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Professional Learning Communities: Perception of Impact on Learning

Esther Denise Hayden
Eastern Kentucky University

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES: PERCEPTION OF IMPACT ON LEARNING

BY

DENISE HAYDEN

THESIS APPROVED:

DocuSigned by:

Will Place

7D2F9B6BB2C84A5...

Chair, Advisory Committee

DocuSigned by:

Ann H. Burns

DCB8D3259B2C440...

Member, Advisory Committee

DocuSigned by:

Roger Cleveland

A2A194076E484FF...

Member, Advisory Committee

_____

Member, Advisory Committee

DocuSigned by:

Ry K. Baggett

734DC952EE294C2...

Dean, Graduate School

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LEARNING

BY

DENISE HAYDEN

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DEDICATION

I would like to thank God for bestowing His continuous grace and mercy upon me while completing my doctoral journey. I especially like to thank my mother for her wonderful words of encouragement and fervent prayers! To my son, Orlando, who has endured my educational journeys, this is the finale. Thank you for understanding and being the sweetheart that you are, I love you. Both you and Mom were a source of strength and inspiration. To Dad and Mommie Esther, I know you both are smiling down from above. I appreciate the love, support and understanding of my family, friends, and many of my sorority sisters of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.

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ABSTRACT

This research focused on Professional Learning Communities (PLC): Perception of Impact on Learning. The overarching question for the research is: How do principals and teachers in Title I schools perceive the learning benefits in a Professional Learning Community?

(a) What do teachers perceive as benefits of participating in a Professional Learning Community? (b) What do teachers perceive as an influence(s) on student learning in a PLC community? (c) What do teachers perceive to be the limitations of a PLC community? In this qualitative research study, data was analyzed from current principals and teachers in proficient Title 1 schools as outlined by the governing state education department.

The result of this study has the potential to highlight a framework for teachers and principals to improve student learning thus, providing improved instruction. Quality instruction can lead to improved student learning, and student learning is vital for success (Weimer, 2010). When student outcomes are improved, more students graduate and have a greater opportunity to become productive members of their communities.

Keywords: professional learning communities,

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY: PERCEPTION OF IMPACT ON
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> "Strong professional learning communities produce schools that are engines of
> hope and achievement for students. . . There is nothing more important for
> education in the decades ahead than educating and supporting leaders in the
> commitments, understandings, and skills necessary to grow such schools where
> a focus on effort-based ability is the norm" (Saphier, 2005, p. 111).

Over the last few decades, numerous reform efforts were tried, yet schools, state
government, practitioners, researchers, local superintendents, administrators, and
teachers are still faced with the daunting challenge of improving academic success for
all students. Educational reforms have been increasing throughout the world. It is
impacting the whole process of academic development (Meesuk, 2021). Unfortunately,
schools have not successfully met all educational challenges (Lieberman, 1995). The
myriad of reforms tried since the "A Nation at Risk" report was released in 1983 have
added some overwhelming responsibilities to America's public schools. The additional
responsibilities coincide with the multiplicity of upgrading changes in our world.
Changes in reforms of curriculum, instruction, and assessment will prepare students for
the complexity demands of life. However, low-performing students may not have the
knowledge to compete effectively in a knowledge-based society (Professional Learning
Communities: Research and Practices Across Six Educational System in the Asia-
Pacific Region, 2016).

To ensure systems are in place to provide all students with a quality education, public schools have been required to comply with a myriad of policies imposed through federal legislation. Student academic expectations are held to a higher standard of proficiency as a result of these reforms. Educational systems are under pressure to meet these higher standards for success (Crum & Sherman, 2008). *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), formally known as *The No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001 (NCLB), outlined a Title I school as a school receiving Title I federal funds with a 50% or greater economically disadvantaged student population (NCLA, 2002). The ESSA was enacted to ensure that:

1. Teachers have the freedom to design and amend their local teaching evaluation system. Teachers can advocate for some valid and reliable measures within teacher evaluation.

2. The Federal education department remains neutral on standards. Teachers can inform their state department of education concerning their questions and concerns as it relates to their state's standards.

3. States must annually assess students in their core subjects in grades 3-8. Students in grades 10-12 are assessed one time. States also have the flexibility in how and when they administer those tests.

4. States have the right to decide how schools should be held accountable for serving all students. However, plans are submitted to the federal government for peer review.

5. Local educational agencies are required to develop a support and improvement plan in partnership with all stakeholders. Schools will provide

structures to support struggling students to avoid consequences that may harm or penalize students.

6. Title II funds can be used in areas of evidence based professional development such as peer-led ongoing professional development that is job-embedded.

Throughout the educational arenas, teachers are held accountable for improving student achievement. Teachers possibly are one of the most important components of the education system (Zohreh et al, 2015). In addition, Zohreh et al further suggest, a teacher's effective management skills in the classroom can increase student learning. The quality of teachers, moreover a teachers' ability to teach content to diverse students in ways that attend to the learning process, is a critical component of schools that make a difference in achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Ultimately, according to Darling-Hammond, teachers must be fully equipped and immersed in on-going professional development in order to have a strong and positive effect on student achievement. What teachers know (theory) and what they do with what they know (practice) may affect student achievement that is at the helm of effective school reform. Over the last 20 years, teacher learning has become one of the most important concerns of the educational establishments (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999).

Problem Statement

Educational stakeholders face complex challenges of improving student learning. Our society is beckoning the Federal Government, states, and schools to fulfill

school-aged students with complex academic rigor that will allow them to function in a heavily knowledge-based society. There is an urgency for high standards, high-quality academic instruction, and a higher level of student academic achievement. Society expects school districts, schools, and educators to provide all students with the same quality of education. Educational reforms are forcing educators, moreover teachers, to change their style of traditional teaching style as it relates to giving direct instruction, to adhere to a collaborative culture. Teachers teaching in isolation are often hindered in improvement of their professional growth and school's overall school improvement, a study by Lieberman & Rosenholtz, as cited in DuFour & Marzano (2011). Transformation of public schools has potential to be essential if educators are going to meet the academic needs of all learners. PLCs have been at the forefront of reform for not only improving education, but DuFour & Marzano added while ensuring on-going, job embedded learning for adults who serve them.

As an elementary school teacher of 25 years, I currently work in a Title I school where our proficient ranking has slowly dropped to a *needs improvement school*. During this transition, our leadership has changed frequently, to include two different interim principals. However, each interim principal job-shared, so we had two-sets of principals each time. No one wanted the sole responsibility of being the school's principal. Frequent turnovers in leadership is the most serious threat to the stability of a school and or school district (Leithwood & Seashore, 2012). "Leadership is the catalyst" to turn underachieving schools around (Leithwood et al, 2004, p.5). "Expert opinion indicates that low-performing schools require effective leadership to turn around a school" (Leithwood & Struss, 2010, p. 27). Teachers, counselors, parents, and

other staff members have the potential to promote academic success. As a teacher in this Title 1 school, I am invested in contributing to the success of my students' achievements, and thus, to implementing a PLC structure to enhance best practices that will increase student success. According to Strickland (2009), high quality professional development assist teachers in building content and pedagogy that positively impacts teacher effectiveness and student learning in the classroom.

Improving the infrastructure of the PLC community with continuous inquiry and improvement has potential to impact the underachieving students in the elementary setting because the students are not achieving an intellectually well-rounded education that will prepare the students to navigate in a knowledge society. Thus, the school's leadership and teachers' ability could be highlighted as insufficient. According to DuFour & Eaker (1998), developing a school personnel to function as a PLC has the most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement. This study will explore how PLC impacts learning in Title I schools.

Background of Problem

Research indicated that teacher pedagogy is significant. Teacher expectation is to teach to all learning modalities to meet the needs to all students to ensure academic success for students. Studies have shown that there are many contributing factors to the success of student learning. I teach at a school that is in a sixty-year-old neighborhood in the southeast of the city. As city populations increase, school boundary lines potentially may change to accommodate students. Research indicates that teacher pedagogy is significant. Teacher expectation is to teach to all learning modalities to meet the needs to all students to ensure academic success for students. Studies have also

shown there are many contributing factors for the success of student learning. According to studies factors such as, socio-economic status, language, and home culture can impede academic gains. In the last decade, the low socioeconomic student population has increased drastically (Conditions in Education, 2010).

Twelve percent of children in the United States are still growing up in less desirable areas. Since 1990, the nation's child population increased to more than 9 million children (Casey, 2019). The increase in children may consist of all racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. According to Alliance for Excellent Education (2008), the McKinsey Group found on the average that the same-aged Caucasian students, out rank African American and Latino students, statistically two to three years in both academic achievement and high school graduation rates. The African American and Latino population increase may lead to a greater number of low socio-economic underachieving students in schools requiring remediation thus contributing to the enormous gaps in achievement for minority and poor students.

Poverty is believed to be a major factor contributing to poor academic performance of students. Because a significant number of students in public schools are outlined by government standards as living in poverty, students who are classified as poor performers are more likely to be from low-income families. Children in low socioeconomic families usually lack educational support at home from a parent. Casey (2019) found that only 36% of parents can read. A parent's lack of knowledge could prohibit their ability to properly stimulate their child's brain from birth up to three years of age. Studies have shown the lack of stimulation could negatively impact the child's academic growth, during a child's preschool development has the potential to delay

academic cognitive skills. Cunha et al., (2006) found that the greatest cognitive skill attainment for a child is the early time-period of their life. Some low-socioeconomic families potentially lack motivational stamina to assist the child in educational matters due to their lack of education (Cheung & Pomerantz, 2012).

With many unchangeable factors, the model of a professional learning community (PLC) holds potentials for school reform (Giles & Hargreaves, 2006). The growing plc model (DuFour et al., (2002) drives staff development in order to improve student learning and achievements. The Professional Learning Community (PLC) or components of these learning communities exist in Kentucky schools to promote collaboration among stakeholders as well as academic achievement in lower performing students. There are misconceptions concerning PLCs. Educators had a mindset PLC was a purchased program, a recurring meeting, or appendage to existing structures and cultures (Hargreaves, 2004), it is an on-going process.

Purpose of Study

The aim of this phenomenological qualitative study was to examine the perception that PLCs in title 1 schools have on learning and to understand the benefits and limitations teachers and principals have experienced. There are several views of Professional Learning Communities (PLC). However, Dufour (2004) describes Professional Learning Communities as P for a professional who has expertise in a specialized field and who should remain consistent in their knowledge base in the field. The L in PLC is for learning, which is engaging in ongoing study and curiosity that is committed to continuous improvement. The C in PLC is for the community, which is creating an environment that fosters cooperation and collaboration. There is an

abundance of literature that supports the need for academic structures that will assist low performing as well as low-income students, who are not achieving academically.

Moving forward, fewer studies have pursued how to include collaborative efforts to extend leadership efforts with building school communities as it relates to increasing academic achievement in Title I schools. The effectiveness of a PLC model focuses on student data and creates a culture of collaboration to enhance student learning (DuFour, 2004). This PLC model has potential to bridge teachers together to collaborate and monitor student learning in a systemic fashion. The importance of ongoing assessment to monitor student learning was emphasized in the United States by Black and Williams (1998a) at the conclusion of analyzing hundreds of assessments.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework provided a lens through which the researcher may examine patterns in data and begin to make interpretations. For this study, the theoretical framework focused on examining teacher learning and student achievement through the theory of Senge (1990). The originator of the learning organization was Senge who initialed the concept that evolved from his work in the business sector. The concept illuminated the educational setting. Senge is attributed for having made the framework for organizational learning effective for improving student achievement. As the term learning organization became popular, the concept evolved into learning communities (Horn, 1999).

Senge described learning organizations or disciplines as places where members are constantly increasing their abilities to generate results. Senge developed five disciplines that are characterized as personal mastery, mental models, shared vision,

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team learning and system thinking. Senge's five domains are not a one size-fit-all approach for schools. However, PLC communities exemplified the principles of learning organizations and many of the characteristics in the five disciplines.

The first component is personal mastery that extends beyond one's competence and skill. Senge (1990) affirmed that personal mastery is a necessary tool for a learning organization. Personal mastery is a discipline of continually clarifying and deepening one's personal vision and experiences that may empower a person to learn, create a personal vision, and view the world differently. According to Senge, individuals at this stage can differentiate between vision, goals, and objectives by describing what the organization is trying to do and why it is trying to do it. Individuals also have acquired skills to apply an image that may engage them to see the reality of their desired future.

Mental models as noted by Senge (1990) are assumptions, generalizations, or images that are deeply embedded in how individuals interpret the world. Senge suggest that the effectiveness of mental models must originate with oneself by looking inwardly. If organizations are to forge ahead with new productive ideas, it will be necessary for the members to learn and facilitate new skills while fostering those changes. Senge caution concerns that people may not wrong but simple unearth with their surface thinking, moreover, mental models may not be wrong. Individuals may not foster openness; therefore, they remain unchanged.

Shared vision (Senge, 1990) allows its members to have modality within the organization. The members can become empowered to excel and learn for the long-haul of the organization. It is important for a leader to share their vision of the organization so all the moving parts will know how and when to function towards the common goal

of success. Senge suggested the idea of sharing visions of the result may foster genuine commitment rather than compliance. As individuals incur system thinking the organization exceeds linear with the possibility of bringing the vision to completion.

Team learning is the fourth component (Senge, 1990). Team learning is necessary for an organization and its members within the organization to flourish and to acquire results. Team learning is a collaborative effort that builds on not only personal mastery and shared vision, but members working together. Senge suggests that team learning starts with its members being able to have effective dialogue as tools used by teams to adhere to their learning process.

The last component is system thinking. Senge's (1990) work is the cornerstone of the learning organizations. When organizations can function as a system thinking model, the system's ability to comprehend and understand the whole and understand that the parts are interrelated. System thinking fuses the other parts together allowing them to operate in a cohesive fashion. Senge suggest that members of an organization can have difficulty seeing systems, acquiring the basic building blocks while applying them to the organization. The lack of system understanding can pose a problem for an organization because each discipline provides a vital dimension.

For this study, learning organizations is an appropriate framework because it involves people engaged in an organization with the same desired results, to impact learning (Senge, 1990). The PLC model gained positive acknowledgements about the potential to impact student achievement. The term transformed from learning communities to professional learning communities. PLCs used in education represent various groups gathered to accomplish results that will increase learning. Results are a

major emphasis on student improvement (Hord, 2009) when the teachers and administrators in the organization work together by having shared values and visons to achieve or enhance results in a PLC community. In addition, deprivation of classroom and working collaboratively with colleagues have potential to yield positive results.

DuFour (2007) noted how schools capitalize on PLCs to increase the capacity to not only transform, but to improve teacher and student learning. PLC community can be sighted in a school that operates within a supportive, self-created community when the whole group of professionals engage in learning. Morrissey (2000) affirms the PLC community provides a setting that is richer and more stimulating when new ideas are processed through interaction with others who are knowledgeable in pedagogy and ideas.

PLCs provided a context of collegiality that supports teachers and administrators in cultivating their craft of teaching by learning district curriculum, instructional strategies, and the systems for interacting meaningfully with each student. In PLC communities, teacher learning comes first, Carmichael (1982) maintained, until teachers are more effective in their own teaching skill, students cannot increase their level of achievement. Hence, a PLC community may not occur quickly, however, it will require dedication and intentional effort on the part of the administrator and the professional staff. Scholars, researchers, and practitioners agreed that each PLC characteristic develops at its own pace, many times overlapping with other characteristics.

Learning organization theory is practical for schools to implement. Senge (1990), as noted before, schools can function as learning organizations. Senge recognized schools as a place for learning, where individually and collectively all those

involved are devoted to the same idea, student achievement. Leithwood et al., (1997) added improvement is an ongoing process that allows organizations the capacity to collect information to use for decision making. In addition, Senge (1990) states that organizations learn only through individuals who learn. However, individuals learning does not guarantee organizational learning. Schools as a learning organization have the potential to develop strategies, processes, and structures that gives the schools the opportunity to learn and engage effectively.

Learning organizations have latitude to give schools institutionalized learning mechanisms in order to revise existing knowledge. Thus, a learning organization cannot thrive without mechanisms. As previously mentioned, schools may or may not implement all eight elements due to school population. PLC model is not a one-size-fits-all approach for all schools that model the professional community concept. PLCs have been noted to operate on a different spectrum. For example, a study in Singapore depicts their PLCs as fundamentally shaping their institutional and cultural settings. Singapore's hierarchical education system and strong culture has an on-going structure in place for authority, different from the Western countries. Teachers' professional learning relies on the wider community and society where the school is located (Yin, 2017).

Phenomenological research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) was used in-part of the research method to help disclose a theory from data collected. The structure of phenomenological research concentrates on the commonality of a lived experience with a group. The bases of the approach are to arrive at a description(s) of the nature of the

phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell). The inductive and deductive nature of the study may be highlighted through this systemic methodology.

Research Questions

The overarching research question was addressed in this study is: How do principals and teachers in Title I schools perceive the learning benefits in a Professional Learning Community? The three sub-questions that derived from the overarching question are:

1. What do teachers perceive as benefits of participating in the Professional Learning Community?

2. What do teachers perceive as an influence(s) on student learning in a Professional Learning Community?

3. What do teachers perceive to be the limitations of the Professional Learning Community?

Research Design

This qualitative study focused was on how professional learning communities (PLC) encouraged teachers' knowledge and student achievement. I conducted interviews with school principals/administration in elementary Title 1 proficient schools. The Title I schools are above the criteria of eligibility as outlined by Title I standards. Interviews were conducted on Zoom due to a national world pandemic that was beyond my control. Qualitative research is interpretative research that seeks to understand the world from the lens of those living in it (Hatch, 2002). Data was obtained through interviews that allowed me to ascertain rich and in-depth data.

Through the data, I had the potential to identify themes, offer explanations, create patterns, connect relationships, and/or make interpretations.

Significance of Study

This study has the potential to benefit local schools by examining the ways in which leaders and teachers in Title I schools marshal the professional learning community to improve the education of both low-income and low-achieving students who maybe some of the most vulnerable in the population in the system. Low-income students may be more vulnerable if they lack the cognitive and literacy ability to achieve (Casey, 2019). Over 50 percent of school-aged students are products of low-income families in Title I schools without the ideal cognitive or emotional development to succeed as students, according to Tough, as cited in Suttle (2016). Literacy difficulties for a low-income student could lead to an array of social, emotional, and economic issues. Low-income students may have a greater risk to increase dropping-out of school, entering the juvenile delinquency system, and becoming dependent on the welfare benefits (Birckhead, 2012).

The study also has the potential to benefit low-performing students who are not classified as low-income. Some students could potentially exhibit learning challenges that could benefit from collaborative support. The study has the potential to bridge the academic gap for low-socioeconomic students in Title I schools. In addition, this study has potential to heighten the awareness of teachers and the principal by engaging in a collaborative culture within their learning organization. In addition, this study also has the potential to gain a better understanding of how school leaders and teachers benefit

from a PLC community to achieve academic success in Title I schools. Lastly, this study potentially could reveal limitations that may infringe on a PLC community.

Assumptions

This study had several assumptions. First, it was assumed that each teacher and administrator had a valid state of Kentucky certification for kindergarten through fifth grade. Second, that all participates were willing to engage in this study. Third, each participant was assumed to answer each question truthfully to the best of their professional ability. Fourth, the assumption was made that all participants would give open and honest accounts of their professional experiences as it related to plc process. Next, it was assumed that each participate would be able to navigate the digital application for Zoom. Lastly, it was assumed that all three proficient title 1 schools implemented the plc process. In addition, it was assumed all participants would be knowledgeable of the plc components and each school currently engaged in the plc process.

Definitions:

1. ***Phenomenological****:* study describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon (Creswell, 2018, p.120).

2. ***Professional Learning Communities/Learning Communities:*** PLC is a method where educators foster collaborative ongoing learning among colleagues within a work environment. Professional Learning Communities organizes teachers into working groups of practice based professional learning (DuFour & Marzano, 2011).

3. *Collaboration:* Teachers coming together to assess their students'

    understanding, to design, plan and implement new instructional strategies,

    practices, and to reflect on their teaching. (DuFour & Marzano, 2011).

Chapter Summary

Over the last few decades public schools have had a plethora of reforms to improve academic success for all students (DuFour, 1998). Changes in reforms are essential for transforming school structures with the aim of increasing the quality of education especially for low performing students (Professional Learning Communities. Research and Practice Across Six Educational System in the Asia Pacific Region, 2016).

` Teachers are accountable for improving student achievements. Educators should be fully equipped and immersed in on-going professional development. High quality professional development as stated by Stickland (2009) assist teachers in developing content and pedagogy that enhances teacher effectiveness and student academic success.

Organization of the Dissertation

This chapter provides a topic of interest for a proposed research study including the problem statement and detailed the significance. The research questions to guide the study are listed as such to allow a rich and more in-depth conversion of the study. Through interviews from elementary participates data was gathered on their Perception of Impact on Learning in a Professional Learning Community. Chapter 2 provided a review of literature. This included the historical aspect of PLC, characteristics of PLCs, discussions of educational reform on the national, state, and local levels. Senge's (1990)

five disciplines are the theoretical framework that guided this study to provide structure

and reinforcement of the research topic. Chapter 3 offered up the methodology that

analyzed the data in this qualitative study to examine professional learning communities

(PLC) and the perception on learning as it relates to student achievement in Title I

schools. In addition, chapter three also examined how teachers applied what they

learned in the PLC process that increased classroom instruction.

CHAPTER 2:

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Public school classrooms maybe figuratively compared to battlefields, where teacher-soldiers wage a war of education as it relates to academic achievement. The educational systems continue to be sites riddled with numerous problems teachers have faced for centuries. The success of the war depends on how effectively these problems are dealt with. This requires, on the one hand, minimizing the occurrence of ineffective reform for grades K-12.

Reform initiatives have been the leading force of setting the tone for teachers being asked to master new skills and responsibilities and to modify their practice to better support student learning (Corcoran, 1993). Recent research has proven effective ways of addressing reform initiatives through plcs that supports a community of teachers in their on-going learning process. PLCs are on the up rise and singled out as an effective route for teacher learning and professional development (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1997; Cochran & Lytle, 1999; Lieberman, 2000; Grossman et al., 2001; Little, 2002; Huang, 2007 & Vescio et al., 2008).

Two different educational reform efforts developed consecutively at the second half of the twentieth century. The first reform, not new to the public schools, was highlighted as the Excellence Movement of the 1980s.The Excellence Movement, as noted by DuFour and Eaker (1998) called for an intensification of existing practices with no new ideas, however, it failed. The Restructuring Movement of the 1990s erected from a new emphasis on site-based management that was bottled with innovation, compressive redesign, and systemic transformation of the schools. Public

schools embraced both reforms, but both were unsuccessful in meeting "substantial widespread change" (Fullen, 1997b).

An uprise of hopelessness and defiance were associated with the failure of these movements that had potential to satisfy their promises of important improvement in public education. It recommends the purposes behind the disappointment and presents the affirmation that the best hope for significant school improvement lies in changing schools into proficient learning networks. The effectiveness of transforming reforms should be according to DuFour (2004); Fullan (2002); Huggins (2010); & Maxwell (2009) consistent with the development of PLCs.

A shift occurred between a traditional learning concept and the plc process that were driven by teachers' working together collaboratively and continuously to improve teaching and learning practices (Reichstetter, 2006). Teachers collaborating is an overarching important component of plcs. It allows teachers the flexibility to change their practice based on various assessment data. As a result, a change in teacher practice potentially yields an increase in student learning (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). In as much, an additional study depicted how teachers working collaboratively was evident in a high poverty school.

The evidence of the professional learning community model was noted by the students high-level of learning and engagement (Honawar, 2008). This study ascertained how professional learning communities' perception impact learning through the admission of teachers and school principals' voices from Title I schools. An insight provided a light on how plcs impacts academic success for students. This review of literature depicted an empirical literature and scholarly research on plcs that focused on

the following: origins of plcs, characteristics of plcs, the role and responsibilities of schoolteachers' and principals, along with the benefits and challenges of plcs.

Origins of PLCs

Professional Learning Communities (PLC) were first documented in 1960 as an alternative to teacher isolation (All Things PLC, 2010). PLCs evolved as a result of early studies by advocates for school improvement that included the works of an array of scholars. Some of the scholars that made more of an impact included, Little (1982) *Norms of Collegiality and Experimentation: Workplace Conditions of School Success.* Senge (1990) with *Five Disciplines*, where the idea of a learning community is an adaptation of the concept of learning organizations. Newman and Wenger (1995) with *Circles of Support,* National Education Association's (1995) *Keys to Excellence for Your School KEYS 2.0*, Hord (1997a) *Professional Learning Community,* DuFour and Eaker (1998) *Professional Learning Community*, Blankstein's (2004) *Failure Is Not An Option,*

Since 1990, plcs have been discussed among educators on every spectrum. The roots of plcs began to accelerate as a promising reform that continuously engaged its educators' according to Little (1982) who found a connection between both school improvement efforts and the relationships among teachers. An ethnographic study was conducted on six urban, desegregated schools. The results of Little's study of *School as a Workplace*, concluded that professional development is continuous in nature.

Moreover, practitioners and researchers found that learning is more likely achieved through several factors, teachers frequently engaging in ongoing concrete talk about their practice, frequent teacher observations that are provided with constructive

criticism to enhance their craft of teaching, teachers work collaboratively, and teachers teaching aspiring teachers. Little's study also revealed teacher isolation is not conducive to school improvement.

Rosenholtz's (1989) provided a foundational study for plcs. The study demonstrated how 78 schools were identified as achieving high levels of collaboration among a teacher enriched schools. In as much, the schools were also classified as high-consensus or low-consensus where the high consensus depicted shared purposes and goals coupled with collaboration. In addition, the low-consensus schools lacked collaboration. As a result, Rosenholtz found that improvement of teaching is a collective effort rather than in isolation. Moreover, teachers were opposed to working in isolation. When working collaboratively, Rosenholtz cited those teachers felt more supported through their on-going efforts and learning. Wenger (1998) found that participants engagement of ideas, experiences, and knowledge leads to new approaches to solving problems.

The scholars and practitioners collectively concurred that when structures of supportive working conditions, shared values and goals, collaboration among administration and teachers were the central focus of student learning, schools would be successful in student achievement. Newman's (1991) study involved 24 public schools that aimed to identify the effectiveness of restructuring "new knowledge" through learning communities. Newman (1991, 1994, & 1996) and Kruse and Louis (1995) concurred learning communities as an essential component of schools most successful at restructuring. to be most successful at restructuring "new knowledge" (p.1).

In addition, Newman (1996) identified conditions that nurtured the advancement of learning communities as: (a) mutual governance that expands teacher' influences over school policy and practice; (b) interdependent work structures, such as teacher teams, that enhances collaboration; (c) enriched staff developments that supports technical skills that are aligned in the school's mission; (d) deregulation that gives autonomy for the school to seek a vision of high academic scholarly standards; and (e) a broad view of parent involvement as a stakeholder. McLaughlin and Talbert (2001) cited that "building learning communities into the practice of teachers is essentially a problem of re-culturing the profession-changing the structure of teaching in isolation to collaboration, from conservation to innovation" (p.125). Thus, many educators interpret learning communities as extending classroom practices through classroom channels of materials and human resources.

McLaughlin and Talbert's (2010) study found that when teachers collaborated in learning communities, they were able to create and share essential pedagogy and ideas prudent to teacher practices and student learning. Research showed the effectiveness for improving the professional development of teachers and the academic achievement of students (Dogan et al., 2016; Selcuk & Allyson, 2018). In fact, Kincheloe (2012) affirms a professional culture can be well-grounded when teachers immerse themselves through sharing knowledge that spills over in the classroom.

Professional community of learners as gauged by Astuto et al., (1993) noted three related communities as: (1) professional community of educators, (2) a network of ongoing learning communities of teachers and students both within and outside the classroom, and (3) the stakeholder community. Astuto et al, suggest the previously

stated, mirrors plcs, where learning is on a continuum for classroom teachers and administrators. PLCs is an aspiration that infuses each single aspect of a school's operation (Hargreaves, 2004) that does not require additional work that has been a traditional routine of educators. However, an effective PLCs does rely on building administrators, teachers, counselors, staff members, district superintendent and related staff to reanalyze their thinking and responsibilities to increase achievement for all students.

Later, Horn (1997a) was credited for educating the education sector on the term PLC, a term that was recognized in the business sector. Hence, the term has been used on a spectrum in education to represent an array of cooperative groups working together. In addition, Horn found that effective PLCs share the following attributes: supportive and shared leadership, collective creativity, shared vision and values, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice. A staff adhering to PLC outcomes, as noted, Horn's (1997b) study revealed many potentials for reducing: teachers isolation, increase commitment to the mission and goals of the school and increase rigor in working to strengthen the mission, shared responsibility for students' success, intentional pedagogy and classroom practice to create new knowledge and beliefs about teaching and learners, extended knowledge of curriculum as it related to student achievements, professional developments that are design to empower teachers, higher morale leads to increased attendance, and a lasting career commitment.

The students' outcomes of the study concluded with decreases in both student dropout rates, fewer classes "skipped", coupled with fewer achievement gaps between students from different backgrounds. Consequently, the students' attendance and

learning rate increased. The plc process has potential to support teachers, administrators, and staff members to increase their skills and knowledge in teaching and soar to high levels of learning that will impact student achievement.

Characteristics of Professional Learning Communities

Researchers have identified important structures that denotes plcs that separated the movement from the other types of staff development. Researchers of plcs shared a passion about job-embedded practices that emphasized teacher learning as students benefit at the center of their efforts. The practice of a plcs has potential for an effective school reform. However, plcs may appear dissimilar per school, but they all are fundamentally structured the same. Doerr (2009) stated, "It isn't important to have the exact definition or model agreed upon, because each community must meet the needs of its members and reflect its school culture" (p.28). Moreover, when communities appear different, Doerr noted that plcs must have the essential key components that effectively improves both teaching practices and student achievement. The key components were to set clear goals of educators that meet regularly, work collaboratively, and share expertise to improve teaching skills and the academic performance of students. Huffman and Hipp (2003) cited that the essence of the key components are the supportive conditions that "glues" the other dimensions together" (p. 146). However, some educators who attest to implementing the plc process were miscellaneously used in the profession of education. Educators used the plc process in forms of a weekly meeting, program, or a book club.

PLC models generally include five to eight qualities that outlines how people cooperate inside the PLC. DuFour & Eaker (1998) affirmed that plcs consist of

collectively working towards shared goals, collaborating about student learning, carry-out best practice for student achievement and school practices, demonstrating a cycle of inquiry, promoting continuing improvement through system processes, and focusing on results.

Figure 1: **Five dimensions of a professional learning community (Hord, 2008).**

Horn (1998) noted effective PLCs as having shared leadership, goals, professional practice, and vision, along with supportive conditions. DuFour et al, (2010) contend that PLCs are an "ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve" (p. 11). The authors suggest that the goal of PLCs is to improve student learning through sustained and job-embedded practices. They further detailed team members working together to clarify student learning expectation, monitor student learning, and provide timely interventions that include support and additional time for learning when students do not meet their appropriate benchmarks. Thus, Hord, Roussin, and Sommers (2010) outlined how the PLC model is the learning and teaching that

occurs in a school. The author suggests that "only by increasing the effectiveness of teaching quality which results in higher student outcomes are plcs made to be worthwhile" (p.2).

The literature suggested that plcs provided schools with a framework to meet the goals of school reform, student achievement enhanced teacher knowledge, instructional practices, and school performance. The PLC process is undergirded by three big ideas that have significant implications for educators. DuFour's & Marzano's (2011) model for plcs emphasizes three big ideas that has implications for educators to ensure all students achieve and excel at high levels. What is it we want our students to learn? How will we know if each student is learning each of the skills, concepts, and dispositions we have deemed most essential? How will we respond when some of our students do not learn? How will we enrich and extend the learning for students who are already proficient? (p. 22).

DuFour & Marzano contend student's uppermost importance is at the forefront of teachers routinely asking the big three questions. The authors suggested an effective school has various ongoing schoolwide systematic approaches to check for students' academic achievement and how to address underachievers based on their intervention systems. A schools' vision and mission should mirror one another for the purpose of students' academic success. As school leaders, teachers, and staff commit to a shared vision-of-change grounded in trust and mutual understanding Garmston and Wellman (1995) cited, educators are creating a safe environment where stakeholders can share what is of value to them. A school that functions as a plc community not only shares a vision, however, the school leader, teachers, and staff shared a common understanding

of how to go about getting to their shared vision. Krijnen (2022) contends that a shared vision among staff may stimulate the development of their shared vision. Research found, transforming a schools' vision to coincide with their mission is the cornerstone for a professional learning community (DuFour, 2004).

Professional Learning Communities

PLCs are organizational components where teachers work collaboratively to reflect on their practices, examine evidence about the relationship between practice and student outcomes, and make changes that improve teaching and learning for the low-achieving student(s) in their classes **(**McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006, pp. 3-4). In addition, a plc is a concept of teacher sharing, as Seashore et al, (2003) noted, while critically examining practice to improve student outcomes. Principals and teachers in the building community continuously seek and share learning. Implementing the shared learning may help changes that may support the success of all students. Researchers found that linking learning with students in the classroom, school leaders and staff in the schools' learning community uses a triangulation method of student data to obtain a students' proficiency level(s).

As a result, a student's unsuccessful academic achievement(s) are put on high alert in order to prioritize underachieving students learning needs (Hord, 2009). The emphasis of a plc model facilitated and supported underachieving students as they achieved educational obtainment. Teachers assess and collaborate to focus their instruction to gain student achievement of low-achieving students (Murphy et al., 2009). To find a linkage between school improvement efforts and relationships among teachers, six urban desegregated schools were examined. The research was an attempt

to enhance the foundation of professional learning communities. The study found that professional development is likely to be achieved when:

- Teachers engage in frequent continuous and increasingly concrete talk about their practice.

- Teachers are frequently observed and provided with useful critiques of their teaching.

- Teachers plan, design, research, evaluate, and prepare teaching materials together.

- Teachers teach others the practice of teaching,

(Little, 1982 & 2006).

The most promising strategy for sustained substantive school improvement is developing the ability of school personnel to function as a plc community (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). The efforts of school leaders and teachers in professional learning communities critically impacts the volume of all school staff members in assisting students to successfully achieve academically (Ratts, et al., 2015). Moreover, the students in a plc are motivated to achieve academically (DuFour & Marzano 2012). Activities that enhance student learning will force teachers to delve into the colleague's practice of expertise, results, pedagogy, next steps and to ponder on the what ifs.

DuFour and Marzano suggested that a professional is someone with expertise in a specialized field, an individual who has not only pursed advanced training to enter the field, but who is also expected to remain current in its evolving knowledge base. Learning suggests ongoing action a perpetual curiosity. The school that operated as a professional learning community recognizes that its members must engage in ongoing

study and constant practice that characterize an organization committed to continuous improvement. In a professional learning community, educators create an environment that fosters cooperation, emotional support, personal growth as they work together to achieve what they cannot accomplish alone DuFour and Eaker (1998, pp. xi-xii).

Collaborative

Learning occurs in groups as teachers learn from each other, not assuming that one teacher is more educated than the other. Collaboration involves both pedagogical and psychological methods (Dillenbourg, 1999). Roschelle and Teasley (as cited in Dillenbourg et al., 1996. p. 2) define collaboration as "mutual engagement of participants in a coordinated effort to solve a problem together". Successful collaborative efforts include strategies that "open" practice in ways that encourage sharing, reflecting, and taking the risks necessary to change. This is when two or more people learn or attempt to learn something together or share idea(s). Collaborative learning promotes changes in teaching cultures.

Collaboration allows teachers time to gather and share educational pedagogical ideas and data. Teachers sharing best practice may provide opportunities for growth for themselves and others. Although individual growth is important for organizational growth to occur, it does not ensure organizational growth (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). On the other hand, overseeing teachers in a school's population to learn is a collaborative effort not an individual task. When colleagues are learning and working collaboratively it focuses on an organizational renewal and their willingness to continuously work together towards an improvement process. Fullan (1993) found an improvement process as teams work together the *Change Forces*:

The ability to collaborate on both a large and small scale is one of the core

requisites of postmodern society, In short, without collaborative skills and

relationships it is not possible to learn and to continue to learn as much as you

need in order to be an agent for social improvement. (pp.17-18).

When teams are given the opportunity to collaborate, they have the potential to possess

the skills to work together to put structures in place for the success of the school, teams,

and committees (Balyer et al., 2015). Teachers working together may have a positive

impact on their working relationships with one another as they contribute their talents

and ideas to school improvement, especially as it relates to the achievement of the low-

achieving students (Murphy et al., 2009).

Teachers extend their collaboration efforts to include various group teams such

as grade level, vertical, and or committee teams. These teams could ensure curriculum

areas are intentionally taught to mastery. To ensure academic gains, teams may monitor

student data and create a culture of collaboration that could enhance student learning

(Dufour, 2004). Moreover, teachers collaborating could be a platform into *Response To*

Invention. Response to intervention program is designed to support underachieving

students who have not mastered skills (Buffum et al., 2009). A professional learning

community model has potential to provide supportive structures to build communities

of support based on the schools' areas of student needs. Student(s) may have

challenging days due to social or behavior issues (Sanzo et al., 2010).

As plcs form, school leaders have the potential to create an environment

encouraging cooperation, emotional support, and personal growth (Balyer et al., 2015).

Teachers having the time to collaborate may offer teachers a framework to build a supportive system that may enable students can be successful.

As schools, populate with more proficient or non-proficient students, at times some teachers may be challenged with their academic needs and emotional needs too. Many teachers internalize the outside issues their students may experience. Students from impoverished homes have a greater chance to sometimes endure abuse (Suttie, 2016). A teacher's empathy for their students may internalize in a form of silent stress for the teacher. Teachers form relationships with their students and families. When students are in less desirable homes it may impact their academic success. Students trust their teachers enough to confide in them about their family concerns. When teachers depend on one another for support, they develop relationships based on trust and empathy. These regular interactions are important in forming lasting professional and mentorship relationships. When teachers feel supported, they can better extend that same support to their students.

Collaboration between teacher and leadership is of vital importance for ensuring a flourishing PLC (Donner et al., 2008); Eastwood & Seashore, 1992). Collaborative culture is viewed differently by many educators and educational leaders. For example, DuFour (2003) stated educators and practitioners have different views about what constitutes collaboration. Moreover, many view collaborations with congeniality. School leaders engage in operational procedures issue such as staff annual birthday recognition or social gatherings. These ongoing activities have potential to build school climate, however, it can just be a temporary "fix" but it does not transform a school. DuFour (2003) define collaboration as a "systemic process in which we work together

to analyze and impact professional practice in order to improve our individual and collective results". (p. 63). Little (1990) defines collaboration as self-efficacy. This approach between teachers was linked to gains in student achievement. In addition, the self-efficacy approach was especially beneficial for the first-year teachers. Gerlach (1994) defines collaboration as an "idea that learning is a naturally social act that allows verbal participation among themselves.

Learning is developed through talking" (p. 12). Panitz (1995) defines collaboration as a structure of interaction designed to enable the works of a certain product or goal through people working together. Panitz further notes that collaborative learning is an enormous term that describes a combination of educational approaches involving the collective intellectual engagement from small group projects to the more specific form of group work known as cooperative learning.

Collaboration allows teachers time to gather and share educational pedagogical ideas and data. Teachers working together can share best practices that may provide opportunities for growth for themselves and others. However, research shows that a collaborative culture contests teacher isolation that can hinder teacher and student learning, as well as the overall school improvement. Little (2006) states that teachers can improve their craft of teaching when their learning is related to current content and working with colleagues to address the curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Saphier (2005) concur and added that the culture of a school, its academic focus, and its professional relationships are more productive if they are intentional and focused. Stigler and Hiebert (2009) concluded that the best approach to help teachers improve instruction is grouping teachers according to the same content and who share the same

learning goals for students. Grouping teachers into a collaborative learning community

requires mutual understanding and engagement. Donner et al., (2008) found that

through participation, teachers gain shared experiences, common interest, and

resources, engaging in dialogue, and building relationships on which all earn each

other's trust.

Shared Values and Vision

A clear insight of the mission and shared values are indispensable to a PLC.

These values are shared when walls of isolation are broken down and principals,

teachers, psychologists, counselors, assistants, and other stakeholders work on goal-

oriented teams to "establish specific, measurable, attainable, results-oriented, time

bound (SMART)" goals pertaining to student learning and achievement (DuFour &

DuFour, 2010). However, the operative word in shared vison and value is 'share'.

Teachers, school leaders, and parents collaborate to create a vision that is realistic and

offers an attractive future for the organization. Kotter (1996, p. 68) described a vision as

"essential" to a successful change process.

An essential characteristic of the PLC community's vision is its unwavering

focus on student learning. School administrators, teachers and staff spear-heads

decisions about teaching, student learning and support norms of behavior through their

school's shared values and vision. A school's value is entrenched in the everyday

functioning of the teachers, administrators and staff as the community learns, engages,

and develops the commitment and talents of all individuals in a group effort that will

push for learning of high intellectual quality. In turn, (Siromik, 1999; Little, 1997) the

norms are developed from the school's values as self-aware, self-critical, and

increasingly effective professional organization filtered with the commitment of its members to seek ongoing renewal and improvement.

Once the group establishes the school's shared goals and vision then those words are placed into action so teachers and students can learn. Newman explains the effect of the group's effort to create a vision statement is to "push for learning of high intellectual quality". Routinely, copies of vision statements are distributed to parents at the onset of the new school year. Shared visions and shared values are not interchangeably used. Senge et. al, (1990) declare that shared visions keep organizations learning and thriving. In addition, DuFour and Eaker (1998) added the benefits of a clear shared vision includes: motivates and rejuvenates people, creates a proactive orientation, gives explicit directions to organization members, has established set standards, and sets a plan of action. Teachers, principal, and staff members have a common understanding of what is expected for school improvement and for students to gain academic knowledge.

PLCs are not structured as the former traditional setting of school where the principal worked in insolation to decide on the school's values and visions. Moving forward, in a PLC, the entire staff is continuously working in some fashion to establish and adhere to the school's educational vision and values through intentional best-practices that are focused around meaningful and transformed approaches to improve student learning. Yogi Berra cited, "If you don't know where you are going, you probably aren't going to get there."

Supportive Shared Leadership

Shared leadership is defined as "simultaneous, ongoing, mutual influence process within a team" (Pearce, 2004, p. 48). Shared leadership is also used interchangeably to refer to collective leadership, decentralized, collaborative, and distributed leadership. Leadership has become a pivotal issue that affects the success and failure of every organization, country, and religious movement. The traditional position of a principal from a hierarchy perspective, is "all-wise and all-competent" (Hord, 1997) by teachers, staff, and parents. Principals were held to a high standard, making it problematic to admit they needed professional development in some decision-making process.

Supportive leadership can offer the platform for developing and sustaining a PLC. Supportive leadership can also contribute to the nourishment of a PLC while reinforcing the structures and foundations of a PLC. The relationship between the teachers and principals can be fostered through a shared and responsive leadership by working together toward a common goal. This supportive and shared leadership has the potential to allow principals to create, maintain, and embrace an interconnected democratic relationship with teachers as it relates to sharing leadership, power, and decision making and the willingness to engage without controlling. Kleine-Kracht (1993) suggested that administrators and teachers must be learners, and everyone can contribute. To effectively contribute, Hord (2009) suggest that time and place are two factors that a school leader must adjust in the school schedule to accommodate teachers and the community.

There are numerous benefits for shared leadership such as empowering organizations to progress, allowing the opportunity for more focus, lessening conflict, and providing a more cohesiveness along with trust. According to Pearce and Conge (2003), shared leadership minimizes the turnover or attrition rate of staff because ideas are maximized, negative views are minimized to allow organizational growth. Sergiovanni (1994) summed leaders as those who: Plant the seeds of community, nurture fledgling community, and protect the community once it emerges. They lead by following. They lead by serving. They lead by inviting others to share in the burdens of leadership (p. xix).

Shared Personal Practice

Research suggests that collaboration among teachers is a powerful contributor to PLCs as it relates to planning collectively, analyzing student work and data, along with a plethora of activities that focus on student achievement. Collaboration among teachers is an essential component of a PLC model. Teachers gather to share ideas, resources, and pedagogical thoughts by way to shared personal practice heightens the term collaboration in a different direction. In a community, Louis, and Kruse (1995) found that a teacher's behavior by colleagues is the standard of the PLC. Shared personal practice allow teachers the opportunity to assist each other, support, develop (Huffman & Hipp, 2003) trust and respect. Shared personal practice provides time to find solidify professional relationships.

Shared personal practice allows a teacher the avenue to mirror and self-reflect on their craft of teaching by conducting peer observations and sharing feedback. In a PLC community, first year teachers have the potential to grow professionally with a

coach or mentor within the building community (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). Shared

practice provides (DuFour, 2004) team members the opportunity to outwardly share

through various modalities as facilitated by the school leader. In a PLC, shared practice

is an effective method of keeping the walls of isolation down, by allowing time for

teachers to stay connected and for teachers to explicitly share and talk as it relates to

strengthening academic success for students.

Within the community of shared personal practice, a teacher's individuality will

still flourish, however, through trust and respect (Huffman & Hipp, 2003) teachers can

become connected to each other professionally. In as much, literature affirms that

shared personal practice is limited in all levels of learning communities. In most

communities, shared personal practice, may be the last characteristic to develop.

Darling-Hammond (2006) states developing higher-order thinking skills and meeting

the needs of diverse students takes a lot of time of the teachers, however, it does not

come without merit for the learners.

Impact on Improving Student Learning

The primary focus of PLCs is to improve student learning. Some researchers

claim PLCs are the main element for improving schools. As observed by DuFour and

Marzano (2011) when a school improves, people improve. The advantage of an

effective PLC model has been cited by many researchers. DuFour et al, (2010) affirms

that PLCs are an ongoing process that allows collaboration among teacher and

administrators to work in an inquiry fashion to obtain answers to their questions to

improve academic skills for both achievers and underachievers. Schools have latched on

to the PLC community because the focus is on student data as well as the effectiveness

of collaborating to improve student learning (DuFour et al, 2005; Hord, 1997. An effective PLC impacts and improves teaching.

Students routinely use a common assessment that measures their student's academic achievement to evaluate a school's effectiveness. The success or failure of students is attached to the principals and teachers (Fullan & Watson, 2000). However, Ashby et al, (1996) contend that a school must decide what it stands for and where it is going before the teachers and stakeholders can see change." The framework to improving student learning hinges on the school's vision where decisions are consistent with the vision. The school's vision is the goal to a school's success (K-12 Blueprint, 2017). An effective PLC aligns with policies and supports explicit vision and goals for successful learning communities within schools and school systems. These structures are both supported by numerous factors such as federal, state, and local policies, curriculum and instruction, human resources, and other systems that are deemed within a school system. Scholars, practitioners, and educators affirm that with steadfast practices and ongoing modifications, PLCs may bridge the academic gap by transforming a very large-scale learning, knowledge, and skill development into a small-scale learning. Moreover, PLCs provide an enduring structure of support for continuous success and implementation of school and systemwide initiatives (Horn, 2004).

To ensure continuity within learning communities and to gain support of their contribution to school and system goals, local and state officials, and school superintendents (Horn) build policies that establish formal accountability for sustainable results coupled with the support to achieve success.

As previously stated, PLCs improve student learning. As teachers learn, it heightens student learning. It is vital that educators and administrators focus on student results to ensure learning. Intentionally creating (DuFour et al, 2005) common assessments and reviewing and using data to drive instruction are key factors for teachers to implement in order to develop an effective PLC. McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) suggest the effects reflects student learning because:

(a) student achievement is measured for both regional and nationally representative school samples,

(b) the prediction of students' learning gains reflects a strong correlation to teacher learning community and teaching practices, and

(c) teacher learning community and student experiences of their school and class reflects a strong correlation.

Three National Longitudinal Studies were conducted, Lee & Smith (1995, 1996); Lee, Smith, & Croninger (1997) cited that all three studies depict a positive statistical effect on student achievement gains reflecting that student increase more academically in a school where their teachers take collective accountability for the success of all students. Additional analyses showed that socioeconomic status had little to no impact on students' achievement gains in a school with collaborative teacher communities.

For decades, schools in China have successfully implemented PLCs community in their schools, however, research on Asian settings is limited. In 2009 and 2012, Shanghai students ranked first worldwide in the Programme for International Students Assessment. Shanghai attributed the accomplishments to regular collaboration of teachers (Tan, 2013). The barriers for Chinese schools were due to traditional cultural beliefs as they were related to the excessive administrative interventions that had an adverse effect on the Chinese harmonious culture. PLC communities, as previously mentioned, may vary in all organizations.

Role and Responsibility of the Principal

"If you can't make a school a great professional place for its staff, it's never going to be a great place for kids" (Brandt, 1992, p. 21, quoting Hank Levin). The role and responsibilities of principals are numerous. However, in a PLC community, thus, throughout this research, school leadership is a major emphasis to improving school effectiveness and school improvement (Leithwood et al., 2004). In order to effectively transition to a PLC community, Alvy and Robbins, (n/d) affirm that principals need to learn how to seamlessly blend their role into "lead teacher and lead learner". Effective principals are empowered with professional tools that may allow them to be steadfast in nurturing with the goal of building a culture for adults, student learning, and all stakeholders.

In addition, principals are creative, supportive, and maintain an engaging environment that promotes a community that supports adaptability, innovation, and growth (Leithwood and Jamtzi, 2007; Teddlie and Reynolds, 2000). However, Leithwood et al., (2004) contend that "leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what student learn at school" (p.5). Principals pass along their practice and knowledge to teachers and stakeholders. Continuing to remain proactive, steadfast and, on the horizon, adheres to best practices to increase student's achievement. The traditional dictator style of leadership is obsolete in a plc community. Leadership in a plc community is a democracy; it requires shared collective decision-making to function as an inclusive community that involves all professional staff members fulfilling their professional

responsibility for maintaining the highest quality learning possible. Leadership is more effective as cited by Houdyshell et al (2022) with their full guidance and wise counsel.

Boyd and Hord (1994) found that the position of leadership is vital to influencing organizational culture; school culture likewise requires the attention of leaders. Principal leadership is conducive to constructive change in many ways. Their leadership reduces isolation, increases staff engagement to the mission and goals of the school, , offers a caring, productive environment, and encourages increase quality. Principals have the potential to be more successful by first seeking to understand the current school culture.

The ongoing role of the principals have continued to mobilize their staff while engaging them in collegial problem solving as well as forging ahead to capitalize on opportunities to develop learning communities to study the possibilities of new curricula. Overall, the role of a principal is a continuous learner of themselves and their staff members to increase student achievement. Principals' role in nurturing staff in their plc community will be complex, challenging and problematic because, in viewing teachers as members of a professional community, it will focus attention on norms or collegiality and on the ethnic of professional practice (Clark & Asturo, 1994).

The role of the principal allows time for teachers to learn and create vibrant practices of group learning. McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) agree that teachers learn best when they are involved with hands-on activities that: (a) focus on intentional instruction and student learning: (b) are constant and continuous; (c) provide collaboration inside and outside of school; (d) reflect on what and how teachers learn and (e) assist in creating theoretical knowledge and skills

Nonetheless, the role of a principal is commonly viewed as essential in contributing to the differences in the school's success and academic learning of all students. Although, this is not a new component in a school's transformation, it is essential. Past and current research has continuously focused on the importance of principals and school leaders and their connection to leadership. The principal's leadership has the influence on either validate or invalidate a school in achieving higher levels of productivity, and success (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). McLaughlin and Talbert (2004) cited achievement for all students could pose several challenges for a principal if: (a) teachers cannot provide rigorous instruction to increase student's cognitive skills that will increase achievement; (b) teachers are going to provide an inadequate education based on the student's diversity, and (c) teachers will not commit to the plc community to assume a new role focused on shared ideas and collaborating with the school community. On the other hand, Coleman (2010) affirmed that students deserve to the right to attend a school where their learning style(s) can be met successfully.

Elmore (2000) found how a principal's role in a plc community is anchored in the realization that a principal 's tenacity to mesh the attitudes, skills and knowledge of staff, create a culture of expectations together to form professional relationship with each other. Moreover, Elmore affirms that individuals account for their contributions to the collective result.

In conclusion, plcs have been at the forefront of reform efforts as a practical means of transforming schools to improve student achievement. The tradition of teaching autonomy works against the plc. The plc model has potential to give schools a

framework to form high-performing, collaborative teams of teachers that are all united toward the improvement of student learning.

Benefits and Challenges of PLCs

Literature suggests many benefits to plcs work strategy that improves student achievement by bringing about change within the school (DuFour & Marzano (2011). More importantly, plcs limit teacher isolation and enable dedication to the school's and district's mission and vision. Teachers are provided with time and resources to collaborate providing opportunities to improve their craft of teaching that ultimately increases student knowledge. Moreover, plcs as noted by Senge (1990) leads to systemic change. Fullan (1991) states promoting system change is difficult, but necessary to prevent a piecemeal change that can result in unintended consequences or no consequences due to mitigating too many education reformers. that can promote piecemeal change. The that can result in unintended consequences or no consequences due to mitigating conditions. DuFour and Marzano (2011) suggest by building an environment that promotes discussion and collaboration within the school, the plc model makes it possible to better monitor and support student progress. When schools implement an effective and organized plc, they will enable teachers to set high expectations for student achievement the quality of learning coupled with pedagogy sets the tone for learning at high levels and increases student achievement.

Researchers, practitioners, and scholars have identified specific elements that contribute to the development of plcs, such as reflective dialogues, shared vision, and collaborative activities, known in plcs as collective learning. Reflective dialogues known as inquiry learning in plcs is a format for students to voice in content, to enhance

student knowledge and problem-solve (Mercer, 2008). Reflective dialogue is a strategy used in the classroom to build community, enhance listening ability, and cultivate self-reflection. During the dialogue, students have opportunities to share their thoughts and responses.

Horn and Little (2010) depict the value of reflective dialogues in teacher teams as sources for exchanging experiences and accessing, conceptualizing, and learning from problems in teaching practice. Lomos et al., (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of the connection between subject-related teacher teams and student achievement. The results showed that plcs have positive consequences on school improvement as it relates to both reflective dialogues and collaborative activities in plcs. In as much, Newman (1996) sought how teachers made conversions that led to extensive and continuing reflective dialogues among teachers concerning their curriculum, pedagogy, and instruction along with student development.

Despite compelling evidence about the positive impact of plc communities some high schools reported challenges with implementing a plc community. Over a decade ago, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP, 1996) issued a report on the status of America's high school as it related to plcs. McLaughlin and Talbert (2007) noted NASSP's blueprint for high school reform regardless of the high schools' population, wealth, and diversity or homogeneity. The schools could be a better learning community for teachers and the other professional counterparts could create a personal learning plan. In 2002, a survey was conducted that resulted in only one in five high school teachers who had met and engaged in the shared academic ideas.

The authors noted how rare such professional practice is to support teachers' ongoing learning and instructional improvement.

The authors noted how creating and sustaining a plc in a high school environment mirrors an elementary or middle school environment where teachers foster a culture that prompts them to critically reflect on their practice and the organization necessary to support their collective data to improve teaching and learning. In grades K-12, Stoll et al., (2006) cites that PLC are defined by the presence of certain characteristics. Fullan and Hargreaves (1991); and Siskin and Little (1995) cited several interrelated challenges in creating and sustaining plcs in high schools. The first challenge in high schools is noted in how educators mitigate efforts to create a whole-school learning community. As a result, researchers found that the structure of the teachers' daily workday consisted of five 50-minute classes in addition, to supporting 130 students per day. The findings were from the ongoing anomic environment that was evident in most large comprehensive high schools. The teachers were faced with many challenges such as collaboration time was not conducive to the teachers' daily schedule, the rigorous amount of clerical work, classroom management, and class preparation for multiple classes was time intensive not allowing teachers time to engage with their colleagues and students.

The second challenge Public Agenda sought by principals/leaders who expressed how they had to operate like "the mayor of a small city" in their schools. High school principals were burdened with the capacity of navigating an instructional leadership throughout all subject areas of the high school curriculum or to serve as a model for inquiry, risk-taking and professional learning. According to Stronge et al.,

(2008) in order to meet the challenges of the national and state expectations, principals must focus on teaching and learning as it relates to student academic progress. The expectations of the national and state guidelines require schools to ensure that all students achieve mastery of curriculum objectives. To meet the mandates, the local schools focus on implementing those requirements to the best of their ability.

The next challenge is pervasive culture. Public Agenda found that American high school are inundated with students who displays disrespect for peers and teachers, violence, cheating, and discipline concerns. The findings also showed in high schools with a high enrollment of students only 16 percent of students. In high schools with a smaller enrollment of students only 22 percent of students reported that students treat teachers with respect.

The last and most challenging task is professional culture. Public Agenda found one high school where teachers where desensitized to the high failure rate of their students in core subjects. In response to the school's high failure rate in core subjects, a few teachers expressed little empathy or a sense of responsibility for students who were not academically successful. Brooks (2016) cited, teacher empathy can have a positive effective on reducing student suspensions and teachers' negativity on students misbehaving. Showing empathy can cultivate better relationships and help reduce discipline problems.

The findings from Public Agenda also showed that out of five high school teachers, two teachers had high expectations for the students and encouraged them to do their best. Moreover, one in three teachers in large high schools and one in five teachers in small high schools responded that 'too many teachers are just going through the

motions." The challenge to change the mindset of the high school teachers who were trained to teach under traditional norms, present difficulty because the teachers were custom to teaching subjects rather than students.

PLCs have become a focus of educational policy in numerous nations, states, and school districts (Stoll & Louis, 2007; DuFour & Eaker, 1998). The Malaysian Education Blueprint endorsed the original PLC model that was created by Horn (1996) with the end goals of increasing teacher professionalism and instilling life-long learners. In the opinion of the teachers, they contend that implementing plcs added additional weight of work added to their normal routine. Singapore educators contend that the introduction of plc activities is time-consuming and relied on teachers having to master a new nomenclature and set of practices along with collective work, peer classroom observation and other administrative tasks (Hairon, Goh, & Lin, 2014) and Hairon & Tan (2017). Hallinger's (2010) survey of scholars and educational leaders in Malaysia affirm educators' reform overload experienced by educators at the expense of their energy and motivation (p. 409). The second challenge was the risk of plcs being executed through surface-level compliance without rethinking upon other education reforms to gain a deeper understanding of its underlying concepts and procedures (Hallinger, 2010).

Another challenge in plcs was found not to directly affect just teachers throughout all educational levels but all staff in the community. From a study of plcs in primary, secondary, nursery and special school, Stephens (2015), cited the vital role of support staff helps to enhance students' learning as they provide academic support to special needs, kindergarten, and preschool students. Support staff such as assistants

have an important role to play in helping to enhance pupils' learning and promote

school improvement. Stoll et al., (2006) stated that a professional learning community is

an inclusive group of people, motivated by a shared learning vision, who support and

work with each other to find ways within or outside of their community to enquire on

their practice and together learn new and better approaches that will enhance all pupils'

learning. Ironically, inclusion of all staff may not be valued in all schools worldwide.

The authors' case study of 16 schools cited that 47 per cent of primary and 35 per cent

of secondary respondents reported that support staff were involved in reviewing student

outcome and progress data. PLCs tend to include support staff more at the primary

level.

More recently, Dogan et al., (2016); and Goldenberg (2004) found that

pedagogical and disciplinary content knowledge, that emphasized only student learning

improved instruction. Science teachers proved the effectiveness with plcs as Louis and

Mark (1998) collected an expansion of three years of data from 900 teachers and almost

6,000 students. The results yielded a positive relationship between professional

community and academic performance on authentic learning tasks. Moreover, science

teachers who fully followed a plc model found their students were twice as likely to

score proficient on the science state test.

The informative work of Senge (1990) was transformed and updated to be

utilized in the educational setting as a plc model (Hord, 1997). PLCs have been

endorsed as a way for schools to reduce isolation, learn together, and build capacity for

creating and sustaining change and whole school improvement efforts. Research has

noted the positive impact of plcs on whole school improvement, teaching practices, and

student learning. Literature also shows strong evidence that tracking data to ascertain if students are learning by utilizing the three big ideas that drive the plc process can increase success for all students.

Chapter Summary

This chapter explains how Professional Learning Community have evolved since 1960 as an alternative to the isolation endemic to the teaching profession in the United States (All Things PLC, 2010). Through the years of development, researchers found that plc structures may vary from school to school, but they all are fundamentally structured the same. Doerr (2009) stated, "it isn't important to have the exact definition or model agreed upon, because each community must meet the needs of its members and reflect its school culture" (p.28). Literature shows through reforms, many schools have made advancements of technology in the 21st century to further enhance their plc process that allows students to have access to more meaningful academic information.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This purpose of this qualitative study was to examine professional learning communities and the perception on learning as it related to student achievement in Title I schools. This study examined how teachers utilized what they learned in a professional learning community to enhance classroom instruction. Research continues to affirm there are two important factors that are key elements that impact student learning. The first factor showed how school leaders offered their leadership guidance in cultivating a plc committed to professional inquiry, collaboration, data-based decision making, and best practice, that helped teachers learn to adapt to new standards of accountability. Principals are viewed as essential factors in their school's effectiveness and improvement (Bryk et al., 2010; Herman et al., 2008; Sammons, 2007; Teddie and Reynolds, 2000; Teddie and Stringfield, 1993). The second key factor that impacts student learning is the teacher (Shulman, 1996) who suggest, the teacher must remain the key component. Research states that no technological devices will replace an entrusted human that can provide a sustainable education through a plc community.

As a teacher who has experienced teaching for 25 years in a Title 1 proficient school, now ranked a novice, low performing Title I school, according to state guidelines, I saw the need for change which required learning, and learning promotes change as it relates to the academic success for all students (Kotter, 1996). During our years as a proficient school, as ranked by the state, our population changed. At my present school, we were still providing good instruction, but all students were not learning at high levels especially our low-achieving students as it related to the Measure of Academic Progress test (MAP). Now, with our changes in leadership and student

population, I found out how to bridge our academic gap through the voices of proficient school leaders and teachers to be the key to the academic success for all students in this study.

Research Questions

The overarching research question to be addressed in this study is: How do teachers in Title I schools perceive the impact of learning. The three research questions that derived from the overarching question are:

1. What do teachers perceive as benefits of participating in the Professional Learning Community?

2. What do teachers perceive as an influence(s) on student learning in a Professional Learning Community?

3. What do teachers perceive to be the limitations of the Professional Learning Community?

Since the downward spiral in our school's student success, research depicted how leadership contributed to student improvement. Leithwood and Louis (2012) contend when principals are in the trenches with ongoing professional development with teachers this allows their understanding of quality instruction that is a catalyst for student improvement. Moreover, principals also obtained an in-depth view to an adequate knowledge-based curriculum that ensured an appropriate content was taught to all students in this study. School leaders ensure teaching and learning in their building shapes the conditions that are conducive towards learning (DuFour, 2011).

The ongoing question of why students continue to struggle to achieve continues to be a concern. This study identified how leaders achieved academic success in their Title I school. The research question for the study was the result of my literature review, as well as my personal experience in teaching in a Title I school.

Research Method

This study was phenomenological in nature using a qualitative research methodology. The study was focused on elementary school leaders and teachers in a non-specialized Title I schools along with their academic success through professional learning communities: impact of learning. Qualitative design draws from the traditions of phenomenology concept and from the works of Creswell and Creswell (2018).

Data Collection

This study was conducted in a semi-structured style. Doyle (2020) exclaimed; the semi-structured interview format allows for a two-way communication. This structure is open for questions to gain a better understanding of the question or topic. I offered a new issue(s) as a topic of interest that related to plcs during the open-ended interview. In a qualitative study, the interview method was the most important data collection to ascertain the lived experiences of the interviewees. Semi-structured interviews were ideally suited when more than a few of the open-ended questions require a follow-up (Adam, 2015). The semi-structured interview allowed the participants an opportunity to share and acquire an in depth of knowledge into the "how's" and "why's" of their experiences of professional learning communities in their Title I proficient school.

The semi-structured interviews questions were used to conduct individual teacher and principal interviews were conducted through a digital Zoom conferencing application session. In the interest of safeguarding the health and safety of all participants, no face-to-face interactions occurred (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021). All research participants were asked ten questions (Appendix B and C). There was a set of ten questions for each group of participants (teachers and principals) in this study. After each question, I was prepared to ask a participant for clarification and or allow the participant to elaborate until data saturation was confirmed. The focus of the principal's' interviews was to gain insight into their leadership perception utilized to implement professional learning communities in proficient Title I school. The focus of the teacher's' interviews gained insight into their perception they utilized to implement professional learning communities in proficient Title I school.

My first approach to gaining participants was made by emailing all elementary classroom teachers at title 1 proficient schools through our global directory. I only had three participants to respond. My second approach was to use the snowball sampling. This collection data, Naderifar (2017) will be utilized when samples with the target characteristics are not easily accessible. The number of interview questions are limited to ten for the teachers and principals to encourage the participants latitude to discuss their experiences with professional learning community in their title I school. Teachers and principals were able to openly share experiences of their knowledge as it related to their plc experience while answering the research questions. This allowed for richer data to be collected. Moreover, the transcripts were results of the narrative on each

participant's experiences. The interviews lasted a minimal sixty minutes. A few were under sixty while a couple went sightly over sixty minutes.

Participates were recorded and transcribed using pseudonyms for teachers and school leaders, schools, and the district name--or any other personally identifiable information that surfaces during the interview process. All documents--including transcriptions--obtained during this study were kept in a locked portable safe in my home for the recommended amount of time for this study. Afterwards, all information relating to the study was destroyed.

Site and Sample Size

This research was conducted on a digital Zoom application that also provided audio and video that conducted interviews. This pathway was to safe guard the health and safety of all participants during our national pandemic of COVID 19. The population for the current study were three purposefully selected non-specialized title I elementary proficient ranked schools.

Target Population

For this study, I interviewed teachers and principals at three different proficient title I schools in the same city and state. School proficiency is determined by the educational state department. The participants represented a school population of diverse students, various student enrollments, and school locales (rural, suburban, and urban) in the city limits.

Delimitations, Limitations, and Benefits Related to Zoom

This qualitative research has several limitations. First, I conducted my interviews through the digital Zoom application platform. This process was necessary to

protect participants and myself due to our National pandemic of COVID 19. Second, to eliminate any background distractions, I uploaded the Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) logo. Third, I only chose three proficient title 1 school even though there are a substantial number of elementary schools in this area, Elementary Schools in this school district are classified as a title 1 elementary school, that can qualify for title 1 benefits, a non-title 1 elementary school or an elementary school with a specialized academic focus. Fourth, I allowed sixty minutes per interview; however, as noted in Table 1 some participant's interviews varied in length of times. Last, teachers were not selected by their years of experience or lack thereof.

Chapter 4:

Presentation of Findings

This chapter presented participants' responses regarding their perception of learning as it relates to professional learning communities. Interviewees detailed methods used by administrators and teachers in the classroom, the central principles that guided their use of professional learning, and their perceptions of student learning. Findings derived from administrators and teachers' reflections, regarding professional learning communities provided context for the chapter's presentation and analysis of general themes. These themes defined the process of perception for their success through the implementation of professional learning communities.

Moreover, this qualitative study explained the Perception of Learning in Professional Learning Communities in Title I Schools. The data was collected through a semi-structed interview aligned to the research questions conducted in the digital Zoom Platform. In total, three principals and nine teachers were interviewed.

Description of the Sample

Participants were recruited from three different proficient Title 1 elementary schools. Each school serves grades pre-kindergarten through fifth grade. All three schools were located within three to five miles of each other. Students were transported to and from school by many different modes. School A is in a residential neighborhood. At the time of the research the following school demographics were reported, School A served around 620 students in grades pre-kindergarten through fifth with the population consisting of 49% females and 51% males. School A's demographic makeup at the time of the research displayed a heavy presence of just over 50% of White students. The

African American student's population did not reach double digits at 9%. At the time of the research, the population of the Hispanic was 22%, and the Asian, or Pacific Islander populations was 11%. During this period, the academic state proficiency ranking was over 60% (Great Schools, n/d). The principal at School A had more than 20 years combined as a teacher and principal.

School B was in a residential area that is surrounded by multiple family-style dwellings. At the time of the research the following school demographics were reported, School B served just over 600 students in grades Pre-Kindergarten through Fifth. School B's gender population of students were equally divided of 50% for both females and males. School B's population makeup was slightly over 54% for White students, African Americans percent was 24%. The Hispanic and Asian were 12%, and students with disabilities were 2%. At the time of the research, School B's academic state proficiency ranking was near 0% (Great Schools, n/d). The principal at School B had more than 20 years combined as a teacher and principal.

School C was in a residential area that is surrounded by multiple family-style dwellings and multiple modes of transportation. At the time of the research the following school demographics were reported, School C served just under 600 students in grades Pre-Kindergarten through Fifth. School C's population makeup was 46% for White students. African American students were 26%. Hispanic were 15%, Asia or Pacific Islander were 4% of the students, and Native American were <1%. The principal at School C had more than 20 years combined as a teacher and principal.

I used two methods to gather participants for this phenomenological research. I first emailed teachers and principals at schools A, B, and C from their school directory.

The emailing method resulted in a low response of five participants. The second method I implemented was the snowball method. This approach proved to be successful for expediting the participants in my study. The snowball method, according to Naderifur et al., (2017) allowed participants in this study to petition colleagues who qualified to participate in my Professional Learning Community study. After the seven participants agreed to take part in the study, I informed each participant that their participation could be a minimum of sixty minutes then we set a time and date for the interview.

Each participant was sent an email with an approved consent form along with the Zoom link. I instructed each participant to sign their consent form, scan it back to me through my school email. As I received each participant's consent form, I sent each participant a Zoom link. Once each participant clicked their Zoom link on their scheduled day and time it allowed the participants to gain access to a face-to-face interview.

I interviewed 3 principals, 3 intermediate, and 6 primary teachers. The time frame of each interview varied in length. I asked two different sets of questions with each set containing ten questions for teachers and principals. On average, interviews lasted forty to sixty minutes. I found that some participants conveyed information at different speeds and this variance in some interviews maximized the time. In addition, two primary teachers were nontenured, not having as much experience to reflect upon.

The participants were not asked their age nor their years of experience. When interviewed, six participants expressed how the concept of professional learning communities changed during their tenure. However, as each principal elaborated on some interviewing questions, they expressed their tenure background as a teacher at the

time, as well as the present administrator. Their verbal elaboration allowed me to gain

more insight into their background knowledge as the school's administrator. As the

interviews evolved, Principals A and C along with teacher 5 from B elementary school

expressed having prior knowledge with professional learning communities. Principal C

stated he attended Richard DuFour's conferences.

I interviewed twelve participants for this qualitative research to obtain an

enriched depth and wealth of knowledge. Upon the completion, interviewees were

transcribed and reviewed with an audio-visual and field notes to create an accurate

sense of the participant's responses Sutton and Auston (2015). I also utilized an

audiocassette, for a back-up. I launched the process of evaluating the administrators and

teachers' transcripts on professional learning communities: precipitation on learning by

coding the administrators in a group and the teachers in another group. Initially, I used

an inductive open coding approach to analyze the data. Open coding as stated by Salih

et al (2015) is an initial multi-step approach. Moreover, open coding is a process

method that enabled me to chunk or label sentences from my transcripts of interviews.

After I analyzed the transcripts from both groups, each coding process allowed for

further refinement of categorical themes to address new codes that emerged. This

restarted my coding process four times, consecutively, to ascertain new key phrases.

After every round of analyzing the data, if needed, I refined the previous new codes. I

created two charts for each group. Both coding charts were labeled teachers and

principals, respectfully. I labeled the chart to represent the teachers using the numbers

one through nine and the chart for principals were labelled A, B, and C to reflect each

principal. As themes were confirmed, a bank of interviewee quotations that illustrated

those themes were inserted in the chart that corresponded with the set of ten research

questions that where vertically in their perspective charts. The chart allowed me to

ascertain any similarities and differences within codes among both groups as themes

were confirmed. After I analyzed each response from the participants, all participant's

open-coding analysis was placed in columns to concur with the participant's answer.

Upon data saturation, sub-themes emerged for theme 1 that had a direct relationship to

the principal theme.

As I finalized my coding, I coded many phrases from the interviews that depict

how the participants credited the support staff for their perspective school's PLC

success. The notable phrases that continued to emerge from both groups were principals

are always at our weekly PLCs, EL teachers plan with teachers and "push-in" the

classrooms daily, principals explicitly guiding teachers through their MAP and Galileo

assessments. Principal A perceived that monitoring teachers in their classrooms daily

through her five-to-fifteen-minute lens "encourages teachers for success, not a gotcha."

The "lens" is a district walk-through as an instructional leadership strategy that

facilitates discussions between principals and teachers about classroom practice. In

addition, two sub-headings emerged that focused specially on Theme 1. From the

forementioned codes, I patterned the theme, structure support.

Consequently, these themes cut across both groups who are vital to the creation and

success of their professional learning communities that impacts student learning.

This research will offer up three unifying themes structure support, consistent

structures, and focus on student learning.

Table 1

Pseudonyms of participants and length of interviews in hour, minutes, and seconds.

Participants	Interview length of time
School A	
Principal A	1:15:07
Teacher 1	1:02:09
Teacher 2	0:60:05
Teacher 3	1:05:10
School B	
Principal B	1:20:07
Teacher 4	1:04:08
Teacher 5	1:13:05
Teacher 6	0:54:02
School C	
Principal C	1:08:02
Teacher 7	1:02:09
Teacher 8	0:55:19
Teacher 9	0:59:18

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the perception that professional learning communities in title 1 schools have on learning and to understand the benefits and limitations teachers and principals have experienced. The qualitative study used three intermediate, six primary teachers, and three administrators in three different elementary schools in the same school district. In this section, I present analyses of the research findings. The attributes of professional learning communities described by PLC literature (Structure Support, Physical Structure, Human Capacities, Consistent Structure, and Focus on Student Learning) helped organize the interview data into pre-designated themes.

Theme 1

Structure Support

The structure support theme suggested structures have the potential to promote and support change in a professional learning community as it supports student learning. Structures can be included to determine when, where, and how the staff regularly meet collectively to learn, decide on discussions, solve problems, and any other systems that characterizes a professional learning community (Horn, 1997). The participants structure support varies because of their individuality and experiences. The participants described structure supports such as keeping their meeting agenda before and after their plc meeting, the scheduling of their MAP and Galileo assessments, guiding them to their next step in a student's progress, and removing barriers.

In the quote below, "When asked what is your role in the PLC and how do you support your teachers in implementing a PLC"? The participants related how these strategies accomplished some of the goals that provided structure support.

Principal A perceived by keeping staff focused and engaged on their professional developments as set by the principal, the teachers are perceived to 'grow' professionally to adhere to a more structured and effective PLC process.

Principal A stated,

> My role is to guide our PLC per our agenda. I also make and update our grade level graphs after assessment have been taken. My leadership experience and knowledge of a professional learning community, in my opinion was the best way to initiate our PLC and to start the process growing instead of having my teachers attend hours of PDs. I want their time to be well-spent and meaningful. I like to protect their time because we ask a lot from our teachers. When our district rolls out something new for the teachers to do, I reassure the teachers by stating, this is what we're being told we need to do, but first, let's identify what we're already doing that matches this initiative.

Principal A perceived by letting the teachers know that they have a "new" (fingers up showing air quotations) initiative that has surfaced that maybe something they are already doing so they won't stress nor completely start over.

Principal B took a different approach to maintaining structure support. Principal B was perceived to reinforce student progress more often. School B students achieved

academically to become a proficient school a few years ago after being one of the

lowest ranked schools academically in the district.

Principal B contended,

> I have several roles, but the ones that takes precedence is guiding my teachers
> during their plc time and to establish testing times on our benchmark testing We
> meet in this room (arms spread out) every week and each grade level meet at
> their same time each week. I must remain in control of the students' progress or
> lack thereof daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly. As long as they're a student at
> School B. If they're NOT (said loudly with each hand cuffed around her mouth)
> making process. I schedule a time to meet with the teacher and we make an
> initial plan then I continue to watch monitor that student. I pull out my PLC
> book (held up the book) during the summer and browse through to ascertain
> what else can we add to tighten up of PLC structure? My assistant (who was
> sitting beside her) shares information from the district leadership meeting she
> attends each year. This helps to give us a shot-in-the-arm to jump start our PLC
> process.

Principal B perceived that staying abreast with the student's past and present benchmark

assessments in grades K-5 allowed the principal, teachers, and her support staff to

gauge when the students who needed to be retaught unmastered academic standards.

> Principal B added,
>
> Regardless of the classroom demographics, administration can still see
> student(s) growth. This is always a concern for teachers. this method stops a
> teacher's excuse about having low test scores. I make decisions, but I do like

and respect by-in from the staff. I think that also contributes to an effective

component of their plc process.

In addition to supporting teachers, Principal B perceived by balancing out classes when

a teacher has a coteaching classroom that contained five special education students in it,

still had potential to impact the school data in a positive manner.

Teacher 1 perceived the structure support at their school to be a source of help

not just for the teacher but also for the students.

Teacher 1 added,

"Intervention teachers help daily to close the low achieving student's academic gaps as

well as helping the students increase their knowledge so they can learn to work

independently".

Teacher 3 added,

We do have an ESL intervention teacher in every grade level. Those teachers

"push-in" the classrooms. These are our title 1 type of kids of low income.

These teachers (with extended arms) truly do co-teach in the rooms and they

pull groups too. I think that helps with student achievements.

Teacher 1 also perceived that their intervention team benefits students because they can

reinforce what has been taught in the classroom in small groups.

Teacher 1 affirmed, "Intervention teachers often help other students who are not in their group if none of their students are in need at that time. Again, we are all in this together. We are on the same team"

In order for learning conditions to function cohesively, Boyd (1992) and Louis et al (1995) affirm both physical structure and human capacities are essential to function productively. As themes became transparent, it was noticeable how physical structure and human structures divided into two main branches. This research offered two subheadings to reinforce structure support.

Physical Structures

The physical structure theme can be characterized by the small size of the school, meeting time, staff's distance to one another, teaching positions, structures of communication, autonomy and teacher empowerment, the role and functions of the school's SBDM (Site Base Decision Making Counsel), structures that supports a plc process (Hord, 1997). The participants physical support varies because of school size and space.

Principal B offered,

> I like keeping a routine of our weekly and monthly task because it keeps me on track plus it keeps the teachers in on a pace of knowing what will come next. I don't like surprises and I don't want the teachers being surprised. So, when there maybe need to be a big change such as in a change in classroom locations due to our population. I like to first get feedback from each grade level as it relates to grade level locations. Them my faithful custodians. I know that change can be difficult for some teachers plus a lot of physical work for our custodians.

Human Capacities

The human capacity theme suggested structures have the potential to enhance a productive learning community with the willingness of staff to accept feedback and work toward improvements for all. In addition, characteristics of human capacity should reflect respect and trust among colleagues at the school and district level. Teachers and staff show the appropriate cognitive and skill base that enables effective teaching and learning, supportive leadership from administrators and others in key roles that promotes an effective plc process (Hord, 1997). In the quotes below, the participants related how the human capacity structure helped to accomplish an effective plc process.

Principal C perceived teachers are not bound by their own restrictions. Principal C reinforced teachers to make sure they know their curriculum before teaching a lesson. Principal C stated,

> It is my job to ensure accountability and that teachers are following the norms we set for our PLCs. My job also includes removing barriers to establish a good plc culture. Often times a teacher's barriers can be the lack of instructional and planning time along with the pressure to meet deadline of completing others task could potentially cause a hiccup to a teacher staying focus on their teaching. Teacher effectiveness will be better attained as long as teacher are equipped with knowledge of their state standards and or district curriculum guides. However, "not knowing" (fingers up to show air quotations), is a barrier to both teacher and the students' progress.

Teacher 7 perceived sometimes established routines need a quick lapse in routine because everyone appears to be stressed with many school demands.

Teacher 7 found,

> I feel like our principal knows when the staff is stressed out. Our principal slows down the pace (hands raised lowering down) and as a staff our principal organizes special days with treats, hand massages, or whatever. This helps the stress level to come down. It's like we take a break from it all for a day or so to breath. We know we can always find comfort in our principal just cutting back on our obligations, just to let them catch a breath.

Teacher 8 exclaimed,

> First, I want to say that our principal is in tune with the staff and our needs. There are times when our load gets too heavy with report cards, conferences, and on-going lesson plans. This is one way our principal is giving in the sense by pulling back from a weekly PLC and staff meetings at least for a week. (exhaled a sigh then continued) I feel like our principal navigates the staff from an outlined or defined goals set by the district. So, I feel like our principal closely micromanages our PLC to keep the teachers driven by the student data.

Teacher 3 took a different routine due to perceiving to need more reassurance from her principal.

Teacher 3 commended,

> I like receiving constructive feedback from my principal such as, you did this great and here are some things you when to work on and later there's a follow-up with giving me a week or so to incorporate the suggestion(s) that has helped

to grow me professionally. I think sometimes it's hard to take criticism from your principal and or peers. It's like you are the same as me. Some peers find it condescending, but it helps me to be a better teacher.

Teacher 9 also perceived to have a different approach to learning from the principal by first building trust in the grade team and the principal before showing professional vulnerability.

Teacher 9 shared,

I am the youngest and less experienced teacher on my team. I wasn't used to being observed by peers and not by a camera (she giggled). My principal often reminds me that I will get out of teaching what I put in it. I decided to think positive about my teaching skills and career. I have always gotten questions answered and help whenever I ask my principal and peers. I made the decision to (with fingers up, air parenthesis) "step" outside my comfort zone. So, I got observed just by the camera during my math time. My principal placed the camera on my computer before my lesson stated. We later watched each other's video during our PLC time. Prior to watching the videos, we were instructed that this process would require our trust in leadership for an opportunity to grow professionally. We all watched the video and allowed each other's comments. We all shared some positive occurrences and accepted points that could grow us. I feel, the principal has established genuine trust with me and my team.

In sum, Leithwood and Louis (2012) found how trust illuminates pathways known to leaders that bridges the school's climate.

Theme 2

Consistent Structures

The Consistent structure theme as suggested by Owens (2016) found that consistency in practice is a vital characteristic for the cohesiveness an effective implementation of a PLC process. In the quotes below, the participants perceived consistent structures

Principal B perceived that by having established consistency of routines they were a productive component in their successful plc accomplishments.

Principal B stated,

> Consistency starts with me. Each week, I develop what we are going to talk about for our agenda based on how the data dictates. I use the same format for my agenda. Each team goes through the agenda together to check off, update, or whatever is needed. That has been the end-all-be-all for us. As a school, we consistently input our watch list kids on our monthly updated data form and watch them in case more support is needed for them. (With widen eyes) Implementing the PLC model with consistency has been the success for reaching proficiency in our school. (With her right hand over her heart) I can't express enough how staying consistent with this agenda (she pointed to the paper agenda) helped to pull our school up from the bottom ranking of a TSI school up to a proficient school.

Principal A perceived that consistency was a driving force in plc process.

Principal A added,

"I consistently implement the PLC model at School A. It has been a vehicle for closing their academic gap. Our academic gains qualified School A to earn the title of a Blue Ribbon School".

Teacher 4 perceived that routines help to keep the focus on what needs to be accomplished.

Teacher 4 found,

> A consistent start to our PLC after every assessment. I love this because for me it sets the tone for our purpose. When we go to our PLC meeting after an assessment, the first thing we do in a round-robin style, we share the outcome of a common assessment by stating, I have this many distinguished, this many proficient, and this many novice students. Afterwards, we discuss the students we perceived to be academically lagging or not from the assessment and how we will reteach the standard. You know, did they understand the standard that was taught. On the other hand, because a percentage of students mastered the standard, how will we accelerate them during our reteaching phrase.

When teachers act professionally in their perspective schools, they will positively affect the learning of the students, Rosenholtz (as cited in Wennergren & Blossing, 2017).

Theme 3

Focus on Student Learning

The Focus on student learning theme suggested that every professional learning community is focused on student learning. This focus can be accomplished by making a clear connection to the classroom. Kullar (2016) declares that an important component

of PLCs in schools "mission statements should include success for all students" (para
1).

In the quotes below, the participants perceived the benefits of how focusing on
student learning made an impact of student learning.

Principal A perceived that when student achievement scores are low that
reflected a downward spiral in student learning then the teachers perceived to feel the
pressure from administration.

Principal A found,

Student learning is a top-down approach because principals can only buffer so much.
The downward spiral pinpoints all the kids who are tier 2 or 3 and on the other hand
exceptionally high doing well can't bring the scores up by themselves, there's too much
weight on the bottom half.

Teacher 7 perceived that learned knowledge from PD's enhanced a better job-embedded
experience that guided the students to focus on learning.

Teacher 7 expressed,

> When teachers share their teaching ideas, it gives me the chance to apply what I
> learned from them in my classroom. It may not look the same way because I
> make the activity fit for my students and my craft of teaching. Our Curriculum
> Coach also helps teachers to focus on learning by providing weekly resources to
> allow teachers time to focus on meeting as a team to have professional
> conversions and not just meeting to plan. You know we sometimes go down
> rabbit holes looking for activities to match weekly standards.

Teacher 5 perceived focusing on student learning helpful in a different academic way. Teacher 5 stated,

> The teachers in grades two through five here at School A always provide
> feedback on student's writing pieces from a rubric. Well, we also give feedback
> on all assessment too. We feel that feedback informs students on how they can
> improve on their next task.

Teacher 3 acknowledged how focus on student learning fits across cultures. Teacher 3 thought,

> think my school hits on diverse populations verses intelligence and that has
> helped our students with their academic growth. The diverse underachieving
> populations stay on our watch list. Again, I use student data to specially focus on
> my underachieving diverse group to guide my tier 2 small group instruction. We
> all use data more for small group than whole group because whole group, are
> tier 1 instruction and that isn't differentiated. We differentiate our small group to
> ensure all students are learning.

In all, schools A, B, and C also perceived that their daily PLC task is not only their driving force, but more importantly a collaborative effort that also includes the support staff.

Summary

The principals and teachers in this study were helpful and willing to give their perceptions of their influences on student learning in a PLC community. The focus of this study is perceptions does a PLC community have on student learning. I will discuss

and support the perceptions of the principals and teachers in this study. In the interviews it is evident that daily support, consistency, and focus on student learning. Chapter 5 will provide implications from these perceptions.

Chapter 5: Conclusion, Limitations, Implications,

Recommendations for Future Research, Teachers, and Principals

Conclusion

The intent of this study was to determine the perception of impact on learning in professional learning communities and offer structures that practitioners can define and take ownership in their work. This is the space where the teachers and principals reflected on past and present practices to make the determination on the next steps as they journey toward academic success. When successfully implemented and embraced by principals, teachers, and school staff though defined support structures, proficient title 1 schools have shown to improve student achievement as well as teacher participation.

This study examined the semi-structured interviews from twelve participants from three different proficient Title 1 elementary schools that were located 1.6 to 3.5 miles of each other. Over the course of my study, I found many practices at the three title 1 schools that promoted the sustainability of PLCs.

The aim of this qualitative study was to focus on how the administrators and teachers at their perspective proficient Title 1 schools implement their PLC to increase academic success for their students.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, all twelve interviews had to be conducted through the digital Zoom application platform due to our national world pandemic of COVID 19. This method was necessary to protect participants and myself. Conducting interview in the participants schools was not acceptable. I allowed sixty

minutes per interview; however, as noted in Table 1 some participant's interviews varied, and some were not as long as intended, but contained information needed for the study. A second limitation was only using three title 1 proficient elementary schools in my study. There were multiple elementary schools in this school district, however, many did not fit the profile for this study. These schools may or may not have qualified for several reasons: the elementary school is labeled with a specialized academic focus, the elementary school may not have been a proficient title 1 school, or not a proficient elementary school thus limiting many schools from this research. Third, this study was solely based on the perception of my participants. I had to "see" through the professional lens of 3 elementary school principals and 9 elementary classroom teachers as they gave their perception through the act of doing and or their observations of how their learned experiences influenced their professional learning community and perception of impact on learning in their classroom. Fourth, the school principal and or assistant principal was interviewed. Next, the age nor years of experience was ascertained for this research. Lastly, this research was based on school principals and teachers' perceptions. I had to depend upon the accounts from the participants total experiences whether good or bad

Implications

This study had several implications to become the catalyst for creating the conditions that foster high-performing professional learning communities (PLCs) in low performing Title 1 schools by addressing several academic needs of students at an earlier stage in the student's academic learning. Interviewees' perception was that the

structures of a PLC in their title 1 school was a method that fostered a group of educators to meet regularly, share their expertise, and work collaboratively to improve teaching skills and the academic performance of their students. An implication for practice that emerged from the research showed the need to provide the time for teachers along with the principal to plan instruction, create assessments, and analyze the results together. Teachers need a set time for this collaboration to develop common expectations.

Another practice that emerged from the research focused on the principal's support. This was implied in two different areas of the data. First, the principal's constant nurturing was successful in developing and sustaining their professional learning communities can ensure. Hord (1997) affirmed that success is through a "leader's active nurturing" (p. 62) of the entire staff's development as a community. The PLC process in each school was developed and sustained with the principal's support.

An implication for practice that emerged from the research was the necessity to create structures that support the work of professional learning communities. Structures may vary based several factors: the school's mission, staffing budget, and the principal's vision to create effective conditions that supported a continuous professional learning that yields in improving classroom practices.

As school missions may change, student learning must remain at the missions' forefront as it relates to focus on student learning. Students can gain academic knowledge; however, it is vital for teachers to be knowledgeable of subject matter, district and state curriculum. Ironically, the result of this study implied that teachers

need professional development to enhance their understanding for the professional learning community process. Mitchell and Sackney (2000) contends that personal growth and development builds the capacity to learn. This study assumes that professional developments will provide teachers with the guidance and support as they progress to become successful teachers.

An implication of the data from this study perceives that the school's learning community can provide schools a framework to build teacher capacity to work as members of high-performing, collaborative teams that focus on improving student learning**.** According to DuFour, and DuFour, and Eaker (2002):

> The framework of the Professional Learning Community model can be put into three themes. The school has to have a solid, shared mission, vision, values, and goals; collaborative teams that work interdependently to achieve common goals, and a focus on results as evidenced by a commitment to continuous improvement.

Recommendations for Future Research

There is a need to expand this research and learn more about professional learning communities (PLC) in title 1 schools. Future research should continue to focus on the intervention groups. A mixed methods study can be conducted where a Likert scale could be used to ask students how satisfied they are about what they are learning. Their results could be used to ascertain what changes need to be made in their intervention sessions. Furthermore, future research continuing with title 1 schools in the county, a quantitative study could be completed on groups of students from

kindergarten to fifth grade. The study could collect data to perceive how many students are able to independently use their foundational skills to increase their reading skills.

An addition, a future study could also be completed by choosing a number of title 1 schools within the same school district. The researcher could inquire about the participants reading habits and their favorite book topics. The learner's knowledge from the research will help to inform the researchers about the student's reading habits and book choices. Another qualitative option would be to interview the teachers working with the students to obtain how they chose the child's intervention learning pathway.

Recommendations for Teachers and Principals

A recommendation for principals seeking to enhance student academics may become inundated with well-intentioned programs to obtain quick results. Utilizing a shared vision and beliefs principals should first determine the best structures, supports, and approaches to advance and gain student achievements based on the school's mission statement that is focused on student learning. Another recommendation is to create an intellectually safe environment that allows the staff to show their vulnerability once a relationship has been established. The teacher participates in this research were safe enough to discuss their shortcomings in front of their teammates once a level of trust was obtained with the principal and colleagues. It is vital for principals to develop a mutual respect among their staff in order to have a successful PLC process.

An effective strategy that has proven to be useful is teachers having time to collaborate to improve instruction through shared ideas and to provide students' academic success. In addition, another recommendation will be to provide teachers with

more professional development to allow them to gain better insight and knowledge of the PLC process and to become more confident in implementing their instructional day.

Teachers can gain a lot of professional growth from the principal by conducting intentional grade level weekly meetings with a focused agenda. A structured weekly meeting keeps everyone focused and on the same page as it relates to the next steps Principals regularly monitored student gains to stay abreast with students below, on, or above grade level. Weekly grade level meetings to view each grade level teams upcoming assessments. It is imperative that teams have common planning in order to have time to engage in constructive dialogue, reflect on, and improve instruction, and perceived to become more effective in their classrooms. Lastly, a professional learning community is identified by the commitment and involvement of all building staff members. A recommendation is to fully involve the support staff in the development and execution of PLCs. These staff members along with teachers play a crucial role. Support staff can oversee varies functions in the classroom allowing the teacher to focus her attention on another other classroom matters.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: LETTER TO PARTICIPATES

Dear Educator,

We are writing to see if you would like to participate in a new research study being conducted at Eastern Kentucky University. Research plays an important role in advancing our Education system and helps lead to improve student academic success. Eastern Kentucky University is recruiting educators to participate in this research study.

Professional Learning Communities: Perception of Impact on Learning seeks to improve the skills and knowledge of educators through collaboration, shared experience, and professional dialogue with the end goal of improving the academic achievement and engagement of students.

Study Purpose:
This study is evaluating principals and teacher's perception of how profession learning communities impact learning.

Participation Requirements:
The study lasts approximately 10 (10) weeks. However, you will only have one (1) 60-minute Zoom interview. During the Zoom interview, I will also use an audio recorder to reflect on our interview with accuracy and clarity.

Contact Information:
If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me------ email me at @mymail.eku.edu. Participating in research is voluntary.

Sincerely,

E. Denise Hayden

Appendix B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR PRINCIPALS

Questions for the Principals

1. What are your perceptions of professional learning communities?
2. What is your role in the professional learning communities and how do you support your teachers in implementing a professional learning community?
3. What were your initial steps in implementing your professional learning community?
4. In your opinion, what is the most important component to implement to ensure success within your community?
5. How much collaboration time are your teachers provided?
6. What trainings or knowledge have you had in professional learning communities? Where do you get your support?
7. What type of training does your staff receive in professional learning community? Is this training on-going?
8. How often do teachers meet in PLC? Is the agenda always student-focused?
9. How much of implementing a professional learning community do you see as an accountability for the success of your school proficiency?
10. In your opinion, should all staff members be included in the implementation of the professional learning community, if so, why?

Appendix C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

QUESTIONS FOR THE TEACHERS

1. What are your perceptions of professional learning communities?
2. Will you describe a shared personal experience where you and your colleagues provided feedback?
3. How often do you receive training on professional learning community?
4. In your opinion, what is the greatest component of professional learning communities that helps to drive success in your class?
5. How do you and your team use your student data from your shared personal experience help to increase academics?
6. What is the first approach of professional learning community you and your team and or staff implements?
7. In your opinion, how does/has having a professional learning community helped you as a teacher?
8. What has been the history of professional learning communities at this school?
9. Is the concept and implementation of professional learning communities well received?
10. What was your prior knowledge of professional learning communities prior to teaching at this school?