become more proficient in the creation of Common Formative Assessments and use of the results. Administrators should plan to

look first that the objective that is being assessed and then how children will be remediated or accelerated in a specific skill. The process will be enhanced if administrators ask teachers questions throughout the development of the assessment in order to gauge teacher understanding of CFA's and to also offer suggestions in order to expand teachers' work throughout the process. This approach would support the inquiry that is most beneficial for teachers' continued professional learning as well as desired teacher autonomy. This facilitative practice would also support what Fenwick (2008) called "the community view," avoiding critical analysis of structures and politics. In the community view, the administrative power would be viewed as a benevolent energy, exercised through the mobilizing of individuals around a shared vision, mutual engagement, and a sense of belonging.

#### 6.6 The Issue of Kelly

Based on the interview responses garnered from the teachers, the Professional Learning Community model was positively affecting classroom instruction and professional development within this county. Kelly's case, however, presented a challenge for the district. Kelly was clearly disenchanted with and disenfranchised from the PLC model. It would be easy to assume that anytime a new model of learning or professional development is implemented, there will always be those who harbor negative feelings toward the implementation. Kelly's opinions about Professional Learning Communities, however, had the potential to derail the model's success within the organization. There is much to be learned by examining Kelly's negativity. I chose to discuss Kelly's interview separately because first, the discussion provides some insight

on her discontent and second, it addresses the topics of time, autonomy and to a certain degree, conflict, which were discussed earlier in this chapter.

The first issue was the model of Professional Learning Communities that was being employed in Kelly's building. As mentioned previously, one of the premises upon which the model is built calls for teachers to develop common assessments, disaggregate data, and plan instruction for students based on assessment results. This planning should all take place within a common planning time during the teacher's instructional day. Based on Kelly's interview, this was not happening. The time that had been designated as PLC time for Kelly and her team was dominated by information from administration and administrative tasks. Within Kelly's school, there appeared to have been some attempt to carve out collaborative planning for teachers, but the time that was made available to teachers was, according to Kelly, inconsistent at best. If Kelly's team expected to plan together, they had to make time outside the school day to accomplish this. Therefore, Kelly's team used Friday afternoons after school to make plans for their classroom and combine their social and professional time.

PLC's are supposed to allow for collaborative planning within a teacher's regular work day. Based on how Kelly's administrator implemented PLC's, this person did not understand this, did not care about collaborative planning, or lacked the resources in the building to provide this meeting time to teachers. This lack of time and Kelly's perceived indifference on the part of her principal illuminated a critical issue in Kelly's school and it was difficult to determine the root cause of the problem.

In a previous school in which Kelly worked, time had been allotted in the master schedule for teachers to plan collaboratively within the school day. She, therefore,

expected the same type of arrangement in this school, and that expectation was not met. By having this comparison, Kelly was able to see how an effective model of a PLC was implemented and this affected her participation within her current school. Kelly stated that she had gone to her principal to ask questions about team planning and gather suggestions regarding team planning time. Based on Kelly's responses, the administrator laid the responsibility of finding time to plan collaboratively on the teachers, stating that if the teachers wanted this to happen, they could come into school early or plan after school. The teachers were also allotted time periodically when coverage was available during their lunch time. Between the fact that little time was allotted during the school day for planning and the time that was allotted was dominated by administrative tasks, it appeared that Kelly had become disengaged from the PLC process within her school building because of factors directly related to the teachers' lack of time and autonomy. Kelly did not refer to any specific conflicts that were occurring between teachers on her grade level. Instead, her conflict appeared to be between Kelly's administrators and her team because of the way in which they were employing the PLC model in the building. Kelly's negativity did raise two important questions for me.

First, the Professional Learning Community model attempts to meet the needs of students who need extra help or enrichment with classroom material – it assumes a three-tier class composition. The question is whether the PLC model has to be altered in a homogeneous classroom environment, or does the teacher need to adjust her level of instruction in order to have students who struggle, students who meet curricular objectives, and students who perform above expected levels? This proposition would need to be investigated within a different context in order ascertain the answer.

Whichever stance is assumed, clearly some adjustment needed to be made in the PLC model within Kelly's school in order for the model to be successful with Kelly's students as well as Kelly herself.

Second, the Professional Learning Communities are designed to provide job embedded professional learning for teachers, which in turn improves the teachers' classroom assessment and instructional practices. If, as in Kelly's case, a teacher is highly engaged in self-selected professional learning outside the context of the PLC, does the model actually hinder professional growth for some? Both types of learning are valuable to teachers. Kelly detailed an extensive learning history in her interview as compared with the other interview participants. One has to wonder if the PLC model, as it was implemented in her school, did not meet her unique needs as a learner. This issue would be an important one for both district and school administrators to consider as they look to develop the PLC model on a long-term basis in schools.

### 6.7 Implications for Practitioners

The teachers' interview responses indicated that the Professional Learning Community framework is in place within Richview County, and the teachers are implementing strategies within that framework within their day to day activities. Based on the teachers' responses, it is also clear that school administrators have set clear expectations with the teachers as to how the PLC framework will be implemented within specific school buildings. Facets of the model such as common planning time, aligned instructional strategies across classrooms within a grade level, Common Formative Assessments, the disaggregation of assessment data, and finally, the instructional response to assessment results are being implemented across the county. The PLC model

may assume different forms within specific schools, but clearly, the framework is in place.

#### 6.8 The Role of the School Administrator in the Professional Learning Community Model

Each teacher mentioned the role that her school administrator played in developing the Professional Learning Community model at the school level, and they detailed administrative roles that were different from building to building. Administrator involvement appeared to flow along a continuum from minimal involvement to micromanagement. It is understandable that each school administrator would have his or her own leadership style; however it appears that the administrative leadership style impacted the functioning of Professional Learning Communities within the interviewees' buildings. Based upon the interviews that were conducted for this project, one could conclude that the administrators that offered their teachers more autonomy to conduct the business of the PLC fostered higher feelings of self-efficacy and professionalism in their teachers (Caroline's case). Administrators who offered their teachers little autonomy in how the PLC meetings were run cultivated feelings of frustration in their teachers (Kelly's case).

Professional Learning Communities will not be successful if school administrators dominate PLC meetings with their own agenda items. The teachers on a grade level are the primary members of a designated PLC and the school administrator serves as a facilitator of sorts. I liken this relationship to a type of member-guest arrangement. When teachers meet weekly, they know what needs to be accomplished within that time frame because they work most closely with their students. The

administrator, on the other hand, must tend to a broader range of responsibilities.

Therefore, PLC meetings will be more successful if the administrator is available to offer advice and/or answer questions that may surface during meetings but not dominate the meetings with agenda items of his/her own. Teachers will not be comfortable telling administrators that their lack of autonomy within a meeting is inhibiting their work.

Therefore, it is the responsibility of the school administrator to be respectful of the work that the teachers are doing and find another time for non-instructional topics to be discussed.

While the manner in which PLC's are managed within school buildings is closely related to leadership style, it could also speak to a larger issue that is more closely related to the district leadership's role in the implementation of the PLC model within schools in Richview County. The manner in which school district leadership has implemented the PLC model could be affecting how school principals are communicating district expectations to their teachers. As mentioned in the introduction, schools have been required to increase accountability measures to conform to high-stakes testing expectations. In addition, some schools had to create combination classes at the elementary school level due to statewide budget and teacher allotment cuts. For some principals, the expectation to implement the Professional Learning Community model within their schools could have been the tipping point to an already full reform agenda.

The manner in which principals are implementing PLC's within their building could also align with the stages of development in which teachers placed themselves when they responded to the district-wide survey in the spring of 2012. If teachers are reporting that they are in the Developing Stage of Professional Learning Communities,



then it would be reasonable to assume that most school leaders are in the same stage as well. District leaders who wish to implement this model in their school district should consider the manner in which the initiative will be presented to their school leaders and what types of training and ongoing support will be offered to those school leaders for a successful implementation.

In the literature review for this paper, high quality professional development adhered to three tenets (Birman et al., 2000). If this type of professional development is essential for teacher growth and development, then the same principle should apply for building principals. In order for principals to implement district initiatives at a high level, they will need to be given the same type of high quality professional development as they are expected to provide to their teachers. If this is not provided, then the quality of the district initiative could be adversely affected. Principals will need more than a one or two day workshop on PLC's. The No Child Left Behind Act described "high quality" professional development as activities that both improve and increase teacher knowledge of the academic subjects they teach (content focus) and that are sustained and intensive and are aligned directly to state standards (NCLB, 2002). The word "teacher" in the preceding paragraph could be replaced with school administrator; principals need the same type of high quality professional development if they are expected to be effective in their school buildings.

#### 6.9 Sustaining the Professional Learning Community Model

It appears, based on the data that was collected for this research project that Richview County will need to take steps to ensure that the model is sustained over time, and that the teachers' work continues to deepen as the county continues to move toward

the Sustaining Stage of implementation. Anytime a new district-wide initiative occurs, large amounts of monetary resources and personnel are directed toward the plan. As new teachers and administrators join the school system, district administrators will need to pay attention to the efforts that go into training and supporting new employees who may not be as familiar with PLC practices as veteran employees.

Also, as the teachers who work within Richview County gain more experience and influence within their schools, school administrators will first have to be mindful of how veteran teachers' influence younger colleagues and how that will impact the work of the PLC's within their buildings. Over time, teachers may desire easier schedules for themselves with easier students, and also find ways to undermine change and improvement efforts. As teachers remain in the profession longer, they typically endure two or three large scale reform issues, only to be let down when the focus shifted, resources were withdrawn, or leadership changed (Hargreaves, 2005; Levin, 2003; Maskit, 2011). County and school administrators should communicate clearly that the Professional Learning Community model will be an ongoing model of work and not an adoption or an initiative that would lead teachers to believe that the PLC focus is temporary.

Second, school and county administrators will also need to be attentive to their new teachers. New teachers may lack background knowledge regarding Professional Learning Communities as well as any ground level training that may have occurred within the district prior to their employment. Richview County should plan to include ongoing training related to Professional Learning Communities in its new teacher and new principal orientation framework. A strong county mentoring program including

mentors on the same grade levels as their mentees would also help address new teacher adjustment issues within PLC groups. New teachers would have the benefit of a stable relationship with a team member that would build their confidence in collaboration skills.

Third, Richview County should also consider adding a professional development piece for those teachers who assume leadership roles within a Professional Learning Community. At the elementary school level, grade level chairs are either appointed by school administrators or elected by their grade level peers. Typically, these teachers have little leadership experience and, as indicated by some of the teachers in their interviews, walk a fine line between relationships of collegiality and supervision. Grade level chairs leading respective PLC groups should maintain ongoing communication with their building administrators in order to convey a consistent, school-wide message to their grade level teams. If Richview County is committed to making Professional Learning Communities its ongoing priority, then both county and school administrators will need to remain consistent in their expectations for the model's application, while allowing teams the professional latitude to implement the model in a way that works best for the teachers and their students. It is indeed a very fine line to walk.

As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, professional development for teachers in a climate of reform needs to provide them with time to think critically about their practice and to develop new knowledge, practices, and beliefs about content, pedagogy, and learners (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Lowden, 2005). The No Child Left Behind Act describes "high quality" professional development as activities that both improve and increase teacher knowledge of the academic subjects they teach (content focus) and that are sustained and intensive and are aligned directly to state

standards (NCLB, 2002). In short, the new model of professional development for teachers will need to reflect the “community of practice” model espoused by Etienne Wenger (1998). Building this sense of community in schools leads to shared vision, changes in school culture and ultimately, an improved capacity to serve students (Huffman & Jacobson, 2010). As the teachers revealed in their answers to the interview questions, time has been allotted for the majority of teachers to examine their craft and develop new instructional knowledge. The majority of teachers also indicated that their content knowledge has been augmented through their work within the Professional Learning Community Model.

In order to sustain teachers’ professional development, the time allotted to teachers for work within their PLC’s should be continued in schools in which it currently exists and provided to teachers within the school day in those schools where the time is currently allotted. Forty-one percent of the teachers who responded to the spring survey indicated that time had been allotted to them within the school day for work with their colleagues. If the model is to be successful, and the district aims for Professional Learning Communities to be sustained, district officials should work with building level administrators in an effort to develop master schedules that provide this time.

#### 6.10 Implications for future research

This study articulated in detail six elementary school teachers’ perceptions regarding the Professional Learning Community model as it is being implemented in their district. A cross-case design was appropriate for this study as it attempted to better understand teacher beliefs regarding their involvement in the Professional Learning Community model. The interviews enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of

teachers' beliefs regarding Professional Learning Community model. As mentioned earlier, the advantage of the case study for this project was that it afforded an opportunity for the findings to be authenticated through repetition, while the comparisons and contrasts between cases led to a deep understanding of the experience (Yin, 2003). This case study did not include teachers from the middle or high school. A research project targeting middle and/or high school teachers' perceptions regarding the implementation of PLC's in their districts would be very beneficial to the body of research on Professional Learning Communities because the structure of their school days and the manner in which middle and high school teachers are organized into departments is very different from the grade level model that is present at the elementary school level.

Second, in order provide an alternate lens through which to view the Professional Learning Community model and its implementation within a specific school system, interviews with principals or even district leaders might be conducted in order to provide this different view. Teachers and classroom instruction have been affected by the implementation of Professional Learning Communities, and as the interviews revealed, there have been both positive and negative consequences as a result of the implementation. School principals would be able to provide insider information regarding how the implementation of the PLC model has affected how they lead their schools as well as which leadership strategies successfully impact the model's implementation.

Finally, those who are considering research studies on the subject of Professional Learning Communities should explore the model's impact on student achievement.

Teachers in this study discussed how their Common Formative Assessments allowed them to target classroom instruction to meet student need. Further studies should be done on how Professional Learning Communities impact high stakes test results since a large portion of daily instruction is being targeted toward specific students need. Although test scores are not the sole degree of a school's success, they have become the criteria by which schools are most often judged. If schools are placing this much emphasis on a collaborative model, school officials should be able to see, in some form, positive results in their test data. Further explorations in research could clarify this point for educators.

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## APPENDIX A: TEACHER SURVEY INSTRUMENT

In order to better understand how Professional Learning Communities are being implemented in Cabarrus County, you have been asked to participate in an anonymous survey. Because you are an elementary school teacher, some of your responses will be used for research purposes by Lauren Finley, a doctoral candidate from UNC Charlotte. Your responses will be confidential and there is no known risk to completing the survey. Your participation is voluntary and will have no impact to your employment. If you wish to participate in the survey, please select "yes" and continue to the link below. If you do not wish to participate, please select "no." Should you have any questions or concerns about how data from this project will be used, you may contact Lauren Finley at [lfinley@uncc.edu](mailto:lfinley@uncc.edu), Dr. Robert Rickelman, dissertation chair, at 704-687-8890 or [rjrickel@uncc.edu](mailto:rjrickel@uncc.edu), or the Office of Research Compliance at 704-687-3309. This study has the potential benefit for improving the district's implementation of the Professional Learning Communities model on a large scale.

1. Do you work at an elementary school?

Yes

No

Cabarrus County Schools has spent three years working on the implementation of Professional Learning Communities. In order to make decisions about the next steps, feedback from the field is vital. The following survey is anonymous and has 20 questions that ask for your evaluation of where we are in our PLC implementation process. Thank you for taking the time to give thoughtful consideration to the questions so that the work, processes and professional development are tailored to teacher and administrator needs in 2012-13. Some of your responses will be used by a doctoral candidate from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte as part of a research project for a doctoral thesis. If you wish to participate, please continue with the survey.

2. Please select the school to which you are assigned.

3. What is your position?

Teacher

Administrator

4. What Grade Level do you teach?

Kindergarten

1st

2nd

3rd

4th

5th

5. Of the options below, what is your years of teaching experience?

1 - 3

4 - 7

8 - 15

16+

6. My PLC typically meets at the following time.

before school

after school

during lunch

during a common planning period

on workdays

7. The length of my typical PLC meeting is

30 minutes or less

30 - 60 minutes

60+ minutes

8. My PLC meets

daily

weekly

2 times per month

monthly

quarterly

So that you can select the best response for questions in this survey, each question is prefaced by a rubric specific to that question. Following each rubric, you will be asked to select the 'stage' that you believe is most applicable .

Please use the following information to respond to the following question:

Pre-Initiation Stage--No effort has been made to engage faculty in identifying what they want students to learn or how they will respond if students do not learn. School personnel view the mission of the school as teaching rather than learning.

Initiation Stage--An attempt has been made, typically by the central office, to identify learning outcomes for all grade levels or courses, but this attempt has not impacted the



practice of most teachers. Responding to students who are not learning is left to the discretion of individual teachers.

Developing Stage -- Teachers are clear regarding the learning outcomes their students are to achieve. They have developed strategies to assess student mastery of these outcomes, they monitor the results, and they attempt to respond to students who are not learning.

Sustaining Stage -- Learning outcomes are clearly articulated to all stake holders in the school, and each student's attainment of the outcomes is carefully monitored. The school has developed systems to provide more time and support for students experiencing initial difficulty in achieving the outcomes. The practices, programs, and policies of the school are continually assessed on the basis of their impact on learning. Staff members work together to enhance their effectiveness in helping students achieve learning outcomes.

9. Referencing the rubric above, please select the stage that best answers the following question about the Mission: Is it evident that learning for all is our core purpose?

Pre-Initiation Stage

Initiation Stage

Developing Stage

Sustaining Stage

Please use the following information to respond to the following question:

Pre-Initiation Stage -- No effort has been made to engage faculty in describing preferred conditions for their school.

Initiation Stage -- A vision statement has been developed for the school, but most staff are unaware of or are unaffected by it.

Developing Stage -- Staff members have worked together to describe the school they are trying to create. They have endorsed this general description and feel a sense of ownership in it. School improvement planning and staff development initiatives are tied to the shared vision.

Sustaining Stage -- Staff members routinely articulate the major principles of the shared vision and use those principles to guide their day-to-day efforts and decisions. They honestly assess the current reality in their school and continually seek effective strategies for reducing the discrepancies between the conditions described in the vision statement and their current reality.

10. Referencing the rubric above, please select the stage that best answers the following question about the Shared Vision: Do we know what we are trying to create?

Pre-Initiation Stage

Initiation Stage

Developing Stage

Sustaining Stage

Please use the following information to respond to the following question:

Pre-Initiation Stage--Staff members have not yet articulated the attributes, behaviors, or commitments they are prepared to demonstrate in order to advance the mission of learning for all and the vision of what the school might become. If they discuss school improvements, they focus on what other groups must do.

Initiation Stage-- Staff members have articulated statements of beliefs or philosophy for their school; however, these value statements have not yet impacted their day-to-day work or the operation of the school.

Developing Stage -- Staff members have made a conscious effort to articulate and promote the attributes, behaviors, and commitments that will advance their vision of the

school. Examples of the core values at work are shared in stories and celebrations. People are confronted when they behave in ways that are inconsistent with the core values.

Sustaining Stage -- The values of the school are embedded in the school culture. These shared values are evident to new staff and to those outside of the school. They influence policies, procedures, and daily practices of the school as well as day-to-day decisions of individual staff members.

11. Referencing the rubric above, please select the stage that best answers the following question about the Shared Values: How must we behave to advance our vision?

Pre-Initiation Stage

Initiation Stage

Developing Stage

Sustaining Stage

Please use the following information to respond to the following question:

Pre-Initiation Stage--No effort has been made to engage faculty in setting and defining school improvement goals related to student learning. If goals exist, they have been developed by the administration.

Initiation Stage-- Staff members have participated in a process to establish goals, but the goals are typically stated as projects to be accomplished or are written so broadly that they are impossible to measure. The goals do not yet influence instructional decisions in a meaningful way.

Developing Stage -- Staff members have worked together to establish long and short-term improvement goals for their school. The goals are clearly communicated. Assessment tools and strategies have been developed and implemented to measure progress toward the goals.

Sustaining Stage -- All staff pursue measurable performance goals as part of their routine responsibilities. Goals are clearly linked to the school's shared vision. Goal attainment is celebrated and staff members demonstrate willingness to identify and pursue challenging stretch goals.

12. Referencing the rubric above, please select the stage that best answers the following question about Goals: What are our priorities?

Pre-Initiation Stage

Initiation Stage

Developing Stage

Sustaining Stage

Please use the following information to respond to the following question:

Pre-Initiation Stage-- There is no clear, consistent message regarding the priorities of the school or district. Initiatives are changing constantly and different people in the organization seem to have different pet projects.

Initiation Stage--A small group of teachers in the school or district is declaring the importance of a program or initiative. Their efforts have yet to impact practice to any significant degree.

Developing Stage -- The school or district is beginning to align practices with stated priorities. New structures have been created to support the initiative, resources have been re-allocated, and systems for monitoring the priorities have been put into place. Evidence of progress is noted and publicly celebrated.

Sustaining Stage -- The priorities of the school or district are demonstrated in the everyday practices and procedures of the school and the assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors of the staff. The priorities are evident to students, parents, new staff members, and even visitors to the school or district. Stories of extraordinary commitment to the priorities are part of the lore that bind people together.

13. Referencing the rubric above, please select the stage that best answers the following question about Communication: How do we communicate what is important?

Pre-Initiation Stage

Initiation Stage

Developing Stage

Sustaining Stage

Please use the following information to respond to the following question:

Pre-Initiation Stage--There has been little effort to establish a common curriculum for students. Teachers are free to determine what they will teach and how long they will teach it.

Initiation Stage--District leaders have established curriculum guides that attempt to align the district curriculum with state standards. Representative teachers may have assisted in developing the curriculum guides. The materials have been distributed to each school, but there is no process to determine whether the designated curriculum is actually being taught.

Developing Stage --Teachers have worked with colleagues to review state standards and district curriculum guides. They have attempted to clarify the meaning of the standards, establish pacing guides, and identify strategies for teaching the content effectively.

Sustaining Stage -- Teachers have worked in collaborative teams to build shared knowledge regarding state standards, district curriculum guides, trends in student achievement, and expectations of the next course or grade level. As a result of this collective inquiry, teachers have established the essential learning for each unit of instruction and are committed to instruct their students in the essential learning according to the team's agreed-upon pacing guide. They know the criteria they will use in judging the quality of student work, and they practice applying those criteria until they can do so consistently. They demonstrate a high level of commitment to the essential curriculum, to their students, and to their teammates.

14. Referencing the rubric above, please select the stage that best defines Clarity Regarding What Students Must Know and Be Able to Do.

Pre-Initiation Stage

Initiation Stage

Developing Stage

Sustaining Stage

Please use the following information to respond to the following question:

Pre-Initiation Stage--Each teacher creates the assessments he or she will use to monitor student learning. Assessments may vary widely in format and rigor from one teacher to another. The assessments are used primarily assign grades rather than to inform teacher and student practice. State to provincial tests are administered in the school, but teachers pay little attention to the results.

Initiation Stage--District officials analyze the results of state and provincial tests and report the results to each school. Principals are expected to work with staff to improve upon the results. The district may also administer district-level assessments in core curricular areas. These assessments have been created by key central office personnel, by representative teachers serving on district committees, or by testing companies who have sold their services to the district, Classroom teachers typically feel little commitment to the assessments and pay little attention to the results.

Developing Stage --Teachers have worked together to analyze results from state and district tests and to develop improvement strategies to apply in their classrooms, They have discussed how to assess students learning on a consistent and equitable basis. Parameters are established for assessments, and individual teachers are asked to honor those parameters as they create tests for their students. Teachers of the same course or grade level may create a common final exam to help identify strengths and weaknesses in their program.

Sustaining Stage -- Every teacher has worked with colleagues to develop a series of common, formative assessments that are aligned with state or provincial standards and district curriculum guides. The teams have established the specific proficiency standards each students must achieve on each skill. The team administers common assessments multiple times throughout the school year and analyzes the results together. Team members then use the results to inform and improve their individual and collective practice, to identify students who need additional time and support for learning, and to help students monitor their own progress toward agreed-upon standards.

15. Referencing the rubric above, please select the stage that best defines our Assessing Whether Students Have Learned the Essential Curriculum.

Pre-Initiation Stage

Initiation Stage

Developing Stage

Sustaining Stage

Please use the following information to respond to the following question:

Pre-Initiation Stage--There is no systematic plan either to monitor student achievement on a timely basis or to respond to students who are not learning with additional time and support. What happens when students experience difficulty in learning will depend entirely upon the teacher to whom they are assigned.

Initiation Stage--The school has created opportunities for students to receive additional time and support for learning before and after school. Students are invited rather than required to get this support. Many of the students who are most in need of help choose not to pursue it.

Developing Stage -- The school has begun a program of providing time and support for learning within the school day, but unwillingness to deviate from the traditional schedule is limiting the effectiveness of the program. The staff has retained its traditional 9-week grading periods, and it is difficult to determine which students need additional time and support until the end of the first quarter. Additional support is only offered at a specific

time of the day or week (for example, over the lunch period or only on Wednesdays) and the school is experiencing difficulty in serving all the students who need help during the limited time allotted.

**Sustaining Stage** -- The school has a highly coordinated, sequential system in place. The system is proactive: It identifies and makes plans for students to receive extra support even before they enroll. The achievement of each student is monitored on a timely basis. Students who experience difficulty are required, rather than invited, to put in extra time and utilize extra support. The plan is multi-layered. If the current level of support is not sufficient, there are additional levels of increased time and support. Most importantly, all students are guaranteed access to this systematic intervention regardless of the teacher to whom they are assigned.

16. Referencing the rubric above, please select the stage that best defines our Systematic Interventions Ensure Students Receive Additional Time and Support for Learning.

Pre-Initiation Stage

Initiation Stage

Developing Stage

Sustaining Stage

Please use the following information to respond to the following question:

**Pre-Initiation Stage**--There is no systematic plan in place to assign staff members to teams or provide them with time to collaborate. Teachers work in isolation with little awareness of the strategies, methods, or materials used by their colleagues.

**Initiation Stage**--Some structures have been put into place for teachers who may be interested in collaborating. Teachers are encouraged but not required to participate. Topics tend to focus on matters other than classroom instruction and student learning.



Developing Stage -- Time has been provided during the contractual day for teachers to work together in teams on a regular basis (at least once a week). Guidelines have been established in an effort to ensure staff members use collaborative time to address topics that will impact instruction. Teams are attempting to develop positive relationships and implement specific procedures, but they may not be convinced the collaborative team process is beneficial. Leaders of the school are seeking ways to monitor the effectiveness of the teams.

Sustaining Stage -- Self-directed teams represent the primary engine of continuous improvement in the school. Team members are skillful in advocacy and inquiry, hold each other accountable for honoring the commitments they have made to one another, consistently focus on the issues that are most significant in improving student achievement, and set specific measurable goals to monitor improvement. The collaborative team process serves as a powerful form of job-embedded staff development, helping both individual members and the team in general become more effective in helping students learn at high levels. Staff members consider their collaborative culture vital to the effectiveness of their school.

17. Referencing the rubric above, please select the stage that best defines how our Collaborative Teams of Teachers Focus on Issues That Directly Impact Student Learning.

Pre-Initiation Stage

Initiation Stage

Developing Stage

Sustaining Stage

Please use the following information to respond to the following question:

Pre-Initiation Stage--There is no effort to establish specific district goals intended to impact the direction of each school. The district reacts to problems as they arise and does little to either focus on the future or promote continuous improvement.

Initiation Stage--The district establishes multiple long-range goals as part of a comprehensive strategic planning process. Schools may create annual school improvement plans in response to district requirements, but those plans have little impact upon classroom practices.

Developing Stage -- The district has identified a few key goals. Every school then adopts goals designed to help the district achieve its targets. Every collaborative team in every school adopts SMART goals specifically aligned with its school goals. A process is in place to monitor each team's progress throughout the year.

Sustaining Stage -- Educators throughout the district have a results orientation. Collaborative teams of teachers establish both annual goals and a series of short term goals to monitor their progress. They create specific action plans to achieve goals and clarify the evidence they will gather to assess the impact of their plans. This tangible evidence of results guides the work of teams as part of a continuous improvement process. Each member understands the goals of the team, how those goals relate to school and district goals, and how he or she can contribute to achieving the goals.

18. Referencing the rubric above, please select the stage that best defines how we are Creating a Focus on Results That Impacts Schools, Teams, and Teachers.

Pre-Initiation Stage

Initiation Stage

Developing Stage

Sustaining Stage

Please use the following information to respond to the following question:

Pre-Initiation Stage--There are no processes to use results as a tool for improvement. Teachers fall into a predictable pattern: They teach, they test, they hope for the best, and then they move on to the next unit.

Initiation Stage--District leaders analyze results from high-stakes summative tests such as state and provincial examinations. Data are shared with each school, and principals and teachers are encouraged to review the results and address weaknesses as part of their school improvement plan.

Developing Stage -- The school has created a specific process to bring together collaborative teams of teachers several times throughout the year to analyze results from common formative assessments. Teams identify areas of concern and discuss strategies for improving the collective results. Assessments are also used to identify students who are experiencing difficulty, and the school creates systems to provide those students with additional time and support for learning.

Sustaining Stage -- Collaborative teams of teachers regard ongoing analysis of results as a critical element in the teaching and learning process. They are hungry for information on student learning and gather and analyze evidence from a variety of sources. Results from their common formative assessments are compared to results from state and provincial assessments to validate the effectiveness of their local assessments. Teachers use results to identify strengths and weaknesses in their individual practice, to help each other address areas of concern, and to improve their effectiveness in helping all students learn. Strategically linked SMART goals drive the work of each collaborative team. Analysis of the performance of individual students enables the team and school to create efficient and timely interventions. Improved results and achievement of goals are the basis for a culture of celebration within classrooms, the school, and the district.

19. Referencing the rubric above, please select the stage that best defines how we have A Focus on Results.

Pre-Initiation Stage

Initiation Stage

Developing Stage

Sustaining Stage

Please use the following information to respond to the following question:

Pre-Initiation Stage--People react to conflict with classic flight or fight responses. Most staff members withdraw from interactions in order to avoid those they find disagreeable. Others are perpetually at war in acrimonious, unproductive arguments that never seem to get resolved. People seem more interested in winning arguments than in resolving differences. Groups tend to regard each other as adversaries.

Initiation Stage--School and district leaders take steps to resolve conflict as quickly as possible. Addressing conflict is viewed as an administrative responsibility. The primary objective of administrators in addressing disputes is to restore the peace.

Developing Stage -- Staff members have created norms or protocols to help them identify and address the underlying issues causing conflict. Members are encouraged to explore their positions and the fundamental assumptions that have led them to their positions. They attempt to use a few key, guiding principles to assist them in coming to closure.

Sustaining Stage -- Staff members view conflict as a source of creative energy and an opportunity for building shared knowledge. They create specific strategies for exploring one another's thinking, and they make a conscious effort to understand as well as to be understood. They seek ways to test competing assumptions through action research and are willing to re-think their position when research, data, and information contradict their suppositions. Because they have found common ground on their purpose and priorities, they are able to approach disagreements with high levels of trust and an assumption of good intentions on the part of all members.

20. Referencing the rubric above, please select the stage that best defines how we are Responding to Conflict in a PLC.

Pre-Initiation Stage

Initiation Stage

Developing Stage

Sustaining Stage

21. In my PLC we agreed on the criteria we would use in judging the quality of student work related to the essential learning in a specific subject.

Strongly agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

22. I am a better teacher because of my work with my PLC.

Strongly agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

23. My students are learning more because of my work with my PLC.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

24. The PLC process provides a more supportive environment for teachers.

Strongly agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

25. Work with my PLC assists with my professional development.

Strongly agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

26. Time spent with my PLC saves time overall.

Strongly agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

27. Time spent with my PLC has allowed me to learn from my colleagues.

Strongly agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### Teacher Interview Invitation:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in an interview as part of my doctoral research. I will be contacting you within the next week or so to set up a specific time to meet. The interview should last approximately one hour. During our time together, I will be recording your responses so that I may analyze the interview data more fully. The interview tapes that are created will be stored in my office, and will be destroyed once my study is finished. The only people who will have access to these tapes are the members of my dissertation committee. Any data that would identify you as a project participant will be removed from the final dissertation product. Also, I will be following up with you in the fall of 2012 to conduct a short, second interview. Once again, thank you for agreeing to participate. If you have questions, you may contact Dr. Robert Rickelman at 704-687-8890; he is the chairperson on this research project and will be glad to help in any way.

### Teacher Interview Questions

1. Please tell me a little about your teaching experience.
2. Talk to me about the structure of your PLC – meeting times, duration, and topics for discussion.
3. Prior to working in the PLC model, how did your team/grade level plan?
4. What has been the least difficult structure for your team to adopt in following the PLC model and why?
5. What has been the most difficult structure for your team to adopt in following the PLC model and why?
6. How do you believe your work with your PLC impacts your instruction?
7. What have you learned from working with your PLC?

8. Do you perceive that your work with your PLC is part of your professional development? Why or why not?
9. Are you a better teacher because of your work with the PLC? Why or why not?