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Principal and Teacher Collaboration: An Exploration of Distributed Leadership in Professional Learning Communities

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Principal and Teacher Collaboration: An Exploration of Distributed Leadership in Professional Learning Communities

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Abstract

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) can be powerful tools for school improvement but require principals and teachers to collaborate and work together. This article reports on a qualitative multi-case study focused on six elementary schools in West Texas that had been identified for having effective PLCs. Principals and teachers were observed and interviewed over the course of one academic school year to understand how leadership was distributed across the school to facilitate effective PLCs. Findings highlight the ways principals distribute leadership across their school, relevant teacher and principal interactions, and how key aspects of PLCs are influenced by principals, teacher leaders, and teachers. Findings have implications for in-service professional development experts within school districts and faculty working in principal preparation programs.

Keywords: educational leadership, distributed leadership, professional learning communities

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La Colaboración entre Director y Profesor: Investigación sobre Liderazgo Distributivo en las Comunidades Profesionales de Aprendizaje

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Resumen

Las Comunidades Profesionales de Aprendizaje (PLCs) pueden ser herramientas poderosas para las mejoras escolares, pero requieren que directores y profesores colaboren y trabajen conjuntamente. El artículo se basa en el estudio cualitativo de múltiples casos centrado en seis escuelas de primaria del oeste de Texas identificadas por tener eficaces PLCs. Los directores y profesores fueron observados y entrevistados durante un año académico para comprender cómo se distribuye el liderazgo a través de la escuela para facilitar PLCs eficaces. Los resultados ponen de manifiesto las formas mediante las cuales los directores distribuyen el liderazgo en la escuela, las interacciones relevantes entre profesor y director, y cómo los aspectos clave de las PLC están influenciados por los directores, los profesores líderes y los profesores. Los resultados tienen implicaciones para expertos en desarrollo profesional en servicio dentro de los distritos escolares y los profesores que trabajan en los programas de preparación para directivos.

Palabras clave: liderazgo educacional, liderazgo distribuido, comunidades profesionales de aprendizaje

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Professional learning communities demand a school organization that features shared values, collective responsibility, an inquiry-minded orientation, and a school culture that promotes reflection, collaboration, and dialogue. Rooted in these organizational elements is an assumption that teachers and other stakeholders have particular knowledge, expertise, and experience that meaningfully contribute to the progression of teacher learning, innovative teaching pedagogies, and improved student achievement. Yet, traditional models of leadership can limit the diffusion of expertise across a school while current accountability and standards-based reforms support a school context that leads to micro-managing teacher time and pre-packaged school improvement programs rather than ongoing and reflective teacher inquiry. As a result, teachers often feel hurried, are focused on the short-term fixes, and subjected to top-down leadership and frequent redirection of their efforts due to program shifts from school district administrators (Bryk, Camburn, & Seashore-Louis, 1999; Giles & Hargreaves, 2006). Research on innovative schools with effective professional learning communities (PLCs) suggest that among other things, a lack of time, effective leadership, resources, and long-term planning create significant barriers to maintaining PLCs in the long-term (Voulalas & Sharpe, 2005).

Principal leadership is imperative to overcoming the barriers associated with establishing effective PLCs because of their ability to manage resources and influence organizational culture and expectations. Research has mostly focused on the organizational context necessary for establishing PLCs and the key elements that allow PLCs to translate into teacher learning and improved practices (Bryk, Camburn, & Seashore-Louis, 1999; Giles & Hargreaves, 2006; Harris, 2010; Harris & Jones, 2010; Huffman, 2003; Huffman & Jacobson, 2003) while only broadly exploring the role principals play in distributing leadership to support teacher leadership in PLCs. Viewing leadership through a distributed lens is significant because creating and sustaining PLCs requires enhanced teacher capacity and leadership. Theories of distributed leadership provide a rich conceptual framework for posing questions about and examining the efforts of a varied group of stakeholders engaged in these types of capacity building efforts (Harris, 2008; Spillane, 2010; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001).

The study presented here examines the actions associated with effective PLCs taken by principals and teacher leaders in six elementary schools

located in West Texas. How principals distributed leadership to support effective PLCs is the main focus of this study. Findings from this study are presented as broad themes: (a) Principals beliefs about teacher leadership; (b) how teacher leaders are identified; (c) PLC types within schools; (d) shared-values within PLCs; and (e) traditional/hierarchical roles principals perform, maintain, or shift under certain conditions. This research is timely because the obstacles to establishing and sustaining PLCs continue to propagate as policies of accountability, limited teacher time and flexibility, and pre-packaged reforms and interventions models are incorporated into the work life of teachers and administrators. Moreover, the increasing complexity of school leadership and instructional practices across all content areas demonstrates a need for principals to look beyond traditional practices to build teacher capacity.

Conceptualizing PLCs and Distributed Leadership

Key features and assumptions of effective PLCs, research findings about the sustainability of PLCs, and the organizational context of schools complicate researchers' understandings of how leadership contributes to the development of PLCs. This section provides a review of research on the topic, but also presents research on effective leadership, highlights leadership obstacles to organizational learning, and explores distributed leadership and how it relates to PLCs.

Professional Learning Communities

There is a great deal of evidence that schools with effective PLCs generate greater teacher commitment and reflective practice (Bryk, Camburn, & Seashore Louis, 1999; Larrivvee, 2000; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008), but effective PLCs tend to be rare, most likely existing in new or alternative schools, and difficult to maintain over time (Giles & Hargreaves, 2006). Many school districts and schools now utilize the concept of PLCs to focus reform around data analysis and test preparation with limited success. Perhaps, it is the nature of K-12 public schools that does not foster an environment for teacher learning or reflective practice because of the time it takes to develop communities, the wave of policies and programs thrown

into schools, and the high rates of teacher and administrator turnover. Regardless of pitfalls, PLCs can be a powerful tool for empowering teachers and creating schools where teachers are compelled to learn, grow, and take action.

Defining PLCs. Capacity, expertise, experience, and knowledge are diffused across organizations. Schools are complex organizations, but with appropriate direction, leadership, and shared values, teachers are capable of creating structures that promote their own improvement and collective success. PLCs refer to inquiry-based social interactions where teachers meet regularly to focus on their teaching practice. Such communities can take advantage of the varied capacity, expertise, and experiences of teachers by pulling these people together in ways that facilitate learning, reflection, and group problem-solving. PLCs are sites where people jointly construct, transform, hypothesize, and adapt the meanings of their practices with implications for individual teachers and the collective faculty (Wenger, 1998). Central to PLCs is a process where a group of people share and critically interrogate practices in an ongoing, reflective, and learning-oriented process (Toole & Louis, 2002).

Effective PLCs tend to share five characteristics or features that often intertwine or operate simultaneously: (a) shared values and vision that emphasizes a focus on student learning; (b) collective responsibility for student learning that helps to sustain commitment and put collegial pressure on colleagues to engage, learn, and improve; (c) reflective professional inquiry that manifests through conversations about important issues, the application of new knowledge, and the identification of solutions to support students and their needs; (d) collaboration that moves beyond superficial interactions of help, support, or assistance; and (e) an emphasis on group and individual learning where teachers develop as colleagues and professionals, but also maintain an orientation toward inquiry and its benefits for improving their own practice and the practices in their school (Stoll et al., 2006).

PLCs vary in their organization and configuration. For example, PLCs might focus on instruction, students with academic or behavioral difficulties, or school structures that support teaching and learning (Levine & Marcus, 2009). The structure of PLCs also vary, as some meetings are highly structured with specific protocols, agenda, and attention to time and outcomes while other PLCs are more loosely structured, more

conversational, and free flowing. In part, the way PLCs are organized is related to the topics or foci of the PLC, but organization can also be related to other factors and elements associated with a particular school, its culture, or community members. Levine and Marcus (2009) found that PLC organization and structure can facilitate or constrain what teachers learn because particular structures influence: "whether teachers make their own practices in the classroom public; which aspects of teaching are discussed; the degree of specificity with which teachers share aspects of their work; and the kinds of information about students teachers make available to each other" (p. 397). These findings highlight a need for leadership and organization, but also a need to have teachers critically engaged in decision-making conversations about how PLCs are structured and the norms established in their operation.

Barriers to effective PLCs. Systemic change is a challenging task in schools because schools are complex and because teachers' beliefs and practices are often rooted in their biographies, experiences, and priorities (Hargreaves, 2003). Hall and Hord (2001) captured the relation between change at the individual and school level:

> Although everyone wants to talk about such broad concepts as policy, systems, and organizational factors, successful change starts and ends at the individual level. An entire organization does not change until each member has changed (p. 7).

A number of factors inhibit or aide in facilitating change that has important implications on how PLCs are developed and utilized to improve teacher practices.

In a literature review on PLC implementation, Stoll et al. (2006) identified a number of variables that hinder the creation of effective PLCs, including: individual orientations to change, group dynamics, and school context. More specifically, influential variables included school size, phase of school reform, school age and history, group dynamics, and existing professional learning infrastructure. Schools that are larger tend to present numerous barriers to change, including a greater diversity of teachers and students, lack of organizational inertia for change, more likely under threat of closure or accountability sanctioning, high teacher/administrator turnover,

and less likely to be open to change or a culture that is reflective, inquiry-minded, and collaborative.

The status of the teaching profession also serves as a barrier to effective PLCs. Increasingly, the nature of teachers' work is hurried, focused on the short term, consumed with paperwork, overwhelmed with meaningless data, and subject to frequent redirection through new school district policies, programs, and interventions (Martin, Sass, & Schmitt, 2012; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Under such conditions, teachers are likely to struggle to engage as reflective practitioners or have the time, energy, or will to invest in building shared values and the other elements necessary to engage in PLCs. The organizational and teacher specific barriers to PLCs generate challenges for school leaders that are significant.

Impact of leadership. The characteristics of effective PLCs and the barriers to establishing and maintaining PLCs makes it difficult to see how a PLC could develop without the active support of principals. McLaughlin and Talbert (2001) captured the importance of the principal to teacher community:

> For better or worse, principals set conditions for teacher community by the ways in which they manage school resources, relate to teachers and students, support or inhibit social interaction and leadership in the faculty, respond to the broader policy context, and bring resources into the school (p. 98).

Principals and other school leaders help to create a school learning culture that emphasizes teacher learning, dialogue, and critical reflection because they are able to influence physical and social climate (Griffith, 1999; Leithwood, Anderson, Mascall, & Strauss, 2010). Principals facilitate the core elements needed to sustain PLCs through their words and actions, how they generate teacher schedules and workloads, and whether or not they are inquisitive, thoughtful, and reflective in their own practices and what they see happening in their schools. A principal's social interactions can facilitate the development of trusting relationships, collaboration, and a diffusion of expertise and knowledge. They can also buffer teachers from district policies and fast-paced changes that disrupt school improvement continuity.

Although it is clear PLCs require leadership and principal support, it is increasingly evident that leadership cannot remain only in the hands of the

principal or other traditional leaders because of the demands, responsibilities, and expertise required to support teachers in a modern school are too significant (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). The characteristics of effective PLCs have previously been described as a form of distributed leadership (Spillane, 2012) and highlight how principals and teachers work together to inquire, engage in leadership, and share their knowledge and expertise to enhance their community's ability to meet the needs of all students. Harris (2003) concluded that multiple forms of leadership are required to build PLCs and that greater opportunities for teacher leadership will lead to meaningful innovations that support professional and organizational learning.

Distributed Leadership and Professional Learning Communities

Distributed leadership provides a rich conceptual framework to study PLCs (Spillane, 2012; Stoll et al., 2006) because a distributed framework can help clarify the varied roles assumed by principals, teachers, and other staff and how their actions, orientations, and leadership contribute to organizational learning. Theories of distributed leadership highlight how leadership is spread across an organization, involves concerted action from teachers and school administrators, and extends beyond task delegation to more profound levels of collective action (Gronn, 2009; Heikka, Waniganayake, & Hujala, 2013). Who leads and who follows is not just associated with traditional roles but to what the problem, task, or situation dictates, or who has the prerequisite knowledge and skills under particular circumstances (Copland, 2003).

The role of the principal and other administrators is still important, but often in different ways (Leithwood et al., 2006). For example, it is important for principals to recognize who is capable of leading and who is not because the last thing that would contribute to an effective PLC would be ineffective leadership, disorganization, or a chosen teacher leader's personal values that are not aligned to collaborative inquiry and dialogue. When principals are able to identify effective teacher leaders for appropriate situations they must also have a support process in place so that teacher leaders are knowledgeable about organizational and task objectives. A strategic and well-supported distribution of leadership can enhance an

organization's capacity to learn, problem-solve, and take ownership over their performance.

Principals tend to engage in many of the same practices described in other leadership approaches (e.g., instructional leadership, social justice leadership), but with recognition that teacher leadership is important, knowledge and expertise is scattered across a school community, and collective engagement brings about greater change than the sum of individual efforts in isolation. These principals are catalysts for a distribution of leadership because they focus their efforts on cultivating teacher leaders, building relationships, and developing networks (Fullan, 2001) that nurture opportunities for teachers to develop, learn, and innovate. A principal's awareness of the diffused skills and capacities of their teachers is essential and enables them to arrange "the conditions, opportunities and experiences for collaboration and mutual learning (Harris, 2002, p. 3).

A distributed approach to leadership is important in establishing PLCs and starts with the principal ensuring the organization is safe and nurturing to adult learning (Jacobson, 2010). Principals have the ability to support teachers with classroom management issues, prioritize planning time, and limit disruptions to instruction. They attend to the human side of leadership because bringing about educational change in the form of PLCs can involve teachers overcoming fears, emotions, and trust issues (Stoll et al., 2006). Leadership in this context requires a degree of emotional intelligence (Harms & Credé, 2010), an ability to recognize how the pace of change can impact the work lives of staff, and an emphasis on support when change becomes uncomfortable.

As principals recognize teacher leadership capacity, it is not their job to push them into leadership positions with little thought or utilize their capacity to handle administrative paperwork or random assignments. Effective principals provide leadership opportunities that are aligned to the schools vision and mission, identify leadership opportunities that teachers can effectively manage, and provide a safety net and support as teachers engage in leadership practice so that they can grow and expand their capabilities (DeMatthews, 2015; Knapp et al., 2010). Developing teacher leadership is vital to the work of PLCs because PLCs thrive when teachers design the core elements and structures that make these communities function. Effective PLCs are not just well organized or efficiently conducted meetings where all stakeholders come prepared, followed pre-

developed agenda topics, and leave with clear next steps. PLCs are places where all community members share values and beliefs about teaching and learning, engage in reflective dialogue, avoid simplistic answers and quick fixes, and are comfortable with complexity. Conversations are not fixed on an immediate answers, rather, they are about digging deeper into data and teacher experiences to understand complexities, explore nuances, and wrestle with dilemmas (Neumerski, 2013).

Teacher leaders and principals play an important role in facilitating PLCs and the core elements of PLCs, but research has only generally described principal actions in supporting effective PLCs. It is commonly understood that effective principals support the development of a school's mission and vision and that teacher leaders and other teachers play an important role in generating and acting out that mission (Kurland, Peretz, & Hertz-Lazarowitz, 2010; Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010). Yet, how principals distribute teacher leadership throughout a school and the daily practices of principals and teacher leaders working together to develop effective PLCs is less understood. Research on PLCs highlight the need for critical conversations between teachers, teacher leaders, and principals, but existing research on these topic tends to focus explicitly on the principal or on teachers in isolation of each other, lacks details or specifics, and does not fully capture a process of how leadership is distributed in a school.

Methodology

This article examines the way principals distributed leadership across six elementary schools to create and sustain effective PLCs. This study was conducted as a qualitative multi-case study (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2009), with data collection occurring over the course of the 2013-2014 academic school year. Six elementary schools were selected based on recommendations of district administrators, informal surveys with principals in each district, local university faculty knowledgeable in the area of school leadership, and teacher climate surveys that reflected the presence of an effective learning community. Initially, fourteen schools were identified from this pre-selection process. However, after conducting early interviews with principals, four of the school's principals did not believe their schools had effective PLCs. Four other schools opted not to participate in the study

due to time constraints or other research studies being conducted at their school.

The data collection process consisted of in-depth interviews with principals, assistant principals, instructional coaches, and teachers. Interview protocols were developed for each staff position (principals, teachers, and instructional coaches) based on their professional role and a review of literature on PLCs. Interview protocols were reviewed by a small group of principals, teachers, and university faculty and piloted prior to the study. Interviews were semi-structured and took place over the course of the school year. Each interview was approximately 35-60 minutes and primarily focused on: (a) the structure of PLCs; (b) the role different administrators and teachers played; (c) school culture around teacher learning; and (d) perceptions of how PLCs help or hinder teachers in their daily work. The term teacher is used broadly and includes guidance counselors, social workers, and other service providers that work full time at the school. In addition, 10 PLC meetings were observed in each of the six schools for a total of 60 PLC observations. Documents were collected from PLCs and analyzed in this study. Documents included meeting agenda, class and school data reports, professional development activities, and reflection protocols.

Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously over the course of the study. Data that were collected and analyzed early in the school year directed further data collection later in the study. Data were analyzed using Nvivo 9 software and coded based on findings from an initial literature review and emergent themes in the data. Both inductive and deductive coding processes were employed (Strauss & Corbin, 1999).

Findings

This study was conducted in six public elementary schools across two school districts located in West Texas adjacent to the US-Mexico border. The districts were within 25 miles of each other and enrolled students with similar socio-economic backgrounds. Bravo Independent School District enrolled approximately 45,000 students and had been recognized by state and national organizations for excellence in school and district leadership. Mesa Independent School District enrolled approximately 7,000 students and was considered by many to be the poorer and less organized school

district. Table 1 describes the general demographics and features of each district.

Table 1.
School District Information

	Bravo ISD	Mesa ISD
Number of Schools	More than 40	Less than 10
Total Enrollment	Approx. 45,000	Approx. 7,000
Hispanic Population	Over 90%	Over 90%
English Language Learners	Over 20%	Over 25%
Eligible for Free/Reduced Meals	Over 70%	Over 75%

Although Bravo ISD had more structures and supports in place than Mesa ISD, both schools struggled with similar challenges and concerns. Both districts were situated across a handful of some of the poorest zip codes in Texas and the United States. In recent years, the per capita income for one zip code served by Bravo ISD was under $12,000 dollars a year. Both districts had high populations of Hispanic students, English Language Learners, and recent immigrants from Mexico.

Both school districts had similarities and differences, but in general, findings related to PLCs and school leadership was similar across both districts. In part, this is because both school districts are located within one region of West Texas that is geographically isolated from the rest of the state. As a result, most superintendents, central office principals, teachers, and school staff received their degree and training from the same institutions. Table 2 provides a brief description of each school.

Table 2.
School and Principal Characteristics

Bravo ISD	**Characteristics**
Gonzalez ES	
Principal Tompkins Tenure:	4 years
Student Enrollment:	Approximately 650 students
Faculty Size:	About 60 teachers

Bravo ISD	**Characteristics**
Juarez ES	
Principal Edwards Tenure:	11 years
Student Enrollment:	Approximately 550 students
Faculty Size:	Less than 50 teachers
Austin ES	
Principal Ronaldo Tenure:	7 years
Student Enrollment:	Approximately 800 students
Faculty Size:	About 70 teachers
Gomez ES	
Principal Johnson Tenure:	2 years
Student Enrollment:	Approximately 475 students
Faculty Size:	Less than 50 teachers
Mesa ISD	**Characteristics**
Houston ES	
Principal Sanchez Tenure:	19 years
Student Enrollment:	Approximately 250 students
Faculty Size:	About 20 teachers
Smith ES	
Principal Torres Tenure:	15 years
Student Enrollment:	Approximately 300 students
Faculty Size:	Less than 25 teachers

Each school had PLCs that fit the criteria of an effective PLC, as described in the literature review. Teacher surveys provided general findings that teachers were engaged in professional learning. The overwhelming majority of staff believed: (a) professional development at the campus level enhanced their craft in teaching and learning; (b) other teachers were supportive; (c) teacher ideas were listened to and considered; and (d) school culture promoted trust and collegiality. Interviews and observations with teachers yielded additional confirmation that effective PLCs existed in

the six schools. Teachers described their PLCs using a variety of terms, including, "a safe place to share and grow" and a place "where everyone comes together to solve problems, address concerns, and learn." Observations of PLCs captured school communities that were not interested in easy answers or quick fixes, but rather, thinking about how to improve practices over time. A great deal of PLC time was spent on planning outside activities, such as learning walks, classroom observations, co-planning opportunities, or data-analysis sessions. After confirming that PLCs were engaged in effective organizational inquiry and learning, interviews and observations shifted to understand the role of distributed leadership, principal action, and key interactions between principals, assistant principals, instructional leadership, and teachers.

Principal Beliefs about Teacher Leadership

Each of the six principals acknowledged a necessity for teacher leadership to improve teaching practices and a culture that was supportive and collegial. Observations and interviews captured the ways principals supported teacher leadership and how their leadership varied across schools. Generally, each principal ensured there was opportunities for teacher leadership, provided feedback and support after observing teacher leaders in action, and encouraged all teachers to share ideas, opinions, and experiences related to school improvement issues. Each school had PLCs where teachers were engaged in leadership work.

At Gonzalez Elementary School, Mrs. Perkins was a 13-year veteran teacher at the school and grade level team leader. Principal Tompkins believed that Mrs. Perkins was hard working, motivated, intelligent, and commanded the respect of colleagues. Principal Tompkins said: "She demands respect and she has it, from everyone, even more than we [administrators] do. She is caring, supportive, but has very high expectations. She's passionate about our school and when she talks, everyone listens." Principal Tompkins clearly recognized strength in Mrs. Perkins, but also saw in her an advocate for school improvement from someone who was not an administrator. Other principals believed that teacher leaders brought strength and expertise to their schools that supported or even surpassed that of the administrators. Principal Torres of Smith

Elementary School spoke of Mr. Reyes in such glowing terms. Mr. Reyes was a third year 5th grade teacher that was the leader of his grade level. He was charming, hard working, and had almost immediately won the support of his more senior colleagues. After sitting in on a PLC run by Mr. Reyes, Principal Torres said that Mr. Reyes was:

> just an amazing young man. He's tireless, smart, and passionate. And, to be so supported by older colleagues, it really says something. In PLCs and in other meetings, he is like glue. He is always bringing people together, he is always looking for common ground, and most importantly, he always looks for outcomes. When you see a young man like this, you support him and you let him lead.

Observations and interviews indicated that each principal recognized the importance of teacher leaders in their schools, but also highlighted that teacher leaders needed support. During interviews, most principals noted that teacher leadership wasn't about delegation of authority or leadership, but instead about supporting teachers as leaders. Austin Elementary School's Principal Ronaldo commented about teacher leadership that reflected the opinions of other principals in this study. Principal Ronaldo said:

> Teacher leadership does not mean these teacher leaders don't need support. It doesn't mean meetings or problems or tasks are simply delegated. Some of my colleagues [in other schools] believe this. Teacher leadership is only effective when we support them, provide them with training, feedback, and motivation. Leadership is difficult work and it's not something we should distribute without thought or support.

Each principal believed that teacher leadership was important to the development of effective PLCs and teacher professional growth. These principals also believed that having teacher leaders supported professional learning and growth in less direct ways. Principal Johnson of Gomez Elementary School believed that having a handful of teacher leaders in different areas and aspects of the school created teacher role models for younger or less experienced teachers. Other principals highlighted that having teacher leaders made all teachers more likely to share ideas, advocate

for new policies, try new instructional practices, and communicate frustrations or problems. All principals agreed that having a faculty that was more open to discussion created opportunities for traditional leaders to solve problems, provide the appropriate supports, and build more trusting relationships.

Selection of Teacher Leaders

How teacher leaders were identified and selected varied across schools and situations. In most schools, principals had at least some degree of say-so about which teachers would lead PLCs, provide professional development, or mentor new and struggling teachers. However, principals did not always have or want absolute control and some teachers were able to obtain leadership positions in more informal ways. Generally, principals and teachers agreed on who should be viewed as teacher leaders. In most instances, teachers were supportive of teacher leaders who had formal authority in PLCs and other meetings.

At Houston Elementary School, Ms. Baker was a fourth-year special education teacher who became a fifth-grade team leader and chair of a PLC organized to support students with disabilities, behavioral problems, or reading difficulties. Her principal strongly supported her and recommended that she be the grade level team leader in an open meeting. Observations indicated that other teachers were supportive of her and believed she was the right person for the job. Ms. Baker's selection was not democratic and could be viewed as the principal's choice, but staff appeared happy with the choice. Below are reflections from Ms. Baker, Mrs. Sanchez the principal, and another teacher in the grade:

- "I was a little unsure about this role, I'm not the most vocal person, but Mrs. Sanchez really believes in me and I know she wants me to do it. I see it as an opportunity to grow and, I guess, more importantly, to help all teachers see how important it is to support all students… I'm excited" (Ms. Baker)
- "She can be a bit quiet, but she is super organized, hard-working, passionate, and loyal to her students and families. She has some room to grow, she needs to get a little more tough when it comes to

interacting with staff, but she will grow into the role and it will help her and our school in the long run" (Principal Sanchez).

- "To be honest, I'm kind of surprised, she's a good, hardworking teacher, but she is a bit shy. She knows her stuff, but will everyone listen to her? I hope so, we will see" (Grade level teacher).

In other schools, teacher leadership duties and responsibilities were distributed on a continuum ranging from democratic where all teachers voted to principal selection without any questions or recourse from teachers and staff. Interestingly, not only did these decisions range across schools, but also within schools. These decisions raise important questions related to teacher leadership. For example, at Juarez Elementary School, Principal Edwards allowed most grade levels to vote on who would be their grade level team leader and had a panel of teachers select and hire an instructional coach candidate who would ultimately run most of the school's PLCs around literacy and mathematics. However, Principal Edwards unilaterally selected the sixth grade team leader because he felt that the team was underperforming and that there were a few teachers who were ineffective and at times toxic. As a result, Principal Edwards moved another teacher onto that grade level and made her team leader. Principal Edwards explained his decisions:

> Not just anyone can lead and not just anyone can lead when there are some negative behaviors that must change. This isn't a democracy, it's my responsibility to ensure all students are learning and at the end of the day, if teachers are not being effective and if we really believe in teacher leadership and effective PLCs, well then I'm going to say who leads and who follows. Having a bad leader only makes things worse, and I'm not okay with that. If I'm not democratic, or I'm not fair, so be it.

Principal Edwards' feelings were shared across all principals. Interviews and observations captured how each principal stressed the importance of teacher leadership, but that their leadership must be effective, organized, and aligned to the school's vision. It was clear that despite the fact that each principal was okay with taking a more distributed approach to leadership, they did not abdicate their formal authority.

PLC Types, Values, and Beliefs

The types of PLCs varied across and within schools. All schools had single- or multi-grade teams with a clear teacher leader identified through the processes described above. In addition, other PLCs existed and were focused on a variety of school related areas. There were school wide PLCs focused on supporting English Language Learners, students with disabilities, students who had recently migrated from Mexico, and students and families struggling socially, emotionally, and/or financially. Some schools had school wide literacy and mathematics initiatives, some of which were geared to improved test scores. Regardless of PLC type, shared values and beliefs were present or in the process of being shaped.

Effective PLCs were common across all schools and it was clear that teachers shared similar personal and professional values associated with the purposes of education. One prominent value shared by teachers was collective responsibility for student learning. During PLC sessions, teachers rarely had excuses for failure and believed that their PLCs and the dialogue, reflection, and problem solving that occurred were the tools for improving their practices and their schools. Typically, teachers' shared beliefs in PLCs were in some way connected to the school's vision and mission and related to key areas the principal cares about. For example, Principal Johnson was a strong advocate for inclusion of students with disabilities and thus identified teachers and supported the development of a PLC around inclusion, co-teaching, and co-planning.

At a general level, shared values in PLCs were aligned to the moral purposes of the school's mission and aligned to teacher beliefs about the purposes of education. In this study, principals and teachers shared a grit and persistent to serve their students despite challenges. For example, a fourth grade teacher at Juarez Elementary School commented: "We have a lot of challenges, but challenges aren't excuses. We come together to address those challenges. That's what this is all about." A literacy focused PLC at Gonzalez Elementary School had a strong sense of shared values. The PLC consisted of fourteen school staff members including grade level teachers, special education teachers, an assistant principal, and a parent who worked as an afterschool literacy tutor. The team identified numerous challenges to success, including, a lack of resources such as leveled

readers/books, technology (electronic tablets and computers, assessment materials (Curriculum Based Measures), and time. However, the team didn't view these challenges as unfixable. Instead, they focused on what they could control and believed they needed to focus even more on their own teaching practices and on supporting each other because of the lack of resources. Mrs. Evans, one of the two leaders said: "We know we can't get everything on our wish list and so we are motivated to become brilliant teachers. We have to overcome our obstacles and we do that by working together, by pooling our expertise, our knowledge, and helping each other out." In one meeting, the team was focused on improving reading fluency. The teachers discussed strategies, shared challenges, set new goals, and then determined that they would conduct learning walks and have a buddy system where two teachers would take turns observing each other and proving feedback based on reading fluency instruction. Months after this PLC meeting, a teacher shared:

> We worked together to improve our practice. You know, by working with your colleagues you learn a lot about what you know and what you don't know. You also learn what others knows. That helps you grow. For us, once we know what we all know and don't know, we work together to learn newer ways and strategies… We are about constant improvement and it's fun.

Other PLCs were focused more on classroom management, mental health concerns, and students struggling with difficulties inside and outside of the classroom/school. At Juarez Elementary School, an interdisciplinary team of teachers, mental health staff, and administrators came together to find ways to support a subgroup of students who were struggling. Teachers in the school had been complaining about some students not coming to school prepared to learn or exhibiting behaviors that made teaching difficult. The assistant principal, Mr. Tony, decided to call together a group of stakeholders. He structured an agenda to facilitate discussion and conclude with some action steps. As a group, the team decided to formalize a community and determined that Ms. Pullen, a social worker, should take the lead on the team, but with the support of Ms. Harris the school psychologist. Mr. Tony was happy about the results and the opportunity to have more knowledgeable and prepared staff leaders. He stated: "I know a little bit

about mental health and outside supports, but I'm far from an expert. Their help and knowledge is great. I'm so much more excited to work on these issues now. I don't feel alone or lost." Ms. Pullen and Ms. Harris felt similarly and noted that they were happy Mr. Tony started the group and knew that he would support them.

The team would discuss student challenges, recommend new strategies, and monitor student progress. In addition, the group members would observe the students in different settings and support teachers who were struggling in the classrooms. Ms. Pullen described the PLC:

> This isn't a traditional PLC, we learn together, we support each other, but sometimes the learning is policy stuff, like how to work with Child Protective Services. Other times, it's about teaching teachers how to recognize triggers to student behavior… Ultimately we learn through each case because each case and each student is so different…We share a belief that we can help each child. If we didn't, we wouldn't be doing this work and would definitely would have given up a long time ago because trying to help solve these types of problems makes you want to give up, it's exhausting…But, when one of us is tired, I know I can count on my colleagues.

The PLC built structures and supports around how they scheduled and conducted meetings, how they developed cases and sought out answers to problems and questions, and how they communicated their learning across the team and across the school. As the PLC became more successful, PLC members would present information and conduct professional development sessions on aspects related to their own professional growth.

Other PLCs with different foci brought together diverse groups of stakeholders, but tended to share the same beliefs: (a) all students can learn if supported; (b) teachers and staff needed each other's support; (c) obstacles and challenges weren't excuses; and (d) learning happened over time through reflection, dialogue, and practice. Teacher learning extended from PLCs to organizational and community levels. Principals, assistant principals, instructional coaches, teachers, and parents benefitted from the learning that occurred in PLCs.

Formal Leadership

Formal or traditional leadership still played an important role in teacher leadership and PLCs. Although each principal had various leadership styles, each principal was observed maintaining expectations for PLCs, setting a level of professional acumen for teacher leaders, and developing a range of objectives for PLCs. Similarly, teacher leaders and PLC members were observed seeking formal authority for support, new ideas, resources, assistance, expectations, and guidance. Sometimes teachers struggled with working in PLCs or with challenging topics and looked for guidance and support.

Teacher leaders and PLCs confronted the following problems: (a) disgruntled teachers or staff that challenged the authority of teacher leaders and/or contributed to a toxic school environment; (b) PLC groups lacked specific knowledge or expertise necessary to get started with their work and required outside training; (c) teacher leaders struggled to organize and manage meetings, expectations, and distribute workload; (d) a lack of knowledge associated with available resources and tools within the school and district; and (e) limited knowledge of federal, state, and district policies. Under these conditions, PLCs and their teacher leaders sought support from principals and other traditional administrators. For example, a PLC at Gomez Elementary School was organized over the summer to learn about co-teaching and co-planning in the area of special education and sought principal support. The group had an objective given by the principal, to identify a co-teaching/co-planning model that best fits the school, identify options to present to the entire faculty, develop trainings that can be given over the course of the year, monitor areas of emphasis, and problem-solve potential challenges.

The first two PLC meetings were not a success because the teachers didn’t feel knowledgeable enough about co-teaching and co-planning models. One teacher in the PLC said, “We were just wasting time because we didn’t have enough information or knowledge to get started.” The team already had strong teacher management, shared values about inclusion, and strong work ethic, but they asked the principal for support, ideas, and recommendations due to a lack of technical expertise about inclusion. Instead of giving recommendations, the principal shared with the group that a statewide training provided by co-teaching experts would be conducted

and implored group members to attend. The additional training provided the PLC with the prerequisite knowledge to be successful moving forward.

Newer PLCs or PLCs with less assertive teacher leaders were more likely to struggle with disgruntled or toxic colleagues. For example, at Gonzalez Elementary School the leader of a PLC struggled with a teacher who constantly interrupted meetings, was not willing to follow the meeting agenda, and was frequently disengaged from the group. Other PLC members were angered by the teacher, but did not outright confront her. This disgruntled teacher was observed talking over other teachers during the meeting session, speaking loudly, and being aggressive in her comments. Mrs. Evans was the teacher leader and was frustrated. She explained her feelings early in the school year:

> I tried talking to her in private and tried to see how I could help her. I asked her how I could help her. I asked her if she had any ideas to make the meetings run smoother. She really didn't want to talk. To be honest, I think she is just one of those people who refuse to fit in with the group. We are all a family here and she is the outsider. I was so frustrated with her and I needed help from our principal.

Mrs. Evans asked Principal Johnson for assistance. The principal provided her with a number of strategies, gave her an article to read about conflict resolution, and scheduled a follow-up meeting in two weeks. Mrs. Evans made little progress and became more frustrated. She again followed up with the principal. Principal Johnson described how he supported Mrs. Evans:

> I observed a few PLCs and saw this toxic teacher in action. I wasn't surprised, because she had problems before. I took notes on her behaviors and then afterwards I scheduled a meeting with her. We talked about her behaviors and her comments… I connected her behavior to our purpose here and pointed out how she wasn't meeting expectations and how her values were not aligned with our mission and vision. I also helped her make a connection to how her behaviors and attitudes are associated with aspects of her formal evaluation… Let's put it this way, it wasn't a nice conversation, but she got the message.

Mrs. Evans and Principal Johnson noticed an immediate change in the disgruntled teacher. By the end of the school year, the disgruntled teacher apologized to Mrs. Evans for being difficult and thanked her for her hard work. There were other instances where teacher leaders asked for support dealing with colleagues, although, some cases were not resolved as successfully.

Principals also encountered problems with PLCs and the distribution of leadership that included: (a) poorly conducted meetings where little work or progress was made on a specific agenda; (b) meetings not starting or ending in a timely fashion; and (c) incomplete assignments or low-quality products (e.g., professional development sessions, policy drafts, parts of school improvement plans). Observations and interviews with principals suggested that at times, teacher leadership was difficult to sustain and deal with. Principal Edwards said, "sometimes, and I know I shouldn't say this, but I wish I could just run everything on my own. At least it would run right." Principal Edwards' frustration was obvious during the interview, but future observations and interviews showed his dedication to supporting teacher leadership and maintaining PLCs that were run by teachers. Each principal recognized that PLCs and teacher leaders required some degree of management based on that particular teacher leader and the challenges associated with the group. Principal Sanchez's comments about the need for formal leadership captured the sentiments of each principal in this study. Principal Sanchez said: "Each [teacher] leader and each PLC has its own strengths and weaknesses. Part of my job is to know the dynamics and the needs of all staff and then to adapt my leadership accordingly." The formal authority of principals was present and used strategically.

Discussion

Each principal in this study engaged in aspects of distributed leadership and demonstrated a commitment to facilitating teacher leadership at a school-wide level. Although there was variance across principals' values, decision-making processes, and styles, each school provided rich opportunities for teachers to take ownership over their own learning. Previous research reported on distributed leadership and how principals supported teacher leadership, but rarely attempted to investigate how theories of distributed

leadership and principal actions associated with distributed leadership support PLCs. This article expands on existing research by focusing on how principals distribute leadership to create or maintain effective PLCs and attempts to capture some of the key elements, actions, and challenges in the leadership work.

Each of the six schools in the study fit the criteria for having effective PLCs previously described in empirical research. Teachers were engaged in reflective dialogue, shared values, and were learning through inquiry and collaboration. The schools believed that PLCs were a tool used to overcome obstacles and challenges. The school community gained from engagement in PLCs and helped to overcome organizational challenges. PLCs were viewed by teachers and principals as difficult, challenging, but ultimately worth their efforts. Administrators and teachers recognized the powerful impact of learning PLCs brought. How leadership was distributed, organized, and managed across and within schools varied. Some principals were more hands-on with managing and supporting teacher leadership and PLCs while others allowed teacher leaders to struggle before providing support. Teachers and teacher leaders had expanded authority and given flexibility to lead, but at times they still turned to principals for answers, support, or additional authority.

These findings provoke further questions about the ways context, group dynamics, personalities, and leadership styles influence principals' approaches to distributed leadership and important issues relevant to teacher leadership. Each school shared common demographic features situated in the same region of West Texas. Principals, teachers, and school district administrators were mostly educated and trained by the same people working in the same universities. Yet, each principal, each teacher leader, and each PLC presented different dynamics that influenced how PLCs were structured, conducted, and focused. The preferences, ideas, problems, and resources available influenced the shared-values of PLCs, the instances when teacher leaders would seek administrator support, and the products of learning produced through inquiry, reflection, and dialogue. These findings raise an important question: Can PLCs be pre-packaged reforms with specific foci, protocols, and objectives, as they exist today in countless schools? Many educational businesses, consultants, and even scholars have produced PLC and teacher education platforms that school districts have

purchased as increased accountability, marketization, and economic rationalization has changed the landscape of public schools (Edwards & DeMatthews, 2014; Zeichner, 2010). In this study, pre-packaged PLC models were not utilized and teachers were happy with PLCs and their learning outcomes.

Some scholars have highlighted that quality professional learning in general, or PLCs in particular, are mostly ineffective due to the fast-paced, ever-changing, accountability systems that govern life in schools. In this study, however, teachers and administrators viewed PLCs and a distributed approach to leadership as a mechanism to adapt to new or old challenges. When teachers lacked resources, such as certain types of assessment materials, they worked together to think about, observe, and perfect new teacher practices that can help them overcome what they lacked. This is not to say that PLCs are the magic bullet in educational reform, but rather, if teachers are given time and support, they can solve many of the issues they confront in their daily work lives and in doing so build community, trust, and shared values centered on student achievement.

Finally, this study captured the importance of formal/traditional authority related to the role of the principal. Principal authority varied across and within schools based on contextual features and principal characteristics. However, each principal maintained authority by holding expectations high, clearly communicating goals, and providing teachers and teacher leaders with feedback and guidance. At times, teacher leaders sought the principal's help or authority to remedy issues. In some instances, principals responded in traditional ways, such as having a critical conversation with a disgruntled teacher. Other times, principals did not respond to requests for support and instead helped teacher leaders find resources they could draw upon to remedy their own problems. These relationships were respectful, mindful of authority, and collegial. They were also mutually beneficial, as teacher leaders and principals had opportunities to learn from each other.

Implications

Researchers should continue to investigate how principals and teachers leaders can support organizational learning and how different leadership qualities, actions, experiences, and contextual features of schools, districts, and policies support or impede organizational learning. To date, most

research on PLCs has focused on either principals or teachers but not on their interactions, challenges, and relationships. Researchers might consider focusing intensely on a small number PLCs to examine and explore daily practices, unique features, and how professional learning occurs during PLC meetings, but also through exercises and practices outside of PLC meetings. In addition, research is needed to explore different types of PLCs with different foci. A school may have a PLC focused on literacy or to support a transition from a bilingual program to a dual language program. The challenges, ideas, values, and actions in one type of PLC may vary greatly from another with important implications for how PLCs are understood.

This research also contributes to discussions on how principals and assistant principals should be prepared. Future school administrators must be prepared to distribute leadership effectively and then be capable of providing support and feedback to struggling teacher leaders. They must also have managerial skills to ensure PLCs are effective, efficient, and produce meaningful outcomes that extend beyond general meetings with little or no organizational learning. Instructors in principal preparation program can structure courses to be similar to PLCs by modeling principal and teacher leadership actions that support the development of community and inquiry. For example, instructors might conduct activities that help candidates build a collective system of values around organizational learning, provide activities that enable candidates to be reflective in their practice, and encourage candidates to work together to generate new ways of teaching and leading. In addition, instructors might consider having principal candidates assess PLCs in their schools. Candidates could present these findings to the class and discuss their strengths and areas of growth. Finally, instructors might consider attempting to build a PLC of candidates that extends outside of one class to an entire cohort of candidates. Candidates and instructors can work together to identify PLC themes or foci and these PLCs can remain intact beyond students' participation in the preparation program.

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