

**The Elementary Principal's Role in Professional Development and Learning Communities:
How to Support Continual Professional Growth**

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

(Education Leadership & Policy Analysis)

at the

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN MADISON

2019

Date of final oral examination: 5/29/2019

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like thank God for instilling in me the drive to always persevere and receive my blessings.

ABSTRACT

School communities are looking for new and innovative ways to educate children. One effective reform strategy that schools are using to better prepare teachers to meet these needs is the development of professional learning communities. Much of the literature presented in this area focuses on teachers and their growth as collaborative working entities. If done correctly, professional learning communities can allow teachers to have professional dialogue about their teaching styles, student expectations, and learning outcomes (DuFour, 2004). The purpose of this study is to explore the connection between an elementary principal's role in the development of successful professional learning communities. Their role is typically described as creating a cultural learning atmosphere where views, values, and beliefs, are accepted by all, but precisely what that means in practice is not known. Although it has been stated that it is imperative for principals to take an active role in the development of professional learning communities (Lunenberg, 2010), the specific tasks, organization, and procedures have yet to be uncovered (Hord, 1997). Specifically, this study addresses the following questions:

- 1) What level of participation (frequency and guidance) do principals use when meeting with professional learning communities?
- 2) Does the level of principal participation have an effect on the success of professional learning communities?
- 3) What are specific strategies principals use to develop and maintain professional learning communities in their school setting?

Data analysis of teacher surveys, teacher interviews, and principal interviews show that professional learning communities can benefit from principals taking a more hands-on approach to leading and guiding learning communities. This study indicates that it is vital for principals to have a more hands-on approach to leading and guiding learning communities through

presentations on a regular basis with the school community. Under the principal's precise direction and guidance, meaningful PLC practices can transform schools by encouraging meaningful teacher dialogue to affect teaching practices and enhance student achievement. Data also revealed four types of principal participation in PLCs: Lead Learner, Facilitator, Director/Detailer, or Observer/Consultant.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction to the Study

Schools today face an array of complex challenges. Many of these challenges are focused around one particular and key individual - the teacher. Since teachers have the most direct contact with students as well as a considerable control over what is taught and how it is taught, it is reasonably assumed that enhancing teachers' knowledge, skills, and attitudes are a critical steps in improving learner performance (King & Newman, 2001). Teachers are continually challenged and often seek new forms of instruction to increase their knowledge to better serve students and prepare them for the next grade level. Teachers find themselves working with an increasingly diverse population of students with multiple progressive academic needs. Practicing teachers try to keep current by educating themselves through short and long seminars and latest trend-workshops to continually seek classroom success in the ever-changing pedagogical world of educating children.

At the same time, principals are also challenged with providing a productive learning atmosphere for both teachers and students. They are discovering interesting aspects of the principal's role through fostering an atmosphere conducive to teacher and student learning. The development of this atmosphere is becoming a necessary requirement or tool for teacher learning and student learning (Hord,1997). With the help of professional teachers, both principals and teachers tediously work to meet rigorous academic standards and state assessment goals. Observers and researchers of the education world have stressed the need for teachers and principals to be able to enhance and continually build on their instructional knowledge in order

to combat many of these challenges (National Commission on Teaching & America's Future, 1996; DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Huffman & Hipp, 2003).

In the past, academic challenges have been addressed through district-wide professional development to collectively educate teachers and other personnel about needed changes and newly adopted academic beliefs. Needs assessment reports have strongly emphasize the necessity for ongoing professional development for teachers and school principals (Loftus et al., 2001).

One common approach to teacher learning is what has been termed “professional learning communities” (PLCs). A PLC is defined as 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 (DuFour, 1998). Professional learning communities operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators (DuFour,1998). It is important to note that the PLC process is not a program. It cannot be purchased, nor can it be implemented by anyone other than the staff itself. Most importantly, it is ongoing—a continuous, never-ending process of conducting schooling that has a profound impact on the structure and culture of the school and the assumptions and practices of the professionals within it (DuFour, 1998). The term PLC is often used loosely and is in danger of losing its meaning, for many educators use this term when describing common interest groups.

An important factor that has been overlooked in the research of professional learning communities is precision (Hord, 1997; Johnson & Johnson, 1995). Precision brings focus. Focus brings clarity. The teachers involved in PLCs should be precise and focused on one or two questions of interest within one subject matter or area of concern. Inquiry groups who lacked

focus have proven to be problematic. These groups find it difficult to directly link their actions to positive effects on student achievement. When a group of teachers with one focus and common purpose worked together they were more reflective, open, innovative and motivated (Johnson & Johnson, 1995)

Another area of concern is the expectation for teachers to present newly found information discovered during their PLC experience and report out about their PLC practices and results. Teachers involved in PLCs may skim the surface at times and miss pivotal turning points in their professional journeys. Teachers need to be presented with more opportunities to reflect and discuss their PLC experiences. This experience alone would provide more insight on the effective process of PLCs. This sharing out or reporting would also inform other teachers about PLC experiences that other teachers will relate to and learn from.

Statement of the Problem

Many districts across the country expect teachers to actively perform in PLCs without proper guidance and background knowledge of how to successfully implement the PLC format or the importance of the PLC structure. True success in completing any task means fully understanding the implementation process and purpose, and then carrying out the specified tasks under specified steps or guidelines that have proven to be successful. District and school leaders must provide teachers with essential background information to provide a true picture of what a successful PLC consists of and what it really means to be an active member in a PLC group.

The successful development of what a functional professional learning community entails continues to be a popular research topic. Numerous studies conducted provide some guidance in the creation and development of professional learning communities (Hipp & Huffman, 2007; Hord, 2008; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Louis et al., 1996; Pankake & Moller, 2003). These studies

include snapshots of individual communities and their successes and struggles. These studies highlight teachers and strategies used in the community. These studies also include university professionals and how they help with the formation of the communities. Many studies failed to mention the principal's role in the development of professional learning communities (DuFour & Fullan, 2013)

Numerous studies have gathered information regarding the skills necessary for change; what is not so clear is how to obtain the will, the motivation, the interest, and the action, to do something with the knowledge that is available (Hord, 1997). Research is needed to understand specific strategies principals use to formulate and maintain professional learning communities. Furthermore, the area of collaborative inquiring teacher teams lack guided information that has a direct connection with the school leader.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the role of principals in the development and maintenance of successful professional learning communities in elementary school setting, and to determine what practices define the principal's participation. To achieve this purpose it will be necessary to first determine the extent to which professional learning community practices are evidenced in multiple elementary schools that have implemented professional learning communities. Specified practices of the principal's role that foster the development and maintenance of professional learning communities will be explored.

This research seeks to provide definitive strategies school leaders can use to evaluate the current practice of professional learning communities to determine levels of success, and facilitate further development. The researcher will use self-reporting surveys, interviews, and

observations to conduct the research. The information provided in this research will guide leaders in the successful implementation and maintenances of PLCs based on information gathered from current PLC practices.

Research Question

An examination of the principal's role in the development of successful PLCs will be conducted. To achieve the purpose of this study, three questions will guide this investigation:

1. What level of participation (frequency and guidance) do principals use when meeting with professional learning communities?
2. Does the level of principal participation have an effect on the success of professional learning communities?
3. What are specific strategies principals use to develop and maintain professional learning communities in their school setting?

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized in five chapters. The first chapter provided an introduction and overview of the topic.

Chapter Two discusses the current literature that informs the research problem. An in-depth look at current research that supports the PLC process is examined to identify implications of further study to enhance the PLC movement. This information explains how this study will expand the existing literature and contribute to the field of study. It also explains the conceptual framework that was used to guide the study, along with the rationale for its use.

Chapter Three details the research design and methodology. It describes the case study design, positioned subjects approach, and the data collection procedures and instruments used to

gather data. This section also specifies the analytical stages employed to help the researcher discover and unveil the hidden story. Chapter Three also discusses measures taken to ensure trustworthiness and reliability of data collected.

Chapter Four of the dissertation presents the findings of the study. It explains the results in relation to principal participation, precision, and presentation. Chapter Five communicates concluding points and discusses future recommendations based upon the completion of the study. Suggestions regarding principal's role in producing effective PLCs will be expressed. Finally, study limitations are addressed and implications for future research are noted.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This literature review provides a comprehensive examination of professional learning communities. The first section includes an examination of traditional professional development with a focus on features of successful professional development and some of its limitations. This section also includes the desire or need for a change in professional development, which led to the change of professional inquiry and teacher collaboration. The next section provides an acceptable definition of professional learning communities and how the movement toward professional inquiry open lines of communication and encourage the building of culture within the school setting. This section also includes the importance the leadership's role and the teacher's role in the successful professional learning communities. The final section of this literature review includes implications for further research.

The review examines original research from books and articles written in scholarly journals in support of PLCs. This literature review on professional learning communities will seek to answer the following questions: (1) How has the change in professional development changed our expectations as teachers and teacher leaders in education? (2) What roles do school leaders and teachers play in the successful development of professional learning communities? (3) What is the correlation between culture and successful PLCs? (4) What needs to be done for the further development of PLCs and teacher learning?

Traditional Professional Development

Traditional procedures of professional development fed teachers knowledge about new trends and information dealing with educating children. The major design features of traditional teacher professional development reflect a legacy of teacher isolation, norms of privacy, fragmentation, and incoherence with far too little attention paid to the current realities of teachers' work and daily lives in schools (Bredeson, 2003). The traditional in-service model usually entailed districts or schools bringing in an outside consultant or curriculum expert on a staff-development day to give teachers a one-time training seminar on a pedagogic or subject-area topic. Such an approach has been routinely lamented in the professional literature. Experts variously say that this belief of professional development lacked continuity and coherence, that it misconceived the way adults learn best, and that it failed to appreciate the complexity of teachers' work (Little, 1994; Miles, 1995).

For a long time, teachers were left with having to clamber through in-service seminars that left them confused, angered and uninspired. Longing for a change and something useful and fulfilling, many teachers sought professional comfort with colleagues and developed unofficial professional learning groups amongst themselves (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Hord, 1997; Little, 1997; Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996; Morrissey, Cowan, Leo, & Blair, 1996). Leaders in the teaching profession began to meet on their own time, after school, during individual planning sessions, and even on the weekends to create stimulating conversations around academia of students and of teachers. They understood the need for teachers to converse about teaching strategies and the academic progress of their students. Researchers began to see a desire in teachers to be a part of their professional knowledge (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Hord, 1997; Little, 1997; Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996; Morrissey, Cowan, Leo, & Blair, 1996).

These actions exemplified initial teacher interest in an authentic professional learning style that would begin migrating teachers out of their isolated classrooms and start them on new avenues of professional growth. In time, this opportunity would eventually lead some schools to initiate the idea of professional learning spaces that provide teachers and principals opportunities to learn, grow, and improve their professional practice and concurrently promote progressive education and student learning (Bredeson, 2003). This movement would prove to be one that would rebuild, redefine, reshape, and contour instructional knowledge into a masterful sculpture of successful learning. Teachers' valuable time would no longer be utilized in the mundane traditional in-service workshops.

During the early 1990s, a consistent stream of research and commentary began advocating an alternative to the workshop model of professional development (Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin, 1995). Researchers have stressed the importance of restructuring professional development for more effective results and have been noted as an increasingly vital component to teacher learning, students learning and overall school success (Bredeson, 2003). The echoes of the preferred approach held that for teacher learning to truly matter, it needed to take place in a more active and coherent intellectual environment—one in which included extensive dialogue and the exchanged of professional ideas and strategies for teaching students, which included an even larger connection to the bigger picture of school improvement (Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin, 1995). The research pointed to a need for stronger professional development workshops where teachers could begin developing professional learning communities.

The original designs of professional development intended to improve student learning outcomes, improve the quality of educators' work life, facilitate organizational change, support

local school improvement efforts as well as broader educational reform, contribute to community building, and last, enhance the quality and impact of the professions of teaching and administration (Bredeson, 2003). The original design and definition of professional development appears clear, precise, and to the point; but there is a major component missing - collaboration. The teachers and principals involved in professional development must commit to working collaboratively in a continual process of collective inquiry and teacher research in order to increase student learning and uncover better educational outcomes for the students they serve. Initializing a professional learning community approach within the professional development model would help accomplish this task.

The Need for a Change in Professional Development

It has been understood for some time that schools across America are in need of a critical change. The federal government's No Child Left Behind Act understood this concern and expressed an interest in the education of America's children. Many schools across the country have implemented academic changes through different student educational avenues and many have been successful in their procedures to change the outcome of student learning. There are still many schools in need of commencing the initial steps in making appropriate changes that have lasting effects on both the students and the teachers. What are schools lacking that is obviously a necessity to move forward? How can teachers and principals play a more aggressive part in the preparation of proficiently placing students in the highlighted academic areas of concern? How can education leaders prepare their schools to better meet these changes and expectation of school reform and achieve high academic success and build teacher professional knowledge?

Features of Successful Professional Development

Professional development strategies that succeed in improving teaching share several features (Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin, 1995). They tend to be:

- experiential, engaging teachers in concrete tasks of teaching, assessment, and observation that illuminate the processes of learning and development;
- grounded in participants' questions, inquiry, and experimentation as well as profession wide research;
- collaborative, involving a sharing of knowledge among educators;
- connected to and derived from teachers' work with their students as well as to examinations of subject matter and teaching methods;
- sustained and intensive, supported by modeling, coaching, and problem solving around specific problems of practice; and
- connected to other aspects of school change.

These approaches shift from old models of "teacher training" or "in-servicing" to a model in which teachers confront research and theory directly. They are regularly engaged in evaluating their practice, and use their colleagues for mutual assistance. By taking this new model of teacher training a step further, teachers and principals across the country can take initial steps into the new age of professional teacher growth and learning.

The community engages in a variety of activities during professional development, which include: sharing a vision, working and learning collaboratively, visiting and observing other classrooms, and participating in shared decision making. The benefits of a professional learning community to educators and students include reduced isolation of teachers, better-informed and committed teachers, and academic gains for students (Hord, 1997). Shirley Hord (1997) of the

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory says that as an organizational arrangement, the professional learning community is seen as a powerful staff-development approach and a potent strategy for school change and improvement.

Successful leaders who encompass a positive school culture have learned to view their organizations' environment in a holistic way (Stolp, 1994). These leaders continue to rethink and systematically practice strategic hiring procedures to adequately hire teachers who are going to fit the mold. They do this to continually build a positive culture and attain people who are more accepting of change in professional growth. Leaders understand that these changes in professional development are necessary, but may be difficult to accept if a positive culture is lacking in their environment. Leaders understand the importance of encompassing a strong a positive culture and try everything they can to promote and maintain a positive culture in their schools. These principals understand that creating a strong culture and maintaining a strong culture is essential for the acceptance of change and the survival of successful functioning schools.

What is a Professional Learning Community?

It is understood that there are some disagreements about the definition of a professional learning community and there is no universal definition of a PLC (Stoll et al., 2006; Williams, Brien, Sprague, & Sullivan, 2008). According to Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth (2001), there have been terms like “community of learners”, “discourse communities” or “school communities”, yet there are no clear common features shared across the terms.

The following definitions offer a range of ways to describe a PLC:

- An ongoing process through which teachers and principals work collaboratively to seek and share learning and to act on their learning, their goal being to enhance their effectiveness as professionals for students' benefit (Hord, 1997)
- A school culture that recognizes and capitalizes on the collective strengths and talents of the staff (Protheroe, 2008).
- A strategy to increase student achievement by creating a collaborative school culture focused on learning (Feger & Arruda, 2008).
- Team members who regularly collaborate toward continued improvement in meeting learner needs through a shared curricular-focused vision (Reichstetter, 2006).
- A group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive learning-oriented and growth-promoting way (McREL, 2003).
- Educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006).
- An inclusive group of people, motivated by a shared learning vision, who support and work with each other to inquire on their practice and together learn new and better approaches to enhance student learning (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Thomas, Wallace, Greenwood et al., 2005).

While these definitions capture the spirit of PLCs, they are only a starting point for understanding them.

What makes a PLC difficult to define is that it is not a prescription, a new program, a model, or an innovation to be implemented. Rather, a PLC is an infrastructure or a way of working together that results in continuous school improvement (Hord, 1997).

A widely accepted definition of PLCs is a group of teachers who meet regularly with a common set of teaching and learning goal, and share responsibilities for work to be undertaken, and collaborative development of pedagogical content knowledge as a result of the gatherings (Borko, 2004; Grossman et al., 2001; Lachance & Confrey, 2003; Little, 2002).

Professional learning communities began as a new way to organize teachers in order to maximize time spent in professional development. Over time, the focus of this literature shifted to examining the changes in teacher's practice and students' learning as a result of PLCs (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). A change unfolded and provided a unique opportunity for teachers. This opportunity would help teachers gain a better understanding of their own teaching practice with a direct result in student learning.

Not only did this change involve teachers, but it also involved leaders. They were expected to take on roles that involved facilitating professional thought and professional instruction. Good leaders understand the redefinition of their roles as instructional leaders with a previous focus on teaching to leaders of a professional community with a focus on learning (Tobergte & Curtis, 2002). Principals also began to realize that teacher acceptance of this change would have much to do with how teacher accept and accommodate to change. The changes in question includes: getting teachers to think and have meaningful conversations about how they teach their students and how their teaching procedures affect student learning. These changes provide great avenues and procedural thought that can be carried out during professional development. Teachers were no longer asked to follow a new way of teaching or forced to use a

new unconnected district-wide curriculum adoption. They were presented with opportunities to grow as professional thinkers. This new idea for professional development would improve teaching and provide teachers with teaching, thinking, and learning skill that would be used throughout their academic career.

The term professional learning community (PLC) describes:

A collegial group who are united in their commitment to an outcome. In the case of education, the commitment would be to student learning (Hord, 1997).

Bredeson (2003) defines professional development as follows: Professional development refers to learning opportunities that engage educators' creative and reflective capacities in ways that strengthen their practice. Therefore, teachers participating in professional learning communities for professional development unite together for an opportunity to reflectively engage in strategies that improve their practice and student learning.

DuFour and Eaker (1998) stated

Each word in the phrase, "professional learning community", was chosen purposefully. A "professional" is someone with expertise in a specialized field, an individual who has not only pursued advanced training to enter the field, but who is also expected to remain current in its evolving knowledge base. "Learning" suggests ongoing action and perpetual curiosity. The school that operates as a professional learning community recognizes that its members must engage in ongoing study and contrast practice that characterizes an organization committed to continuous improvement. A "community" is a group of people with a common background or with shared interests within society. In a professional learning community, educators create an environment that fosters mutual cooperation, emotional support, personal growth as they work together to achieve what they cannot accomplish alone, therefore acting as a community.

For the purpose of this paper, the term professional learning communities will encompass a group of educators working together with the shared vision, beliefs, or values (DuFour, 2005). These groups of individuals will gain knowledge about their instruction and student learning. The environments in which the PLCs work and will be places where existing beliefs and

assumptions about education, community, teaching, and learning are challenged and critiqued for a better understanding of the profession (Little, 2003).

Many researchers have acting definitions of what a PLC is and what it may contain, but many researchers are still in search of a concise definition of what constitutes as a functional PLC. There are many districts and individual groups of teachers meeting regularly, but have construed the meaning of a true PLC. The term has been used so ambiguously to describe virtually any loose coupling of individuals who share common interests in education, that it is in danger of losing all meaning (Fet all, 2006). Many gather with the intent on improving instruction and improving student learning under false pretenses that they are a fully functional PLC. The frustrated groups end up with very little or even zero results. There are many reasons why these groups fail and continue to fail. Many of their failures refer back to an acting definition of what a PLC constitutes and agreed upon functional elements of a true PLC. A study done by Richmond and Manokore (2010), attempted to identify critical elements for a functional and sustainable professional learning community. They collected data over a five-year period of urban science teachers learning communities. The participants were volunteers. Teachers met biweekly in 2-hour meetings after school. The meetings were facilitated by either a university science education faculty member or a district science specialist. Documentation of the PLC meeting involved taking field notes, audio taping, and transcribing the taped sessions. The researchers had two fundamental questions: What are the features that characterize “teacher talk” by participants during PLC meetings? To what extent did PLC membership shape the participants’ reflection on their own teaching practice? Field notes and transcribed audio tape recordings of each PLC meeting, as well as teacher interviews were used as primary sources of data for this project. By analyzing “teacher talk” during the PLC sessions, five elements of a

functional PLC were identified: teacher learning and collaboration, community formation, confidence and knowledge of content and guided inquiry, sustainability of reform, accountability measures on teaching and learning. In essence, the researchers of the study concluded that in order for a PLC to be functional and sustainable, these elements will need to be present in the community. During follow-up interviews, the participants of this study reinforced the importance of these elements and agreed that the success of their PLC was due to these factors. Another finding in this study revealed that facilitation and leadership also played a major role in establishing and maintaining the PLC.

In another review completed by Vescio, Ross and Adams (2007), five similar essential characteristics of PLCs are described after an extensive review of available research on the impact of PLCs on teaching practices in student learning. The researchers of this study examined current literature including books, papers, and articles related to two basic questions: In what ways does teaching practice change as a result of participation in a PLC? And, what aspects of the PLCs support these changes? Does the literature support the assumption that student learning increases when teachers participate in a PLC? And, what aspects of the PLCs support increased student learning?

When looking across the final selection of research, which included 11 sources (ten American studies and one English study), the researchers attempted to make connections between learning communities and the classroom practices of teachers to develop essential characteristics of a successful PLC. The first essential characteristic involved the common idea of shared values and norms. The researchers felt these elements must be developed with regard to such issues as group's collective views about children and children's ability to learn, school

priorities for the use of time and space, and the proper roles of parents, teachers, and principals (Newmann et al, 1996).

The second essential characteristic was a clear and consistent focus on student learning (DuFour, 2004). The third characteristic included reflective dialogue that could lead to extensive and continuing conversations among teachers about curriculum, instruction, and student development (Newmann et al, 1996). The fourth and fifth characteristic involved deprivatizing practice to make teaching public and focused on collaboration (Newmann et al, 1996). It is important to note that the researchers of this review reported on empirical data that connected PLCs with changes in teaching practices and students learning (Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2007). They did not report findings that described work within PLCs nor did they report on the results of reflective self-reporting or its value. In contrast, the Richmond and Manokore study yielded similar findings and were able to describe the work within PLCs. This study also reported on the reflective practices of teachers.

These two studies revealed similar characteristics of PLCs, but Vescio, Ross and Adams (2007), added significant findings involving culture and it failed to specifically identify changes in pedagogy. Both studies concluded that the teaching practices of participants became more student centered over time, but the researchers of the second study emphasized that establishing a PLC contributes to a fundamental shift in the habits of mind that teachers bring to their daily work in the classroom. There is limited evidence that the impact is measurable beyond teacher perceptions (Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2007). Both studies yielded inconsistent results with regards to the development of a concise definition of PLCs.

Professional Learning Communities and School Culture

According to Owens (1998) culture variables, “*refer to the values, belief systems, norms, and ways of thinking that are characteristics of the people in the organization.*” The culture of a school is important because educators interpret reform using their existing beliefs, values, assumptions, and practices (Sutherland, 2004). Efforts to reform education are actually efforts to change the culture of districts, schools, and classrooms (Sutherland, 2004).

The development of culture is something that has had an intertwining presence in the development of professional learning communities. The culture in a school can support or discourage change.

Culture influences everything that goes on in schools: how staff dress, what they talk about, what they feel is an important issue, their willingness to change, the practice of instruction, and the emphasis given to student and faculty learning (Deal & Patterson, 1994; Firestone & Wilson, 1985).

Principals can promote change in a positive way that also promotes positive school culture among teachers and a positive school climate for students that is conducive to learning. Unfortunately, the field of education lacks a clear and consistent definition of school culture (Stolp, 1994).

The term school culture for the purpose of this paper will be defined as follows: The historically transmitted patterns of meaning that include the norms, values, beliefs, ceremonies, rituals, traditions, and myths understood, maybe in varying degrees, by members of the school community (Peterson, 1998). This system of meaning often shapes what people think and how they act and react (Stolp, 1994). The interest in culture and how culture plays a major role in PLCs will be addressed later in this literature review.

Good leaders understand the importance of encompassing and maintaining a strong and positive school culture. School leaders also understand the importance of setting high goals and the continuous focus and refinement of these goals; for without goals, we flounder. Without demanding goals, we settle for mediocrity. Demanding goals cannot be reached without some sort of culture to hold everything together. Schools must hold high expectations, both for academic performance, culture, and character and work consistently to help students and teachers live up to them (Ryan & Bohlin, 2000).

A case study completed by Jose daCosta (1998) presented the following question, “How can friendships be nurtured so that student focused collaborative work-teams can function in the school?” He found that without some sort of social culture already in place, it was almost impossible and unrealistic to expect a staff to want to work together on pedagogically focused issues (daCosta, 1998). The initial steps for building this type of culture takes time, but this critical building block with this particular study was absent and proved to negatively affect the collaborative efforts of the principal and the building of professional learning teams.

Professional Learning Communities and the Principal’s Role

Much has been written about how the culture in a school can allow positive changes to occur and distill positive changes from occurring (Peterson & Deal, 1998). Culture can have a major influence on everything that occurs in a school: how staff dress, what they talk about, what they feel, what is important, willingness to change, acceptable practices of instruction, and emphasis given to student and faculty learning (Peterson & Deal, 1998). Principals can promote

change in a positive way that also promotes positive school culture among teachers and a positive climate for students that is conducive to learning.

Establishing the culture of a collaborating school is a major step for principals, but maintaining the positive and productive culture is probably the hardest task of producing a professional learning community. Maintaining the established culture means taking on a total student-centered approach to teaching and learning. The principal's role is to encourage productive thought of his or her teachers. The sole purpose of maintaining this role is to help teachers understand the primary goal for developing a learning community: student learning and professional growth. This approach will unfold a collaborative and cooperative working environment, with open lines of communication between the teachers and the building principal to create a positive culture of learners.

Opening up lines of communication and setting a new foundation for professional dialogue begins with the principal. Glover (2007) mentions the importance of engaging in honest conversation with teachers about teaching and learning. The key part of a principal's moral responsibility is exploring the possibilities for change with teachers. The change is "professional discussion" and the development of a professional working relationship between principals and teachers. This engagement in dialogue or professional discussion can break through self-limiting perceptions that keep teachers silent - and promotes opportunities for teacher leadership (Glover, 2007).

Principals also help cultivate a collaborative working relationship amongst all staff members by complimenting teaching styles and promoting strong teachers who are willing to work together in a trusting relationship (Ryan & Bohlin, 2000). This could be an ongoing

challenge, but if there is a strong culture established and continually addressed and redefined, the process will be positive.

Along with cultivating a community of learners, principals also play another important role. Principals must be learners themselves. One of the most powerful ways for principals to extend their learning is to participate in professional learning communities (Hord, 2008). The traditional pattern that teachers teach, students learn, in principals manage is completely altered (Hord, 1997). Principals can use PLCs to their professional advantage by participating with teachers in PLCs that are designed for school-wide learning to encourage higher efficacy, professional renewal, and support for student improvement (Hord, 2008).

Education department faculty members who are interested in developing university-school relationships can also take on important roles as leaders in the development of functional PLCs. Teachers involved in PLCs guided by faculty members are sometimes open to an outsider who has a neutral stance, but can help facilitate meaningful conversations and provide educational background and/or input. Three university professors Linder, Post and Calabrese (2012) took on such roles in a recent study. They helped to establish and sustain three individual PLCs by placing the major decision-making in the hands of the teachers, enabling them to develop a feeling of autonomy. Not only did these professors assist the PLCs and the development of successful on-site collaboration, but they also supplied them with professional literature that provided information for the teachers involved and they served as experienced resourceful voices. The goals for the establishment of these PLCs included the development of relationships, the enhancement of collaboration, the engagement of reciprocal investigation and learning that led to collective inquiry and reflection, application of new learning, to conduct research with teachers, and the placement of pre-service teachers. The results of this study

revealed an important component of PLCs, having the assistance of a leader and in this case a university faculty member. Effective and resourceful leadership roles are important in the development of PLCs.

Professional Learning Communities and Teacher's Role

With so many changes and challenges occurring in schools on a year-to-year basis, principals are realizing that the acceptance of these changes have much to do with how teachers accept and accommodate to those changes. Principals are aware of the belief that change is the enemy of culture (Deal, 1994). They understand that teachers need to find meaning in what they're doing in order for them to accept change in thought and in everyday procedures. Teachers need to feel that they can speak out freely about both praises and criticism of their school and educational practices to promote more productive learning environments (Deal, 1994). Teachers need to have a voice and would welcome the opportunity to speak freely and clearly about their professional practices if the culture and atmosphere are conducive and open to collaborative inquiry. Teachers need to feel that what they have to add will be accepted as professional thought.

The process of accepting the new role of teachers can be long and difficult. Teachers sometimes find it difficult to adopt different approaches to teaching and learning, especially those teachers who have been teaching at the same school for an extended period of time (Bezzina and Testa, 2005). They tend to pull away from involving themselves in collaborative decision-making because they are not use to this style of learning (Bezzina and Testa, 2005). They also pull away because of negative experiences in the past with changes in professional development and other teacher expectations. Throughout ones teaching career, major changes

occur every 2 to 3 years. These changes include curricular expectations, administration, demographic shifts, and state and national expectations that are happening every year. Teachers sometimes feel pulled in many directions and shut down completely towards new innovative ways of teaching students.

Having conversations about teaching and learning is not something new for teachers. Many teachers have conversations with their colleagues and/or teaching partners about their teaching on a daily basis. Some even find it interesting and are willing to share new teaching strategies or experiences they have had with their students during a particular lesson. School leaders and researchers want teachers to go deeper in conversations about their experiences, successes, and failures. Some researchers feel that these experiences tend to be limited by the nature of the conversations (Graham, 2007). They feel there is a difference between just sharing or having a discussion about teaching and learning versus having an active dialogue about teaching to better understand teaching and learning outcomes.

Some researchers feel that teachers need a more guided approach to having collaborative conversations (Graham, 2007). The guided approach is necessary to further develop the examination of instructional practices, identification of learning expectations represented in student work, identification of patterns of student work, connections with student work to practice, examination of assessment practices, and reflection on group processes (Nelson, Deuel, Slavit and Kennedy, 2010). A study done by Nelson, Deuel, Slavit, and Kennedy (2010), acknowledged the importance of having deep collaborative conversations. The researchers in this study found that teachers tend to detour away from critical discussions about their students. They believe that teachers only skim the surface when exploring teaching and learning relationships. They believe teachers avoid asking or responding to questions that probe or attempt to change

the status quo (Nelson, Deuel, Slavit and Kennedy, 2010). Lack of time was hinted as a hindrance in having effective dialogue, along with the fact that teachers don't know how to have effective PLC conversations about their teaching.

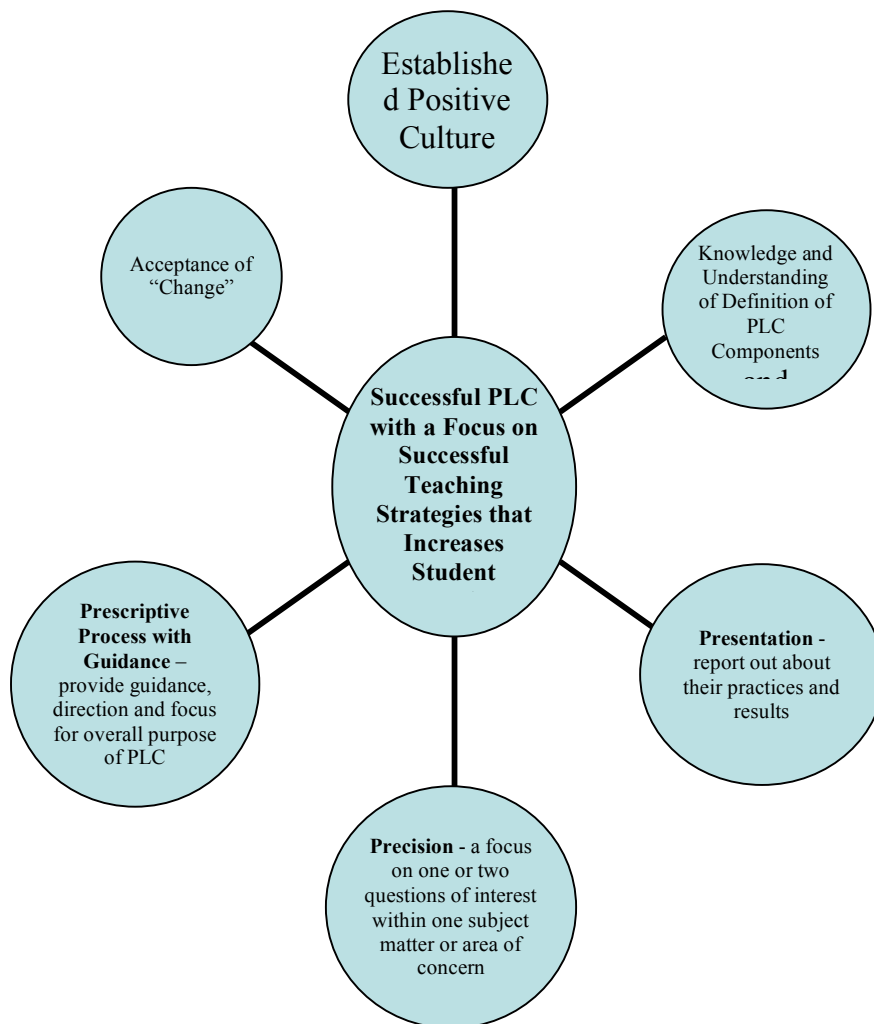
Therefore, the researchers of this study suggest that there is a needed change in how we teach teachers how to converse with each other about teaching and learning. They suggest modeling by teacher leaders as an important component necessary to promote meaningful change in conversation. They also feel teacher leadership is a critical factor in the development of deep conversations about teaching.

Organizational change and the change in professional procedures is not so much about structural changes as it would seem. It is about a change in how teachers think about teaching or a change in thought, action, and belief (Bezzina and Testa, 2005). The critical role of the teacher may be to have an open mind about the possibility of teaching proficiency through change. Teacher acceptance of this change may solely depend on the established culture of the school.

Through collaborative efforts, the positive change that can occur will prove to be beneficial to both the teachers and the students. Collectively, teachers will discover a new way of teaching, a new way of evaluate their current style of teaching, and to reevaluate how student learn through goal setting discussions and sharing of ideas. In turn, this will promote a positive school culture where teachers are focused on supplying the necessary tools for successful learning. This will promote a school culture characterized by mutual respect, collegial sharing, and high standards that are reinforced and underscored in school traditions, espoused values, and recognition ceremonies—these are schools where people care about each other, work hard together, and celebrate finding ways to improve what they do (Ryan and Bohlin, 2000).

A successful community of teachers with a focus on effective teaching strategies that increase student learning and promote the development of professional learning communities entails six necessary attributes. A summary of these critical attributes is found in Figure 2.1. This framework was developed to guide both the research and the development of professional learning communities. The attributes listed include qualities necessary for both the principals and professional educators.

Figure 2.1: Conceptual Framework Guiding Study



The implementation and continual practice of professional learning communities is key to effectively addressing the necessary changes in school improvement. The current literature in this area of study focuses on research in support of the development of professional learning communities. This literature uncover missing links needed to effectively implement functional PLCs. Further support is need with a focus culture as a major component and prerequisite in making a shift towards encouraging a professional community of teacher learners. For this shift to occur, strong administrative qualities are necessary to initiate this change in professional thought. Principals will need to continually challenge teacher's academic knowledge to prepare them for this change in academic change.

Halverson and Kelly (2017) suggests that the foundation for school improvement is organizing professional learning around activities that create relational trust. When schools have strong relational trust, members ask for and receive help from one another, and the expertise in the community itself becomes a resource for improving practice of teaching and learning. They suggest opportunities to generate relational trust through a collaborative school-wide focus on problem solving, professional learning, social distributed leadership, and coaching and mentoring (Halverson & Kelley, 2017). The growth and relational trust does not happen accidently; school leader create these opportunities. When leaders orchestrate collaborative design activities into professional learning, coaching, and mentoring, educators can together develop a culture of risk taking where colleagues become resources for deeper learning, thus creating a deep relationship between leadership, teacher leaders and their learning (Halverson & Kelley, 2017).

Principals can create change in professional development and change to a cultural atmosphere to welcome fresh ideas and establish a reciprocal relationship from teacher leaders to

trusting working relationships. This change creates an environment that honors all opinions and values individual strengths. This change establishes working relationships by addressing needs and supplying proper tools to support educational efforts.

A further change is need to continued developing and restructuring professional learning communities. Cultivating a diverse group of teachers takes time, practice, and dedication on the part of teachers, teacher leaders, and principals. This change in thought, procedure, and action means a complete change in how teachers think about their own individual teaching styles, student learning, and how to have continuous in-depth and sometimes uncomfortable conversations about their own professional shortcomings. Principals must encompass the idea and the need to obtain a strong positive culture that supports professional development and student learning so schools can become places where every teacher makes a difference and all children learn (Peterson, 2002).

Overcoming resistance to change can be painful work within an established culture of teachers. This resistance can be diminished by involving staff in their own discovery and growth (Sutherland, 2004). To overcome resistance takes an enormous amount of time and effort on the part of the principal. Great principals accept the challenge and are willing to listen to ideas and suggestions from team members who reach goals collaboratively.

Research for this study revealed overlapping views consisting of teacher learning and collaboration, community formation, clear and consistent focus on learning, reflective dialogue, and culture. All of these views help create functional PLCs.

An important factor that has been overlooked in the study of PLC deals with the idea of precision. Further research is needed for the development and support of the notion that PLCs should be precise and focused on one or two questions of interest within one subject matter or

area of concern. Many stories of the successful PLCs revealed that when a group of teachers came together with one focus and a common purpose, the PLC group was more reflective on their teaching and therefore had more of an effect on student learning.

Another area of interest for this study is the expectation for teachers to present newly found information discovered during their PLC experience and report out about their PLC practices and results. Teachers are discovering new information about themselves as professionals every day. This information needs to be shared, further developed, and sometimes reevaluated. Many teachers involved in PLCs skim the surface and miss pivotal turning points in their professional journeys. I feel that teachers who are given more opportunities to reflect and discuss their PLC experiences would gain more insight on the effective process of PLCs. This is where university faculty members can also take on important leadership roles in the successful establishment of PLCs. They can aid teachers by providing necessary background knowledge and guidance in the development of autonomy and professional growth.

This sharing out or reporting would also inform other teachers about PLC experiences that many could relate to or learn from. Many teachers are expected to perform PLC activities without having received essential background information on what PLCs really are and what it really means to be an active member in a PLC group. The sharing of information will provide teachers with information of what is expected in future of PLCs.

Calhoun (1994) encouraged the use of action research to develop learning communities. Action research, in essence, engages teachers and helps them look closely at what is happening in their schools. These findings help teachers make schools better places of learning by changing curriculum and instruction expectations, relationships of the staff with students, and the

assessment process (Hord, 1997). Having a community of learners who are ready to take action on their learning is a process worthy of development.

The development of professional learning communities is a process still in the making. Much information has been gathered to provide guidance in the creation and development of professional learning communities. Much knowledge has been accrued regarding the skills necessary for change; what is not as clear is how to obtain the will, the motivation, the interest, and the action, to do something with the knowledge that is available (Hord, 1997). There is much work to be done in the area of PLCs.

As a researcher I would be cautious in saying that one day there will be a proven set of directions and/or procedures on how to create a successful professional learning community, for they have proven to be self – guided and molded differently depending on the community members involved. It would be fair to say that the future holds a place for professional learning communities where continual growth and development in the professional realm of educating children is imminent.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction to the Chapter

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of the principal in developing and sustaining professional learning communities in elementary school settings and to determine what practices define the principal's participation. The significance of PLCs and the need for a more supportive role of the principal were outlined in the review of literature. While researchers (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; 2007; Hord, 1997; Hord & Sommer, 2008; Huffman & Hipp, 2003) have described the principal's role as important for successful implementation and sustainability of PLCs, focused examinations of the role of the principal are lacking in the literature related to professional learning communities. Chapter 3 describes the methodology and research design used in this research to examine teachers' understanding of functional PLCs and the current roles principals have played in the formation of the PLCs. This chapter includes the definition of terms, a presentation of the type of research design that was used as well as the case study rationale for the design. The positioned subject approach, details about the role of the researcher, and the sample selection are included as well. The instrumentation and data collection, which includes a teacher survey, a concept map, teacher interviews, and principal interviews, are also included in the next section. The steps for collecting the data for this study are reviewed. I describe methods for the protection of human rights to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. The chapter concludes by identifying the limitations of this study.

Definition of Terms

In empirical research, it is essential for the researcher to define the central ideas or concepts of the research study. This study was conducted using the following definitions:

1. *Professional learning community (PLC)*— A PLC is defined as an ongoing process in which a group of educators with the shared vision, beliefs, or values who work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve (DuFour, 1998).
2. *Professional development*—learning opportunities that engage educators’ creative and reflective capacities in ways that strengthen their practice (Bredeson, 2003).
3. *School culture*—The historically transmitted patterns of meaning that include the norms, values, beliefs, ceremonies, rituals, traditions, and myths understood, maybe in varying degrees, by members of the school community (Peterson,1998).
4. *Principal*— a building level school leader charged with the overall administration, supervision, and professional development of a school building by his/her new lawyer.
5. *Elementary School*— a school for the first 5 grades including Pre-Kindergarten, Kindergarten, First, Second, and Third grade students.
6. *Elementary Teacher*— a person who teaches in an elementary school including Pre-Kindergarten, Kindergarten, First, Second, and Third grade students.

Research Design

Case Study Design

The type of qualitative research for this study will include a single instrumental case study. A case study is a common framework for conducting qualitative research (Stake, 2000). “The focus of a case study is to dig out the characteristics of a particular entity and its key distinguishable attributes.” Case studies typically “includes a focus on a single unit, in depth description of a phenomenon, real live scenarios and uses multiple data collection methods (Yin,

2003). The researcher focuses on an issue or concern, and then select one bounded case to illustrate this issue. Yin (2003) further posits that in a case study a “how” or “why” question is being asked regarding a contemporary set of events, which the investigator has little or no control at all. The purpose of using a case study is to get in-depth details as much as possible about an event, person or process.

Yin (2009) postulate that the “distinctive need for case studies arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena” and “allow investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events...” (p. 4). Using the case study approach allowed me to examine the principal’s role within an actual PLC. Because focused examinations of the principal’s role are lacking in PLC research, utilizing case study research provided data for developing a functional PLC and a more defined description of the principal’s role. Case study research was preferred methodology since I was interested in insight, discovery, and interpretation of the principal’s role.

Positioned Subjects Approach

The positioned subjects approach in research is one that assumes that people, as positioned subjects, actively interpret and make sense of their everyday worlds (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). To carry out my research and develop an understanding of the principal’s role in the development of PLCs, I utilized a positioned subject approach to inquiry, where “subject” refers to people with particular needs, perceptions, and capabilities for action, and “positioned” refers to the environment in which they are located” (Conrad, Haworth, and Millar, 1993). Specifically, I conducted a case study to gain the perspectives of “positioned subjects”: those who helped me to explore the role of the principal and their teachers’ PLC experiences. While conducting my research, I operated with the intent of collecting, representing, and synthesizing

the insights and perspectives of participants using this information to develop an understanding of the principal's role of effective PLCs. Using a positioned subjects approach I guided the selection of respondents based upon their relationship and significance to the study.

As a positioned subject myself on this project, I understand that my research requires me to lay aside my assumptions about PLCs or current principal participation and to openly inquire and observe the process. I am positioned by my role as a researcher, my PLC experiences, my point of view, including the 18+ years as an educator, and a current employee of the district included in this research. While my career experiences shape my perspectives, I have worked diligently throughout this study to check my biases and use my perspectives, values, and predisposition as tools of inquiry. I have made every attempt to observe carefully and document accurately the perspectives and process of the stakeholders without judgment or evaluation.

Role of the Researcher

This qualitative study investigates the level of participation by principals with site level PLCs. Qualitative research is the approach usually associated with the social constructivist paradigm, which puts an emphasis on the socially constructed nature of reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). It usually includes some type of recording and an analysis of the information recorded or observed. These actions are carried out to gain an understanding of human behavior and experience. Researchers are interested in gaining a rich and complex understanding of people's experience and not in obtaining information which can be generalized to other larger groups (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

A qualitative approach was appropriate for this study because the data and information gathered are used to gain an understanding of the participation between principals and teachers in the development of professional learning communities. The information gathered from

interviews, conceptual mapping, and open-ended surveys. In order to carry out this research, I interacted with principals and teachers involved in PLCs to gain insight to the level of administrative participation and overall success of PLCs.

Sampling

For this study, subjects included, but were not limited to, the individuals listed below:

- The elementary school principals in one small mid-western school district.
- The elementary school teachers who participated in PLCs in the schools in one school district.

Additional subjects were included based on survey results and individual teachers who indicating an interest in one-on-one interviews. Additional participants were selected when further information was needed to measure the involvement of leadership participation, precision, and presentation.

Six out of six acting elementary principals within one district agreed to be a part of this research. The principals were interviewed along with three teachers from the same district. In this chapter, a brief background description of the district, each of the six elementary schools, and the principals are included. A brief description of the teachers who volunteered to be interviewed is also given. Fifteen teacher initially signed up to show an interested in volunteering for an interview regarding the survey and to help with furthering the study of PLCs. Unfortunately, only three teachers were able to be interviewed. Possible reasons why the number of teacher interest declined will be discussed later in the limitations section. The principals' names and the teachers' identities were kept confidential throughout this study.

Background of the District

Demographics. The school district chosen for this research serves students and residents in a small mid-western city. The school district educates approximately 6500 students. The district has six elementary schools, each led by one principal. The elementary schools house between 250 - 450 students in Pre-Kindergarten through Grade 3. This district also has four intermediate schools, each led by one principal and one assistant principal. The intermediate schools houses 500 - 650 students in grade 4 through grade 8. This district has one high school, led by one principal and four assistant principals. The high school serves nearly 1700 students in grades 9 through grade 12. Of the students at the high school, 65% of students are classified as economically disadvantaged students, 12% are students whose first language is not English, and 12% are students with disabilities.

In the entire district, approximately 77% of students qualify for free and reduced lunch. As part of a federal program through the United States Department of Agriculture and the 2010 Healthy and Hunger-Free Kids Act, every child receives one free breakfast and one free lunch as of 2016.

Background of the Elementary Schools

Demographics. This case study focused on the elementary sites and therefore a breakdown of the enrollment and demographics of each elementary school are provided in Table 3.1 and Table 3.2. It is important to note that the lowest performing school is School 1C, which has the lowest enrollment of approximately 210 students and has the highest enrollment of economically disadvantaged students. This is the only school with a failing report card score. It is also important to note that School 6B has the highest enrollment of approximately 470 students and meets few expectations according to the state report card. Lastly, School 5A has a

high percentage of economically disadvantaged students equaling approximately 83% and a high percentage of English language learners. This school meets report card expectations. There is only one school that exceeds state expectations, School 2F. These observations will be discussed later in the research.

Table 3.1: Elementary School Demographics Data 2018

	Total # of Students*	% of Econ. Disadv	% of Engl. Lang. Learners	% of Students w/Disab	School Report Card Score
School 1C	210	89%	22%	14%	Fails to Meet Expectation
School 2F	420	67%	21%	8%	Exceeds Expectations
School 3E	390	76%	12%	16%	Meets Expectation
School 4D	320	77%	11%	14%	Meets Expectations
School 5A	370	83%	30%	14%	Meets Expectations
School 6B	470	61%	17%	18%	Meets Few Expectations

* School enrollments are approximations in order to protect the confidentiality of the schools.

As noted earlier, the elementary schools in this district are comprised of five grade levels, Pre-Kindergarten to Third Grade. Each grade level has its own PLC team. Each school has approximately 30 - 40 staff members.

Table 3.2: Elementary School Race/Ethnicity Demographics Data 2018

	Asian	Black	Hispanic	White	2 or More
School 1C	0%	41%	30%	22%	7%
School 2F	1%	22%	34%	32%	10%
School 3E	1%	16%	22%	53%	8%
School 4D	1%	19%	22%	43%	14%
School 5A	1%	24%	42%	25%	8%
School 6B	1%	18%	33%	40%	8%

Background of the Principals

The principals interviewed for this study had different levels of experience as administrators and PLC training. Most of the principals have had some type of training related to PLCs and only one principal had no prior PLC training and relied on independent research to understand the premise behind PLCs and the steps in the PLC process. Some of the principals shared how they had PLC training provided to them by this district at one point in time. Some also explained their training occurred while working in another district.

Reportedly, the district provided meaningful professional development for both the teachers and the principals about professional learning community practices and sent administrators to a conference Professional Communities at Work Institute in Lincolnshire, IL in the Summer of 2013. Unfortunately not all principals were able to attend. Some of the elementary principals were not yet employed and principals had an option to attend. Only three principals attended the conference Principal B, Principal F, and Principal D. Information in Table 4.3 provides a picture of the educational background and experience of the principals interviewed for this study. Additional demographic information about the principals is not shared in order to preserve confidentiality.

Principal A

Principal A has worked in education for the past fourteen years and has been an administrator for eight years. He has worked in one other district before coming to this district. He had PLC training prior to coming to this district and while in the district. Principal A has both an administrative license and a master's degree. He leads School 5A.

Principal B

Principal B has worked in education for twenty years and has been an administrator for fifteen years, primarily in her current district. She started her career in a different district, but has remained in this district for most of her career. She has had multiple PLC training and was in the district during the first stages of the implementation of the PLC philosophy back in 2009-2010 school year. Principal B has both an administrative license and a master's degree. She leads School 6B.

Principal C

Principal C has worked in education for twenty years and has been an administrator for 15 years. She has worked in two other districts before coming to this district. She had PLC training prior to coming to this district and while in this district. Principal C has both an administrative license and a master's degree. She also has a Ph.D. She leads School 1C.

Principal D

Principal D has worked in education for the past nineteen years and has been an administrator for the past five years. She was a part of a PLC while a teacher herself, but has not had any formal PLC training. She also worked as a Literacy Coach with PLCs in the district. Principal D has both an administrative license, and master's degree in reading. She leads School 4D.

Principal E

Principal E has worked in education for the past nineteen years and has been an administrator for the past three years. She was a part of a PLC while a teacher herself, and she has had formal PLC training. Principal E has both an administrative license and a master's degree. She leads School 3E.

Principal F

Principal F has worked in education for the past twenty-four years and has been an administrator for nineteen years, primarily in his current district. He started his career in a

different district, but has remained in this district for most of his career. He has had multiple PLC training. Principal F has both an administrative license and a master's degree. He leads School 2F.

Table 3.3: Elementary Principal Credentials

	Master's Degree?	Admin Cert?	How long in Education	How long as Administrator	Special PLC Train/Conf.
Principal A	yes	yes	14	8	yes
Principal B	yes	yes	20	15	yes
Principal C	yes	yes	20	15	yes
Principal D	yes	yes	19	5	no
Principal E	yes	yes	20	4	yes
Principal F	yes	yes	24	19	yes

Background of Teachers

Three volunteer teachers for the interviews were of different teaching backgrounds. One of the teachers interviewed was a special education teacher, another teacher was a regular education teacher, and the last teacher was a dual language teacher (DLI). The teachers taught in the primary grades (Kindergarten - Third). Due to confidentiality concerns, information regarding volunteer teachers was limited.

Teacher Survey

The teacher survey (see Appendix A) was used to gain insight on principal participation (Lunenberg, 2010), precision (Lunenberg, 2010), and presentation (Lunenberg, 2010). The primary responsibility of the principal was to promote the learning and success of all students. School principals can accomplish this goal by focusing on learning, encouraging collaboration, using data to improve learning, providing support, and aligning curriculum, assessment, and instruction (Lunenberg, 2010).

I wanted to know the level of principal participation with the setup of PLCs, the continued focus of a true professional learning community, and follow-up procedures whether all members were involved. I inquired about the focus of the PLCs or questions they used to guide discussions, and how they were utilized in the PLC. I was interested in the formalities for presenting information discovered during the PLC, including student data and professional growth. In other words, I wanted to uncover ways in which principals held PLCs accountable for their time and commitment to develop successful and meaningful PLCs.

The survey was executed in hopes of seeing trends within specific schools who reported high principal participation and a positive PLC experience. The next section will include a description of each step of the teacher survey that was completed to gain information about the PLC process within the district and to pinpoint schools of interest.

An initial survey was conducted during a monthly district-wide elementary professional development meeting with all elementary teachers in the district. Teachers were asked to volunteer their thoughts and perceptions about current PLC practices at their current location under the guidance of their current principal. Participants were asked to provide their opinions and to rate their current practices on a Likert scale of one to five (one being the lowest and 5

being the highest) and to include the school at which they taught for sorting purposes. The completed surveys were sorted and grouped by schools to gain a school-wide understanding of the three main points or dimensions of the research precision, participation and presentation. The information the teachers provided about their involvement in PLCs was used to gain initial building information about PLCs participation, experience, and leadership involvement from the teachers' perspective as a collective. The questions were as follows:

1. On a scale of 1-5 with 1 being the lowest score and 5 being the highest score, how would you rate your current building level PLC experience?
2. Please rate the level of principal participation with your current grade level PLCs.
3. Please rate your site in regards to being focused and revisiting the expectations of a PLC.
4. Please rate your level of understanding of the PLC process.
5. Please rate the effectiveness of how PLC information is shared at your current location (i.e. discovered findings that represent professional growth and/or student performance are presented to colleagues outside your PLC and/or your principal).
6. Other than your group, do you feel there is another successful PLC group? (See Appendix A)

Concept Map

In this study, individual teacher participants were asked to create a concept map. A concept map is an example of a visual organizer used in teaching, research, and practice in diverse settings and can provide a tool for meaning making (Conceicao, Samuel, & Biniecki, 2017). The purpose of the concept map was to get visual representation of the background knowledge and understanding of the PLC process and to gain insight on the current understanding of the PLC format, the level of participation with the principal and PLC

participants, and whether the participants felt they had a positive or negative experience with PLCs at their current site. The concept map captured teachers' perceptions of current practices of PLCs and the effectiveness of the principal from an individual teacher's perspective. Prior to the distribution of the concept map, I gained knowledge on the prior implementation process of the PLCs from the district's administrative staff. This was done to gain a history on the district's PLC implementation process, procedures, and past opportunities where PLCs were the main objectives. Knowledge of how this process was carried out at each site was researched to gain information on the principal's activity with PLCs. This information was used to compare teacher's view of the process with the design the principals implemented. It was helpful to see how teachers understood the PLC process and the level of principal participation. It was interesting to see the connection the teachers created to describe the PLC process at their schools and whether or not they incorporated the principal's role in the map.

Specific directions were included with the concept map. All three teacher interviewees were given a sheet of paper with the following statement written in the middle, "*Successful PLCs with a focus on teaching strategies that increase student learning...*" Teachers were asked to complete the concept map prior to the interview. The teachers interviewed commented on the concept map and how it helped prepared them for the interview and organized their thoughts and opinions around PLCs.

The first teacher was asked to complete the concept map during the interview. This step was quickly changed after reflecting with the teacher and some adjustments were made to allow the remaining teachers more time and to give them the option to complete the concept map prior to the meeting. This change was implemented to alleviate pressure or lack of comfort to perform and to alleviate the urge to ask questions about the concept map before completion. It was very

important that the teacher supplied his or her own thoughts and feelings regarding the key statement without assistance. The remaining participants were asked to complete the concept map at their own leisure, but were asked to spend no more than an hour to complete the map without any assistance. A one-hour time limit was suggested per advice from the first teacher and to alleviate researched responses. Teachers commented that this time allotment was sufficient for the task.

Teacher Interviews

In this study, interviews were used to determine teachers' perceptions of PLC and the effectiveness of the principal's role. I asked interviewees to discuss their principal's level of participation with PLC groups and whether teachers viewed this participation as necessary for successful PLC. The interviews also provided the researcher with the teacher's perception of the PLCs formulated at their school. The interviews were conducted in person in the subject's natural environment (schools, offices, etc.) to allow for open dialogue and conversation. Teacher interviews ranged from 20 to 40 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. A total of three teachers, who regularly participate in PLCs, were interviewed. These individuals volunteered to participate by indicating as such on the initial survey (see Appendix A). Each interviewee received an interview transcript electronically and time to review; followed by an email for feedback, approval of accurate representation or possible changes.

To practice interviewing and testing interview questions, a pilot study with two individuals, one being a teacher and one being a principal who are well versed in the topic of PLCs, occurred prior to the initial study. The practice interview served as a screener and provided the researcher with current district principal requirements and PLC practices and helped

shape interview questions to optimal results and insight. The interview protocol used for study appears in Appendix C.

Principal Interview

The principals at all of the elementary schools in this district were interviewed. The purpose of the interview was to gain an understanding of the process and procedures of current PLC practices at the principal's site. Principals were asked to provide background information on what actions were taken to keep his or her PLC groups focused. The interview also gathered data to highlight precision practices and in what ways the principal guides teachers on purposeful reporting about their findings. Lastly, the interview with the principals of the schools provided feedback on the level of the principal's participation with PLC groups. See Appendix D for the interview protocol used with principals.

Method

The proposed study addresses the following three questions: What level of participation (frequency and guidance) do principals use when meeting with professional learning communities? Does the level of principal participation have an effect on the success of professional learning communities? What are specific strategies principals use to develop and maintain professional learning communities in their school setting? To answer the research questions, the research will be conducted in five steps. The steps in the process will be completed in the following order: 1. Teacher Survey; 2. Development of Sub-Groups; 3. Teacher Concept Map and Interview; 4. Principal Interview.

Step One – Teacher Survey

The researcher presented the survey during a collective meeting of all elementary teachers in the school district. Teachers in this district participate in a monthly meeting on the second Friday of each month. Teachers were asked to complete the survey during one of these meetings (see Appendix A for the survey). A total of 119 teacher completed the survey. The survey asked six questions using a 5-point likert scale. Teachers also had the opportunity to volunteer their thoughts and perceptions about PLCs and how the process has evolved at their current location. Specifically, they were asked to score their current experiences, the principal's participations, the effectiveness of sharing results, if expectations are revisited, and their overall understanding of the PLC process. The information the teachers provided about their involvement in PLCs was used to gain initial information about PLCs participation, experience, and leadership involvement from the teachers' perspective. Teachers also volunteered for the individual interview phase of the study.

Participants were asked to include the school at which they teach for sorting purposes. The surveys were then sorted and grouped by school to gain an understanding of the differences in responses across the six schools and to provide an initial understanding of teachers' perceptions of the three dimensions of PLC functioning:

1. *Precision* of the PLC process and expectation
2. *Participation* or participation of the principal
3. *Presentation* of data from the survey results

Step Two - Development of Sub-Groups

Data from step one was collected and analyzed before proceeding to the next step. After completing the overall comparison of the survey data from the six participating elementary schools, I narrowed the field and look more closely at the schools with the highest means and the schools with the lowest means for each of the PLC dimensions (precision, participation, and presentation). The information from the survey was used to develop two subgroups of schools. The first subgroup consisted of schools that express positive PLC experiences with regards to principal participation, precision, and reporting. This group of respondents was the primary focus of this study. The second sub group consisted of schools that express a negative PLC experience with regards to the same guidelines previously mentioned above. This group was a secondary focus of this study.

Step Three – Teacher Concept Map/Interview

Data from step one and two were collected and analyzed before proceeding to the next step. This step consisted of two parts: Concept Map and Follow-up Interview. The teachers who volunteered to participate in the interview also completed a concept map of their ideas and thoughts around the area of successful PLC and effective teacher strategies that increase student learning. Before beginning the interview and discussing of the concept map, the purpose of the research was reviewed.

All three teacher interviewees were given a sheet of paper with the following statement written in the middle, “*Successful PLCs with a focus on teaching strategies that increase student learning...*” Specific directions or were included with the concept map. The teacher volunteers were asked to depict how they understood the principal’s role in a PLC.

Create a thoughtful concept map of your beliefs around success PLCs. There are no right or wrong answers. The purpose of this activity is to unfold your thoughts and beliefs about PLCs and what makes them successful. This tool will help the

researcher measure your understanding of the PLC process and guide the discussion. (See Appendix B).

Teachers were asked to complete the concept map prior to the interview. The purpose of the concept map was to get a visual representation of the background knowledge and understanding of the PLC process from the teachers. Further discussion regarding the concept maps will continue in the next chapter. Participants were asked not to spend more than an hour to complete the map.

The researcher examines each concept map for information regarding the PLC process and participation or involvement of the principal. Maps were also used to determine whether and how teachers depicted the reporting-out or sharing of PLC information to the school community. Therefore, the concept map provided the researcher with initial information regarding: principal participation or lack thereof; and whether teachers have an understanding of the reporting process of school data and teaching/learning strategies. The maps also provided an anchor for the discussion that occurred in the interview.

To ensure consistency in conversations with each teacher, an interview protocol was followed (see Appendix C). Questions asked respondents to describe their experiences and probed their views about what makes a PLC successful and what role or roles they believe a principal should serve.

Step Four - Principal Interview

A total of six interviews were conducted with principals at each school site. The principals were contacted by phone to set up a time for the interviews. Once again, each interview was guided by an interview protocol (See Appendix D). The focus of the interviews was threefold: to find out the principal's level of participation and intervention or guidance with

professional learning communities; to discuss the precision of the process in the development of professional learning communities and his or her expectations of the community; and to learn about the process used to present the data and outcomes of the professional learning community to the whole school.

Protection of Human Rights

In addition to obtaining approval from the University of Wisconsin-Madison Institutional Review Board (IRB), permission was obtained from the research committee of the school district to complete the initial teacher survey. In both cases, procedures were put in place to ensure that participation was voluntary and the information shared was confidential. Subjects completing the initial teacher survey gave consent by completing the survey and a statement explaining consent was included on the survey form (See Appendix A). The survey collected no identifying information about participants other than the school at which they worked and their years of teaching experience. The information gained was only used to compare schools and to identify participants who showed willingness to participate further the investigation. Teachers and principals who were interviewed gave consent by completing a consent form prior to the interview email and submitted it to the researcher at the time of the interview. Participants were informed that they could choose to withdraw from the study at any time.

All schools and participants including volunteer principals and teachers were given pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. Schools were given a letter A-F and Principals were given number 1-6. Teachers who volunteer for an interview given numbers 1-3. Participants' confidentiality will be protected and they will be given the option to receive a copy of the study when it is finished to verify confidentiality.

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations of this study. It is important to note that there was a two-year gap between the initial staff survey and the actual teacher and principal interviews. It is also important to note that there was one principal who left the district during the completion of this study. The survey results provided data for school 5A and the PLC process under the previous principal and not the current principal (Principal A). The teacher who interviewed (Teacher 5A1) focused on the practices of the current principal.

This study does not speak to all elementary principals who are incorporating professional learning communities within their schools. The principals who were interviewed for this study were employed in the same district. There is a high degree of familiarity with the researcher and current practices of PLC within the district. I am employed as an assistant principal in the district, though not at any of the schools from which data was collected. As such, I not only understand the expectations of PLCs from current research, I also understand the expectations of the district and building level PLCs. I have also worked with PLCs at three of the schools used in this study in the past and therefore knew all of the principal and some of the teachers currently working in the elementary schools. The familiarity of this district and current practices, although a limitation, could also be viewed as a positive aspect of this study. For example, my familiarity with the district made it easier to negotiate the approval process in the district and to contact and obtain responses from principals.

The teachers who were interviewed for this study were recruited on a volunteer basis. As such, I had no control on the type of teacher-volunteers involved in this study, nor was there a way to determine whether the teachers interviewed were representative of their colleagues.

Several possible explanations can explain why only three teachers ended up volunteering for the interview. Some teachers decided to eliminate themselves from the pool for personal reasons. Some expressed fear that their principals would find out who was interviewed. Other teachers reported discomfort with answering some of the questions about their principal. Another possible reason for the low number of teachers willing to be interviewed could be related to teacher retention in the district. A few teachers were contacted for an interview, but had left the district and/or were seeking employment elsewhere. Lastly, a few teachers were relocating to different schools or different positions within the district and were no longer in that same professional learning community or teachers. There were many closed doors and barrier to gathering the data for this research, but in the end, I was able to compile a solid data set to report on the principal's role and the PLC process.

I was aware throughout the study of bias resulting from differences from past experiences with learning communities and professional development that occurred in the district. I was aware of bias with the subjects of the study in personal philosophies of leadership and professional learning communities' procedures. My personal beliefs were set aside to complete the study. This study is limited as a descriptive study of six principals of only one school district in a small city in Southern Wisconsin. The results of the study are applicable only in that context, and are not generalizable to the leadership of all schools.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Introduction

Principals hold a significant role in developing professional learning communities. Principals control the culture and vision that he/she strives to encourage in their own building. Through structured expectations, conversations, and presentations, principals can encourage the culture that the entire community desires and help sustain functional PLC's with a purpose. Discovering or uncovering that role is a recent and continuously explored interest in the PLC world. While no two PLCs are exactly alike, it is still necessary to have a process to strive for high achievement and growth. The purpose of this study was to examine the role of the principal in developing and sustaining functional professional learning communities in the elementary school setting and to determine what practices currently define the principal's participation to encourage positive school culture, promote optimal teacher learning, and student achievement.

This study was conducted to investigate the PLC strategies that principals currently incorporate to develop functional and sustainable PLCs. This information was gathered to uncover successful avenues to present a template of what a principal's role may entail. The research questions are:

- What level of participation (frequency and guidance) do principals use when meeting with professional learning communities?
- Does the level of a principal's participation have an effect on the success of professional learning communities?

- What are specific strategies that principals use to develop and maintain professional learning communities in their school setting?

The first question addressed in the study was, “What level of participation (frequency and guidance) do principals use when meeting with professional learning communities?” Data was gathered through a tri-lens view that began with a district survey offered to all elementary teachers, volunteer teacher interviewees, and principal interviewees to examine three interest areas:

1. *Precision - Supplying precise information of the PLC process and expectation*
2. *Participation - Current principal participation or participation with PLC groups*
3. *Presentation - Presentation of accomplishments from each PLC group*

Teachers eventually took ownership of their own definition of what they knew about the PLC process even if their current principal had inconsistencies in the researched components in the PLC process including participation, precision, and presentation. Teachers felt they were functioning adequately with or without their principal’s guidance. The teachers in this study felt they understood what a successful PLC entailed but were hesitant and waited to see the process unfold under the guidance of their principal. Overall, teachers reported a higher understanding of the PLC process, but a lower percentage in revisiting the expectation of a PLC and the principal’s participation. This meant they had a sense of what they were expected to do, but the felt they lacked accountability and direction from their principal.

The three areas of interest were initially examined by distributing a survey to all the elementary teachers in the district. In all, 154 teachers were asked to complete the survey and a

total of 119 surveys were completed successfully and submitted, which means there was a 77.3% response rate. There were 4 surveys completed with no indication of the school and could not be used in the study. There was a total of 31 teachers who declined to participate in the survey. The information from the survey helped develop two subgroups of schools. According to the data, the first subgroup included School 1C, School 2F, and School 3E. These schools' survey results yielded the highest percentage of teachers who reported favorable assessments of their schools' current PLC practices. These schools also had the lowest percentage of non-favorable practices in the three highlighted areas of interest principal precision, participation, and presentation. The secondary school sites included School 2F, School 4D, and School 6B. The second subgroup consisted of schools whose teachers expressed PLC experiences that were underdeveloped in regards to the previously mentioned highlights.

Table 4.1 Summative Survey Results

	Survey Results – All Participants N =119	Low 1	2	3	4	High 5
Participation	Current building level PLC experience? Mean = 3.64	0	11	42	45	21
	Principal participation with current grade level PLCs? Mean = 3.06	17	22	34	29	17
Precision	Site being focused and revisiting PLC expectations? Mean = 3.53	6	24	37	35	23
	Level of understanding of the PLC process? Mean = 4.13	1	4	18	52	44
Presentation	Effectiveness of how PLC information is shared at current site? Mean = 3.45	7	12	42	37	21

Teachers were asked to volunteer for a follow-up interview regarding the survey and to help further the study of elementary PLCs. There were 18 teachers who initially volunteered to be interviewed, but ultimately only 3 teachers were able to be interviewed for the study. For the duration of this study, the teacher volunteers are referred to as Teacher 6B1 who is from School 6B, Teacher 5A2 who is from School 5A, and Teacher 2F3 who is from School 2F.

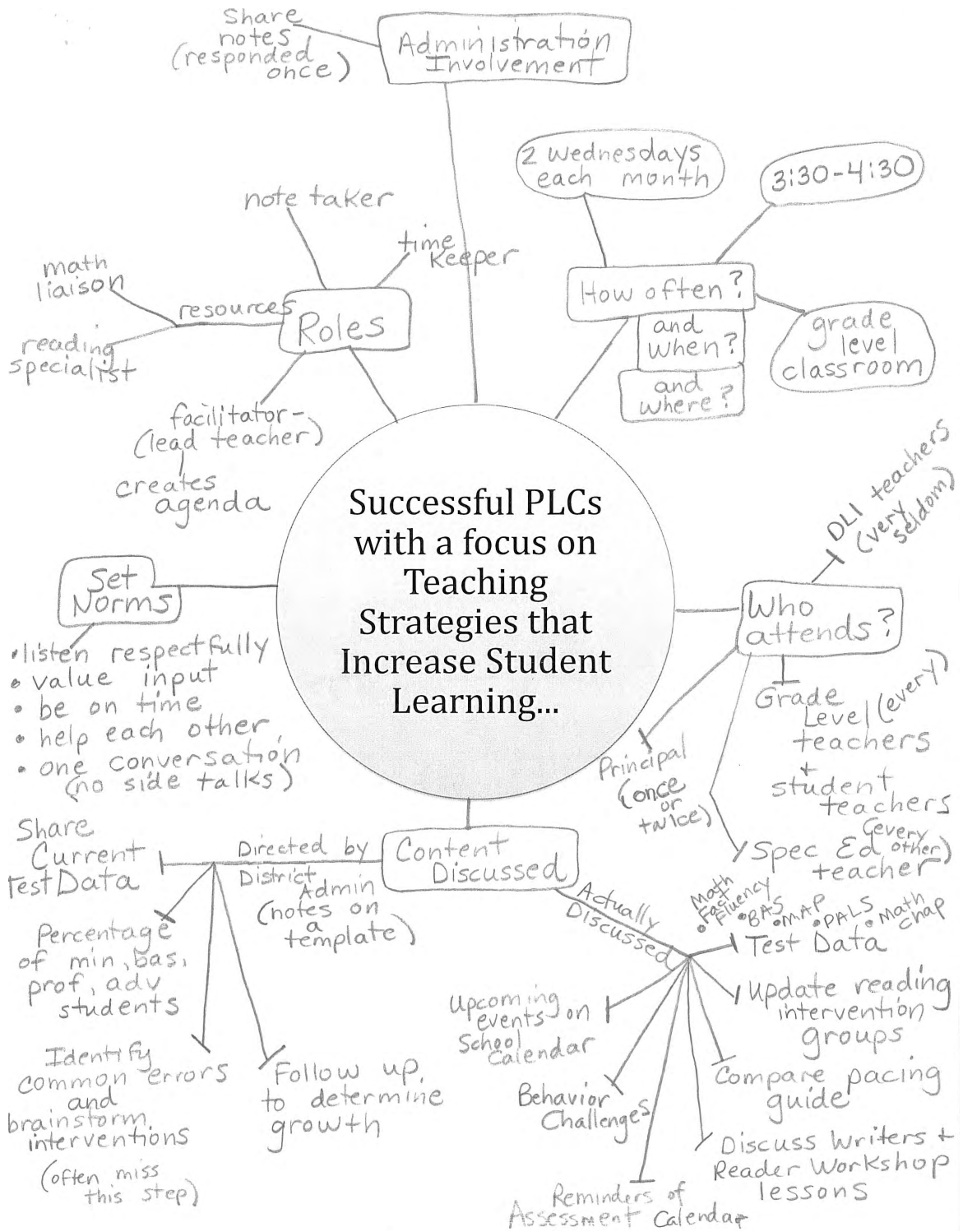
Those teachers who volunteered also completed concept maps that depicted their desires for the PLC process. The results of the concept maps were interesting in the fact that no two concept maps were the same and none of the concept maps mentioned the principal. In fact, the only similarities between the teachers' maps, visually speaking is that they followed a web-like

formation with ideas that stretched away from the center. One teacher even decided to map her ideas using a computer program, while all the other teachers made hand drawn maps. The teachers successfully followed the central question or statement that was provided to guide their thoughts. I found it equally interesting that the teachers failed to mention the teaching of student or teaching strategies, yet all of the teachers mindfully completed a map of what they felt should be included in a PLC process to increase student learning with a focus on teaching strategies.

Teacher 6B1 went beyond expectations by answering the statement that was given in the representation of the map. This particular map included ideas towards the tops of the map of what is actually done at her current school. At the bottom of this map, Teacher 6B1 included their thoughts and ideas of what should be entailed in a successful PLC. At the beginning of the year, Teacher 6B1 explained how each group sets norms to follow and assigns roles for all individuals in the collaborative team (i.e. time-keeper, note taker, facilitator). There is a key role that is assigned to one person by the principal - Lead Teacher. The Lead Teacher creates an agenda for each meeting based on the parameters set by the principal. He or she is responsible for sending out information to everyone prior to the meetings. The Lead Teacher contacts all team members to ensure everyone brings the correct data to the collaborative meeting. They check in with all team members to establish a status of progress and pacing and to make sure everyone is prepared for the collaborative meeting. Essentially, the Lead Teacher is an integral part of the collaborative process. Teacher 6B1 also mentioned other people who are present during any given collaborative meeting including the math liaison, a special education teacher, and the reading specialist. These individuals may be present during a collaborative meeting. Teacher 6B1 feels the roles are necessary and helpful for the team to be productive. Each team

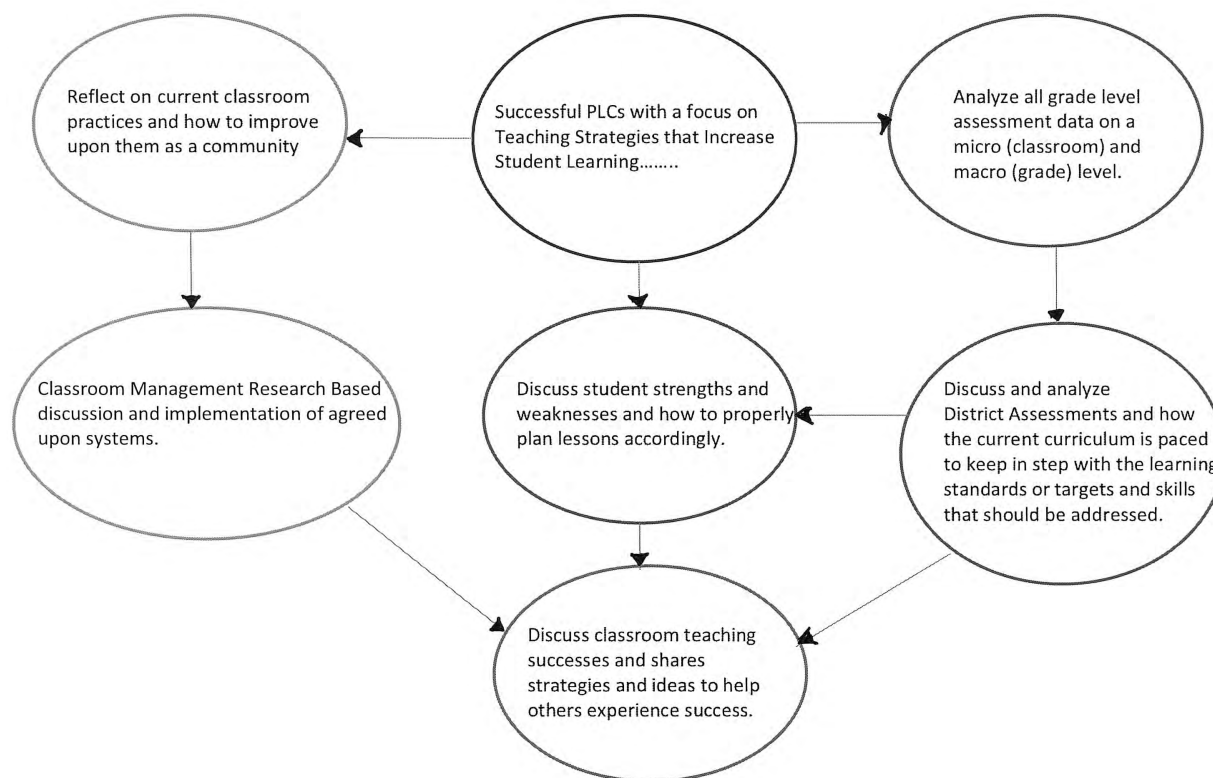
keeps notes about the meetings and the Lead Teacher submits meeting notes back to the principal using a Google document.

Figure 4.1: Teacher 6B1 Concept Map



The Teacher 5A2 interview and concept map will be discussed next. Teacher 5A2 included arrows to guide the map in the directions of her thoughts. Teacher 5A2 included interesting word choices at the beginning of each statement to explain the actions steps for a PLC. The words included were reflect, analyze, and discuss. These words were used to explain the teachers' actions. Teacher 5A2 wanted to show that the main actions of a PLC are to analyze data and reflect. Teacher 5A2 thought that grade-level teams analyze data on two levels within this district: a macro level (grade level) and a micro level (school level). On both levels, there is a need to discuss and analyze assessments to determine successes and difficulties. Each classroom is a community with a certain connection amongst one another (micro), but they also have a responsibility to connect as an entire body of teacher-learners (macro). The combination of classroom community and the current systems (the macro, micro, and district level) promotes positive classroom management and effective learning. Teacher 5A2 felt that this information was necessary for new teachers because it could help with current issues and concerns about behavior and classroom management.

Figure 4.2: Teacher 5A2 Concept Map



Teacher 2F3 included four central ideas on their concept map: 1. Data-driven, 2. Ideally supports uniformity, 3. Informs instruction, intervention, and enrichment, 4. Student-centered. She thinks that these four things are what a PLC should entail to successfully increase student learning.

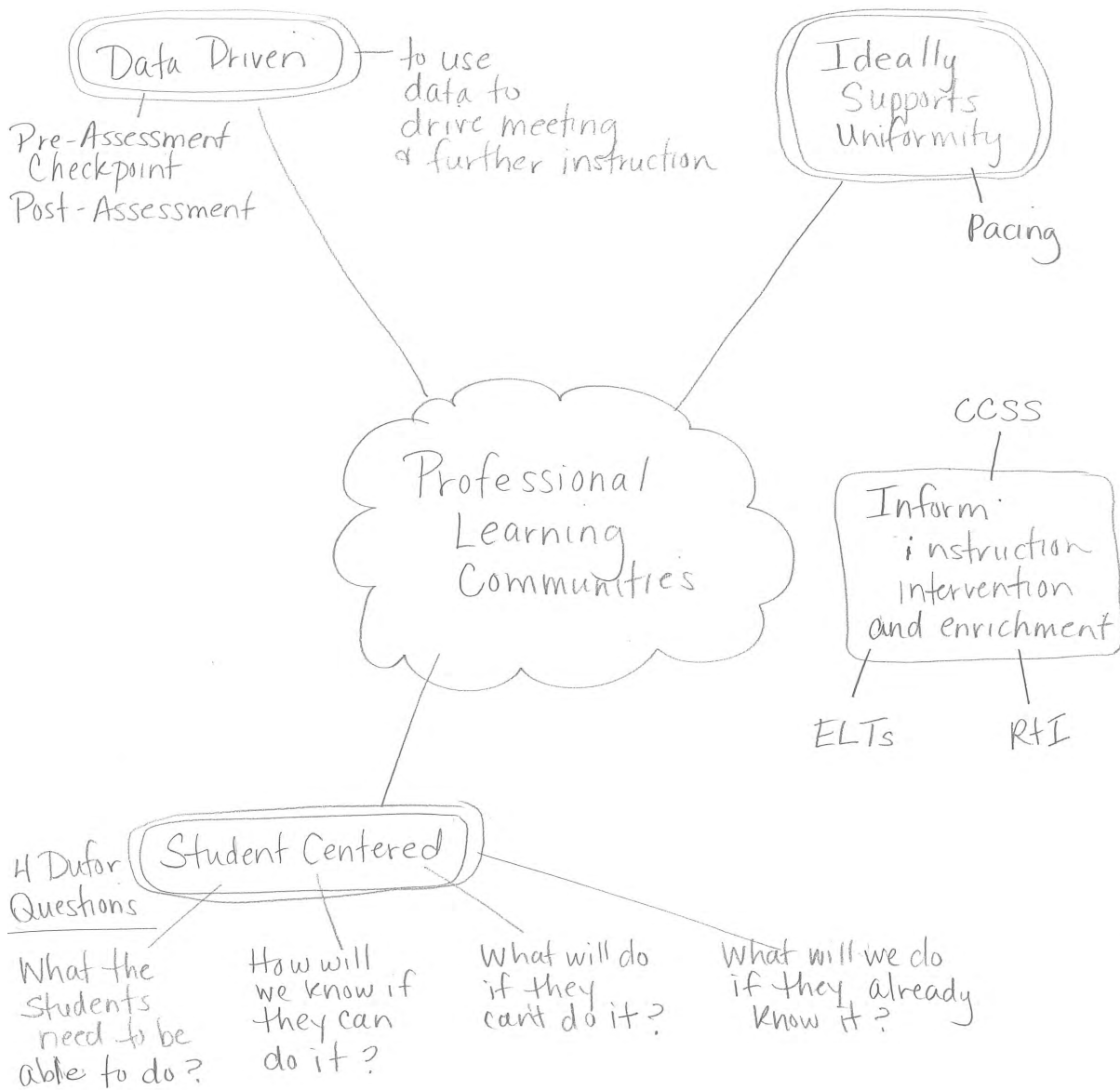
Teacher 2F3 explained how pre-assessment and post- assessments are used to drive the meeting and provide further instruction. Pacing was mentioned as a way to support uniformity within the group. Intervention and enrichment are the other components they mentioned that help inform instruction, in addition to the common core standards, essential learning targets, and response to intervention. Lastly, Teacher 2F3 suggested PLCs should be student-centered. In order to have a

student-centered approach, DuFour's (2017) four questions were also included on the concept map. The four questions are as follows:

1. What will the students need to know and be able to do?
2. How will we know if they can do it?
3. What will we do if they cannot do it?
4. What will we do if they already knowing?

Teacher 2F3 believed these four questions along with the data helps drive and inform a PLC meeting. The results all of the meetings and the data should drive the instruction and the enrichment that should follow. Teacher 2F3 said that the ultimate goal is to gain knowledge about students and practices. Teacher 2F3 did not mention the existence of a Lead Teacher.

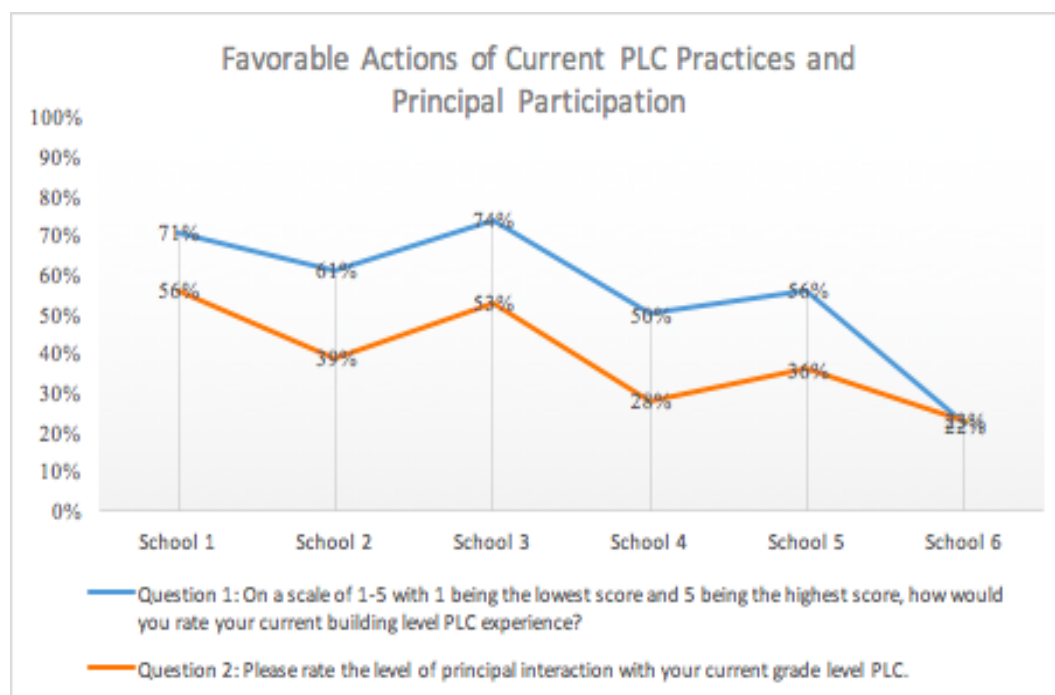
Figure 4.3: Teacher 2F3 Concept Map



Principal Participation and Participation

Data from the surveys were collected and analyzed. Figure 4.4 shows the combined number of teachers who selected 5s and 4s on the first two questions of the survey. These questions attempted to determine the percentages of teachers who felt positive about their professional learning community experience and their principal's participation or participation in the process. The data showed that School 1C and School 3E had the most teachers who were favorable about their current PLC experience. The same two schools also had teachers who expressed favorable opinions of their current principals' participation with their learning community. Moreover, School 1C and School 3E showed the highest levels of agreement in all interest areas of the study. Therefore, these two schools were looked at as key environments where teachers reported principal participation was favorable compared to the other schools.

Figure 4.4: Survey Results - Favorable Actions of Current PLC Experience for Participation



During the interviews, each principal shared how they interacted with their PLCs during scheduled meetings. All principals commented on the fact that all PLC meetings for the entire district occurred on the same night, Wednesdays, for an hour and a half. They all explained how they found it difficult to cover all grade levels, but many attempted to check with each group to assist when needed, to answer questions, or provide clarification. Many principals shared how they sometimes viewed themselves as an “active listener” or “observer.” They felt that their job was to support PLCs and to assist when needed, rather than fully facilitate the meetings. All principals echoed this belief with the exception of two, Principal A and Principal C – the principals of two schools with the highest scored PLCs. Both of these leaders described how they were an active part of the process. Principal C believed that her physical presence was important along with the presence of the reading coach and the math coach. She felt it is was mandatory for the coaches to be present at every meeting to answer questions regarding their respected content

areas. Principal A also explained that she served as a highly visible figure at these meetings, and it was important for her to be able to assist grade-level PLCs who needed help.

Principal B felt that the meetings should be more teacher-led, but that her help was needed at times, although not as frequently as she anticipated. Principal B also disclosed that her role was not to monitor the meeting and that she did not want to interrupt the flow of the meeting. She reported that from her perspective, the whole dynamics of the room shifted when she walked in. As she explained:

It was always interesting because the moment I walked in they all wanted to start asking me questions. I didn't want that to be my role. My role was just to kind of sit and observe and listen and then if there was clarification I felt like I could be available. So somehow we have to revisit that whole process of the PLCs and what my role should be in it because it shouldn't be that I am monitoring them.

Principal D described how she has tried to be more present and thus available during PLC meetings by having all teachers meet in the same room: “I don't particularly care for the new format we have because it is all at the same time, but I have them all in the same room rather than spread out in the building.” In her view, this approach alleviated confusion and miscommunication between staff and the different math and reading coaches and the principal because they are all together to answer any questions. Even though she saw some positive aspects of this approach, she reported that she misses having only one grade meet at a time and does not like having all of the teams meet at the same time. She prefers a more spread out schedule.

Principals E and F believed their roles should be more like a “go-to” person, rather than a facilitator or micro-manager as well. Principal F stated,

I at least go to each team for a little bit and I check in. I asked: Are there any questions? Do you understand what you're working on? Do you need anything from me? What do

you need? So I make sure that I check in with each grade level. If there is a particular grade level that is having an issue or something else, I may spend more time with that group.

It is important to note that even though many of the principals felt they had to use an observer approach with their groups to allow the PLCs to flourish, the principals incorporated a formal written communication tool provided by the district administration to answer questions and provide feedback to the individual grade level PLCs. The tool was also used to maintain uniformity with all PLC across the district. The form, developed by district-level administrators, was an electronically stored document. This document was only shared with the grade level team, the principal and other district administrators. All the principals were required to use the form as a communication tool, and all PLCs were expected to complete this form by the end of the meeting. The form was not shared with other PLC groups within the same building. Principal C led discussions with her leadership team on the reoccurring themes found in the forms collected. Principal E shared something unique about the way she used this tool. She shared the forms across grade levels. For example, she shared the 1st Grade PLC information with the 2nd Grade PLC, the 3rd Grade PLC information with the 3rd Grade PLC, and so forth.

The teachers voiced different perceptions regarding their principals' presence and participation. Teacher 6B1 expressed concern with the communication between the teams and the principal. Teacher 6B1 explained how notes are consistently shared with the principal, but the team does not hear from the principal consistently. Collaborative teams meet at least two times per month, every other Wednesday, but the principal has only been able to attend two meetings this year. It is significant to note that the principal has five different PLCs occurring at the same time each month and is not able to make it to every PLC meeting.

Teacher 6B1 also described the principal's role as more of an observer and listener than a facilitator and active participant. Teacher 6B1 shared,

It would be great if she could just be at the meetings. Honestly, I think she's wonderful and I love her. I think that she's been out of the classroom enough so the assessments that we're using, she has never administered. She is more of a listener and an observer in our discussions.

She also shared that at times the principal can be helpful when discussing behavior issues or answering specific questions, but Teacher 6B1 feels that the collaborative team has successfully functioned on their own and that they are doing what they are supposed to do for students.

One part of the prior-mentioned communication tool allows teachers to report comments, questions, or concerns regarding their PLC discussions. This information is shared with all of the principals at each respective building, but the follow-up has been inconsistent for the principal at Teacher 6B1's building as well. Teacher 6B1 stated, "Even though there tends to be some inconsistencies with follow-up from the principal, there is a belief or a sense of accomplishment by the team members." The collaborative teams are able to perform their agreed upon duties as members of the PLC group.

In contrast, Teacher 5A2 describe the definite presence that her building's principal has with PLCs.

"Our PLCs are definitely guided. It's not micromanaged by any means. The principal may visit a PLC especially if he knows that there are some things or weakness there that kind of stand out in the data. He just wants to make sure that everybody is on the same page with the things that we need to improve upon. So they are definitely driven by the principal."

The principal at her building provides a focus or a focal point on a weekly basis and shares this information in a weekly newsletter. Teacher 5A2 also mentioned that her previous principal had a noticeable presence as well and also sent out weekly newsletters. She explained that in her building there is a teacher leader or grade level liaison who helps drive PLC

discussions and works alongside the principal. The PLC groups meet by grade level and collaborate with the special education teachers as well.

Teacher 2F3 did not have a positive experience to share in regard to their principal's participation. Teacher 2F3 expressed frustration with her professional learning community experience as a whole stating, "I leave professional community meetings every month frustrated that I just wasted my time. It kind of doesn't help me in the classroom." Teacher 2F3 shared that she has yet to be a part of a successful PLC according to her understanding of what a PLC is and the aforementioned expectations of a true PLC experience. She reports that the meetings lack data, guidance, and administrative input. Teacher 2F3 explained that the expectations of this past year's practice became more task driven, which left her with a "checklist completion" impression versus a community of teacher learners.

This last year, maybe even the past two years, the DLI [Dual Language Instruction] team met outside of our buildings. We all met together within DLI and we don't any of this. It is not data-driven at all. And we haven't had an administrator in any of our PLCs. But in the prior year, we would try to do these things. It became more about pencil pushing and just getting a form filled out and submitted. Our data is there, our common assessments are there, and we could do it, but we just don't.

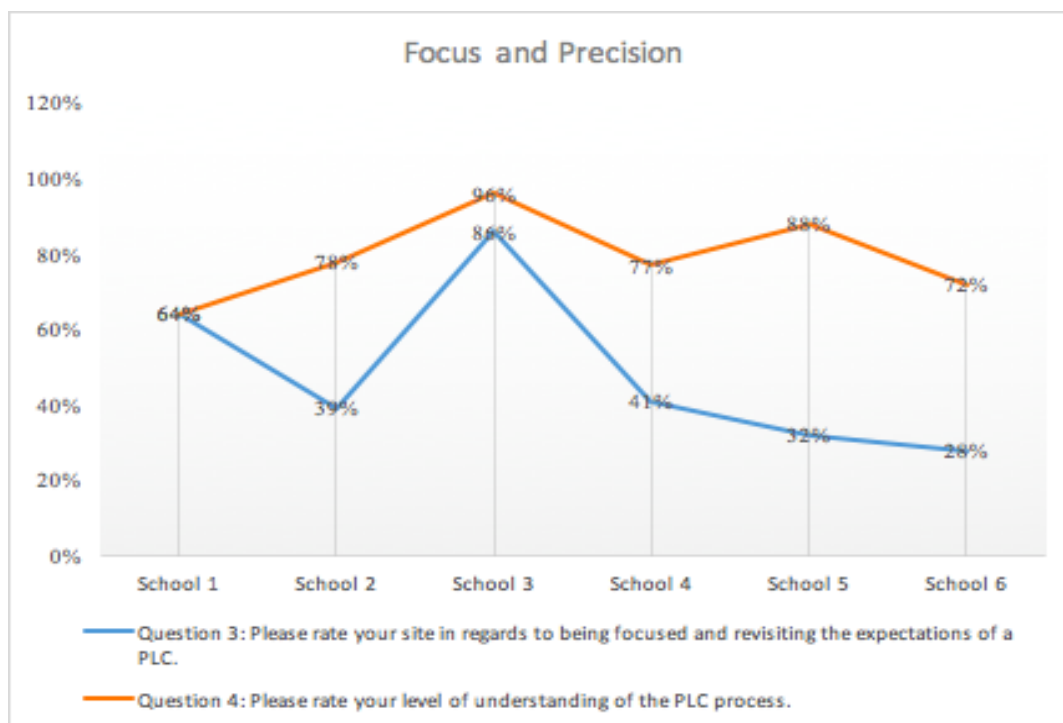
Precision

Figure 4.5 shows the combined number of teachers who selected 5s and 4s from the survey. These responses show the percentages of teachers who felt positive about their learning community experience and their precision in accomplishing their goals. To reaffirm, precision in this study refers to continuously revisiting the process and expectations of a community of learners. The data in Figure 4.5 show that School 1C and School 3E had more teachers who were favorable about their current PLC experience with regards to being focused and revisiting expectations. It is important to notice that School 3E is still the school that reported higher

overall satisfaction with their PLCs (see Figure 4.4). School 1C had 64% of the teachers report their collaborative teams were focused and revisited expectations, and the same percentage of the teachers indicated they take time to revisit expectations with their principal throughout the year. School 3E results yielded the highest percentage of favorable teachers for both indicators of precision. 96% of the teachers surveyed at School 3E indicated they were focused, on task, and revisited the expectations of a PLC. Comparatively, School 3E also indicated that 86% of the teachers surveyed reported a 5 or 4 level of understanding of the PLC process.

School 3E and School 5A had the most teachers who were favorable about their PLC preparation and understanding of the process. Eighty-eight percent (88%) of the teachers surveyed at School 5A indicated they understood the process, but only 32% felt favorable about being focused and revisiting PLC expectations. Notably, only 28% of teachers surveyed at School 6B reported a high level of understanding of the PLC process. In contrast, this school reported 72% in favor of their understanding of the PLC process, which was a forty percentage difference. Interestingly, all of the schools yielded similar contrasting results with large disparities between the two indicators of precision except School 1C and School 3E.

Figure 4.5: Survey Results - Favorable Actions of Current PLC Practice for Precision



All six principals indicated they had a strong understanding of the PLC process. Both Principal A, Principal B, and Principal C shared information on the prior training they received outside of the school district. Principal C explained that much of what she understood about PLCs was gained before she came to this school district:

I think a lot of my understanding came prior to coming to the district. There was some built upon in the district and then again more built upon on my personal research and delving into different information or articles or books.

All six principals reported that teachers attend some type of all-staff presentation at the beginning of the year. During this time, principals establish procedures for their teachers who participated in PLCs. Some of those formalities included how to report back, how to set norms, who will be in each PLC, which data will be used, and other expectations for the learning communities. Each principal referenced the district calendar, which indicates specific dates and times the meetings would occur. All meetings for the upcoming year were held on after school

on Wednesdays for 90 minutes. All of the principals explained that they presented this information in the same fashion under the direction of the District Administration Office.

All principals reported that they provided information on how they wanted all of the meetings to proceed for the year, but some principals added personal touches to the district mandated format to address specific needs of their school. For example, Principal C referenced how she used special formats to help organize PLC notes that allowed her to provide feedback to the PLC grade groups

“I have some definite expectations about setting norms. We have certain formats that I ask our teachers to use to document their work. The most recent structure we used were google folders so that everyone had access to them and I could respond. Reading specialists and math intervention staff responds to their minutes in a timely fashion. So that has worked out well.”

Principal C believed it was important to educate everyone about PLCs and her specific expectations. She anticipated having to start over at the beginning of each year. Therefore, she spent multiple meetings with her staff educating them on what true PLCs were and what her expectation was at the same time. She emphasized her approach:

Every team is going to be different. So, it is a great opportunity for us to rebuild and re-educate everyone. As far as educating our staff on our expectations, it is a part of the beginning of the year. Every year I lay out a format.

She also explained that it was her responsibility to educate her staff about PLCs and to ensure that they followed through with the expectations. She felt it was important to make sure all of her teachers had a common understanding of what PLCs entailed and continued the learning process of PLCs throughout the year.

Similarly, Principal A echoed Principal C's approach to the dissemination of information at the beginning of the school year. Principal A took it a step further by providing one-on-one assistance with the PLC groups at her school. Not only did Principal A share that she provided

help with data collection and analysis, but she showed her teachers how to use their student data and took pride in wanting to work beside the teachers. Principal A felt she had more of an understanding of the process than her teachers, so she tried to help them as much as possible. She even provided discussion techniques to the teams and encouraged them to use when analyzing student data. As she explained:

“I would provide maybe starters for some of the discussions that people were stumped on and where to actually begin. I would provide help with data because they would have it, but not necessarily know what to do with it. I attend those PLC meetings so that I could show them what my expectations were with their actual data vs make-believe data that wasn't important to them. So I think modeling, being there, and showing my expectations helped a lot.”

Principal A and Principal C also described some struggles that their staffs experienced which caused some of the changes in how the PLC information was presented. Principal A reported her staff had some previous productivity issues prior to the changes she implemented. She believed her staff lacked drive and comfort when it came to sharing information about children with other teachers.

I think there was some discomfort and lack of comfort with the sharing of the children, which is what needs to happen in a true PLC. They still wanted to have their ownership of their kids... That was a stumbling block in some people's minds.

She also shared that some groups of teaching teams never reached the level of expectation according to the PLC definition. She believed the major cause for this shortcoming was the lack of trust.

Principal C also expressed the opinion that many of her staff members did not understand some aspects of a PLC. But, she reported understanding has improved since the changes she has made with regards to precision and continuous professional development. She shared how she refrained from referring to the groups of teachers as Professional Learning Communities at the beginning of the year. She explained that they were not high functioning and/or still getting into

formation and learning how to be a team of learners at the beginning of the year. She called the groups “collaborative teams” until they functioned as a professional learning community.

However, she was adamant that it is the responsibility of the principal to educate the staff about PLCs and to make sure they are all working from a common definition of a PLC. She elaborated on this point:

“We constantly have to make sure we have a common understanding of what that is first of all and I feel like that is my role. I don't want to take over anybody's role. I want it to be authentic. I want it to come from the teachers, but there are times that I feel they may need some guidance or how do we use the data or what do we do next now that I have all this information; what is the next step and just having some tools or some questions to ask teams to prompt that reflection and get them moving along.”

The other four leaders, Principal B, Principal D, Principal E, and Principal F explained how they set the expectations of PLCs at the beginning of the year in only one staff meeting. Principal B and Principal F commented that the information shared at the beginning of the year was mainly done for new teachers who may not understand the process. Of note is that Principal B also expressed that she sometimes struggled with the implementation of the process with her staff, “I feel like I have a good grasp on PLCs, but sometimes I struggle with the implementation of the process with the staff. So, taking the understanding and putting it into play is something I struggle with sometimes.”

Two of the three teachers interviewed echoed similar frustrations with regards to precision and lack of preparedness and training from the principal to fully implement this process and prepare teachers for the work of PLCs. Although one of the teachers, Teacher 6B1, proudly stated how successful her PLC performed without much guidance from the building principal, all of the teachers reported the importance of having the principal in the forefront PLCs to help build culture and send a clear message of connectedness to the staff. Teacher 6B1 shared that the principal at her school delegated some critical duties to the lead teachers who guided the PLC

discussion. The lead teachers at her school were responsible for creating the PLC agenda for their grade levels and dispersing materials and data for the meetings. The lead teachers also checked in with grade level PLCs to answer questions and concerns to make sure everyone was mindful of their pacing. The roles that the lead teachers took on appeared to be beneficial and allowed the teams to feel successful and accomplished. She attributes the success of being able to function without the principal to experience:

I wonder if the age of the experience level of the teachers has something to do with the varying needs of the principal because some of us have been teaching for a very long time. We have a little bit more experience or interest in dissecting the data and dive in to find out what the data means, and the teaching strategies that go along with it. Newer teachers may need a little more direction depending on their team.

Teacher 5A2 mentioned little regarding precision and practice. She only mentioned that there was a definite need for training for all on how to analyze student data to notice trends and patterns. She was pleased, however, with the way the PLCs ran. She believed the principal respects them as professionals and expects everyone to hold themselves accountable. She shared, “I really love the professionalism that our principal expects and she doesn’t micromanage.”

Teacher 2F3 thought her PLC has been doing it wrong for too long. She expressed feelings that there should be at least one person in every PLC who is trained as a facilitator if the principal cannot be there to assist. She believes there are enough administrators in the district who could seek out special training to bring back to the district. She stated:

I think either the leadership team or a dedicated group could go and get trained extensively and come back and share what is supposed to happen and come back to train the trainers. The trainers could come back and whip their PLCs into shape. It is going to take some time and a lot of work to get us there.

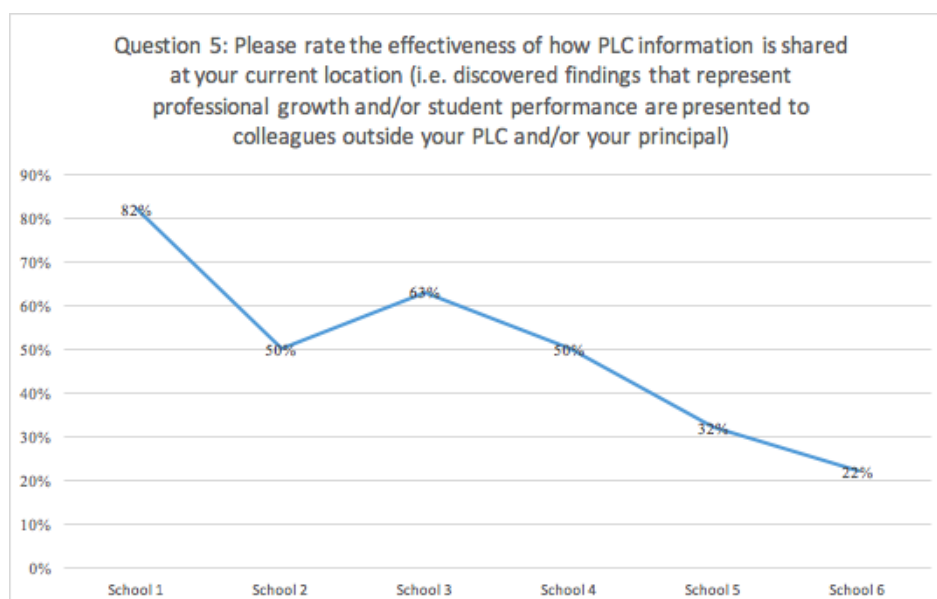
Teacher 2F3 also expressed concern with regards to the district not having shared PLC vision so that every principal would have the same directive.

Presentation

Figure 4.6 shows the combined number of individuals who selected 5s and 4s from the survey, and these indicate the percentages of teachers who felt positive about their learning community experience and the effectiveness of how PLC information was shared. This experience will be referred to as the presentation process. The presentation process entails the sharing of findings, new knowledge to inform teaching and learning that affect teacher growth and add to the professional development of teachers. Once again, the data showed School 1C and School 3E had the most teachers who were favorable about their current PLC experience. 82% of the teachers at School 1C were favorable about how information was shared at their school. 63% of teachers at School 3E were favorable about their experience. Only half of the teachers surveyed at School 2F and School 4D felt favorable about how information was presented at their school. School 5A had 32% of teachers that felt favorable and School 6B had only 22% of teachers reporting favorability about presentation.

In this part of the survey, teachers were asked to rate the effectiveness of how PLC information was shared at their current school. As noted earlier, all of the principals indicated that they formalized communication to share PLC information with each collective group. Many of the principals share this information with staff through Google Docs or a similar shared document system. Only one principal indicated that her staff participated in some type of presentation at the end of each PLC session. Only one teacher indicated a “shout out” time at the end of each PLC session where groups would share successes or struggle.

Figure 4.6: Survey Results - Favorable Actions of Current PLC Practice for Presentation



Interviewed principals all described varying degrees of how PLCs were set up in a closed session and shared information regarding student data and common practices amongst members of the same PLC. Principal A explained that information is collected and is only shared with that PLC. Principal A expressed her belief that PLCs are progressive in the way they function. That is, she felt some of her group were ready for this stage, the public presentation of work, and some had to exhibit other PLC attributes before making this transition to this stage. She shared that some of the grade level collaborative teams would be ready to move into the presentation stage but had not thought of this as an option prior to this interview. This was a new idea she wanted to entertain in the upcoming year.

I think that is maybe a piece where they would be ready to do this year because the PLC process is a step by step and over time. I think last year they really understood the process of looking at data and how that can affect and how when we share our kids and when we look at all of that information together we can achieve more as a group and our students can show achievement. So I think that we got to that stage. Now this year will be more of

a stage where they will feel more comfortable because they have seen the culmination of their hard work show summative growth. I think that this would be a year that they would be more apt to share out and I think that is part of that whole growing process.

She also explained that there were a few times throughout the year where teachers were given an opportunity to briefly share what they were working on during a staff meeting, but she had never thought of presentation as part of the progression. She can, however, definitely see the benefits of including presentations. As she explained, "I think the presentation is important because it shows that you are one entity and it takes all of us to get there, but it has taken each one of those PLCs doing their work... So, I think it could be beneficial."

Principal B and Principal C disclosed how information is collected from the learning communities and shared only with the leadership teams. As such, this sharing occurs only with a select few teachers, not the entire staff. Principal B described how there is a need to advance presentations to the next level of effectiveness. She has pondered whether she pushes teachers enough to be accountable. Principal B articulated some of her thoughts around presentation, accountability, and a fear of singling individuals or a specific team out:

I thought about... Is there some way that we could just take a little bit of time without calling people out, without saying people's names, to highlight some of the comments or some of the things that were discussed at a PLC? Also, how can we allow people to really see some of the rich conversations that happen and maybe start out with some of the really positive ones. Right now, it is the only people in the leadership team. It is my reading specialist, my math interventionist, my school psych, and a couple of teachers on that leadership team who are able to see the benefits within these conversations. Periodically, we will sit down as a leadership team and look at the PLC notes. We will talk about them, but then we don't do anything beyond that and we probably need to take it to the next level. You know me well enough to know I really work hard at not offending people and I don't want to put people on guard, but again sometimes I may not push people enough to be accountable. It is one thing that I have learned over the years is, that you can make people be accountable without hurting their self worth I guess is the best way to say it. It doesn't have to be punitive.

Principal C felt there were highly effective teams amongst her staff. She believed more training is needed to help her staff find “ah-ha” moments so they would feel comfortable sharing with the whole school. Grade level collaborative teams usually focus on their own grade level data or their own classroom data, but there was room to grow.

We had a couple of teams that were stronger than others. I wanted them to share out to other groups what they did. I first had to point out that they were a highly effective PLC because they don't see that in themselves. Then encouraging them to share was hard. One team in particular had a hard time identifying what made them successful, but they looked at data and they adjusted their instruction and all of those pieces... I felt that was important to share out school wide. We really didn't have a great avenue for that.

Principal D and Principal E both shared that their teams sometimes had informal presentations. Principal D reported that she went around to different collaborative groups and discussed checkpoints. Checkpoints were specific agenda items they wanted to accomplish for the meeting. She said she has thought about presenting information about what each team is doing on the team's shared drive. Then, everyone could see what everyone else was doing, but at the time of her interview, this action had yet to be accomplished. Principal D did not have a formal presentation in place for the entire staff.

Principal E mentioned that in staff meetings, the collaborative teams shared problems that would arise after student data collection. Principal E also talked about how teachers would discuss possible solutions to rectify the problems. She recognized the benefits of being transparent when sharing data with colleagues. During a staff meeting, the teachers at her school often talked about progressive concerns that were discovered within math or reading data. They talked about what was discovered, what problems surfaced, the results, and/or how it could be fixed. For example, something was discovered with the third grade math data in a specific area, next second grade teachers looked for that same trend. Then first grade looks for beginning signs

for that issue as well. Ultimately, the staff set up a system of checks and balances to find a solution and/or cause of the issue so that it could be identified and addressed early on. When the issue was found and highlighted or researched, the problem would eventually begin resolve. This same cycle occurred with many academic areas of concern as Principle E explained:

Well if they see it early, then that grade levels will start to work on that area of concern right away. Sometimes you may even hear the teacher say, 'Wow they really got those fractions down in third grade', and then you'll hear first grade teacher say, 'Well they should because back when we had them in first grade, we did x y and z to prepare them.' Then you will have teachers in third grade saying students are struggling with adding two digit numbers. Then second grade teachers will say they struggled with that in second grade. So, what we are trying to do is before they get to 3rd grade from 2nd, and you know that they struggled with a certain concept in that grade level, we want to pass information onto third grade teachers so that they can better prepare them for future learning.

Principal E concluded that communication and transparency are key, along with collaboration. As she explained, "It's important to not hide anything from previous grade-level team about the struggles of the student." She expounded on this idea

How do you fix it if you do not know what the students coming to you are struggling it? Why would you keep it a secret when you want all students to grow? It doesn't make sense. It's not an embarrassment on you as a teacher. It's not a struggle for you as a teacher, it's just the facts about how the year progressed for that student or a group of students. We saw it's a trend with students and their learning. Why would you leave that stone unturned? It doesn't make sense to leave it unturned. It just manifests from a stone to a boulder and then you send that boulder to middle school and by then it's a mountain. We don't want that. We want to do what is best for kids and we want all kids to be successful. You have to collaborate, you have to communicate, and you have to be transparent. You have to be these things to be a good PLC. People are struggling with being in a PLC because of those things. They don't want to feel like it's (students are failing) because of me.

Principal F stated that he needs to make presentations a regular occurrence. He reported that he is struggling with how to implement presentations across grade levels to open dialogue about student progress over time. He stated: "Going across grade levels is important because if you are focused on really moving kids forward, you have to know what they are lacking from

years before or before they come to you.” His interest in creating conversations and presentations is similar to the way Principal E and her staff presents information to other grade levels.

Principal F stated,

We have done informal presentations several times, but I probably need to get better at making it a regular thing of sharing data. We've done that in isolation with one collaborative group. I've always wanted to figure out how to make it impactful to work across grade levels. How do I combine PLCs and make it effective? What would the agenda look like? Do we focus strengths that they see with the incoming kids? Do we talk about the needs of the students, and where do they see the deficits, and can you help focus on that and how it would that look? How do you keep that as a focus instead of saying, ‘If you guys would just teach them this’ ... you know? That has always been a goal of mine too. How do I get that articulation in and communicate that to staff?

The interviewed teachers were asked to share how their teams presented information to other PLCs or if they reported on how their work was going. Only one teacher could answer this question. Teacher 6B1 and Teacher 2F3 echoed similar responses when asked about presentation. Teacher 6B1 and Teacher 5A2 had little to no experience regarding presentation, but both teachers expressed an interest in what the presentation of information would look like for PLCs.

Teacher 5A2 had a positive experience with presentation efforts from the principal at her school. The collaborative teams at her school had a specified time where they shared information regarding their PLC work. “Shout- outs” was the term she used to describe how teachers shared discoveries, challenges, and successes of the work they did in their PLC meeting. She found this experience to be beneficial and commented on how the principal brought everyone together at the end of each PLC session.

We meet in individual grade levels to discuss student data. Then we will come together to be a part of the large group discussion. He is present at the end of the PLC. Each of the grade level teams report out about what occurred on that day. We shared important issues we saw within the data, what we found out about those issues, and how we planned to rectify those issues in the future. Sometimes would be in our grade meeting and we

would say okay, 'Let's pull this up so everybody can join this conversation and get some help'. So we do have a come together moment.

Teacher 5A2 also commented on the principal's role and how he is able to convey the whole picture with his staff. She shared her appreciation of his expectation of professionalism and the confidence that he instills in his staff.

It sounds so simple to just come together and everybody talk... I'm loving the way we do it now. I really love the professionalism that our principal expects and he doesn't micromanage... He just wants to know what you have been working on so that he can see the whole picture... I love his input and he does make it a point to make sure that all the pieces are working together. I really do like that collaborative piece and I like that we come together at the end. He might not even know how great that is... and that is the extra piece we needed last year.

It is important to note that Teacher 6B1 and Teacher 2F3 did not share the same experiences that Teacher 5A2 had, but Teacher 6B1 talked about the possibility of extending her PLC experience. As she explained,

I think there is a lot of value in vertical alignment. I think third grade would be pretty interested in what's happening in second because they will be coming to them next year. I'm going to another grade next year and I would like to know a little bit about what the grade before knows coming to me.

Interestingly, Teacher 2F3 also expressed similar hopes of a possible next step in her experience with professional learning communities. Teacher 2F3 stated,

It is going to take some time and a lot of work to get us there. In the beginning, when we first started with these PLC, we had to understand what these questions were. I think our curriculum now makes it easier to answer these questions. For example, where are the kids supposed to be... There needs to be a discussion on what is really missing here.

Trust and Culture

None of the participants of this study were asked specific questions regarding trust. None of the participants were asked to describe the culture of their learning team or their learning

environment. Yet, trust and culture are two concepts well represented in the survey data, principal data, concept maps, and teacher data.

Teacher 5A2 shared positive things about the culture in her building and the professionalism of her PLC experience. She explained how grade groups presented or “shared out” to the entire staff and then invited others’ ideas, questions, and suggestions. This process proved to be extremely beneficial for their PLC. Teacher 5A2 also explained how everyone had a certain professionalism about the way things were carried out and that the principal’s expectations help drive to success of the PLCs.

Although Teacher 6B1 and Teacher 2F3 were unable to share information about their experience with presentations, they could share information on critical areas of interest with regard to trusting relationships and professional learning communities. Teacher 6B1 commented on how sometimes teachers felt competitive with each other when encouraged by their principal to seek out another teacher for advice or to see how they used student data. She shared, “I wish there was a way where principals didn't pit teachers against each other. That's a fine line. Because principals could say take a look at how so-and-so scores are... and let's look at what she's doing. That could be a real difficult situation for some teachers.”

Teacher 6B1 shared feelings of intimidation and frustration when it came to having discussions about student growth or what she did to make sure students progressed. She talked about personality conflicts can sometimes get in the way of having true professional conversations. She shared:

I will say this, I don't have this issue this year, but I have had this issue in the past. I've had concerns with PLCs where there are some teachers who don't want to share their data or their strategies, and are not open to you or offering of what you're doing for your students. In the past, I've had experiences where someone would say, ‘All of my kids really blew it on this test.’ And so I was not comfortable saying, ‘Well my kids did really well... here's what I did’. I feel I am looked at as, ‘Right she has all the answers.’ So

there's some personality things that get in the middle of this too and it can get a little intimidating to share your data. So where can the principal help with that. That I could see as being a principal's role.

Teacher 6B1 also gave insight on how principals can help create a more positive culture by developing leadership skills within all of their staff and not focusing on the same group of teacher leaders. Teacher 6B1 felt this was a mistake that principals make when facilitating collaborative groups,

One way that I think principals can help culture is to not have perceived favorites on the staff. I think that is one of the first things a principal can do that will hurt the culture of the staff. I have talked to teachers in the district who have expressed that. if you're not in this little group, you're not the leaders at all in the school. I think empowering many different people as leaders help to create a culture within the plc. It's not always their favorite that has to be the facilitator.

Teacher 2F3 had a similar comment about the culture and the feeling of competitiveness amongst teachers and how to rectify this issue. She felt there was a need to be a trained PLC facilitator at all PLC meetings. This trained facilitator could be a principal or another individual who understands the entire process of PLCs. This individual is not a teacher who has agreed to help her fellow teachers in a teacher leader capacity. This person would be a trained PLC Leader to help the teams perform correctly. She describes her disappointment at leaderships' lack of preparedness,

Yes, I think another piece that could possibly move us along is you need at least one person in every PLC who is trained as a facilitator. The problem with that is then it becomes a peer against a peer and them driving the meeting and there could be some animosity when you have things like that. But if someone is sitting in there and there are just not enough administrators who could do that. So I think, either the leadership team or a dedicated group could do something like that... and whip their PLCs into shape. But that would take time and money and a lot of hard work. Without the by-in, but we've been doing it wrong for too long now.

Towards the end of the interview, Teacher 6B1 explored some of the major conflicts and potential causes of conflicts within the collaborative team. Personality conflicts was an area of major concern. Teacher 6B1 was also concerned about teachers feeling intimidated and sometimes are unwilling to share data about their students. She explained how “Some teachers do not feel comfortable saying that their students were successful on a test or a specific area within an assessment.” In the same token, she shared how some teachers in the past who were unwilling to acknowledge the accomplishment of another teacher and were unwilling to take their advice or shared successful strategies. Teacher 6B1 feels that this boils down to the culture.

Teacher 6B1 stated that the principal plays a role in building culture. Teacher 6B1 mentioned a few areas that can hurt the culture. The principal must ensure that he or she doesn't create a sense of competition amongst teachers and put teachers against each other by comparing accomplishments. This can cause a divide that would be detrimental to the culture. Also, principals should not have perceived favorites amongst the staff, which also cause issues. Ultimately, Teacher 6B1 feels empowering many different teachers with many diverse backgrounds and skills within the PLC helps create a positive culture within the PLC and the school as a whole.

Teacher 2F3 feels there are many missing components and disruptive factors that inhibit a PLC from being successful. Some of those missing pieces include focus, buy-in, training, proper data, variety of assessments, and preparedness. The once a month meeting leaves a large gap of time in between meetings and more time is needed for analyzing and planning. There is a lack of prepared common data amongst the group because all the teachers involved in this group work in different building across the district. The meetings are set up as a dissemination of

information forum versus a professional learning and growing-working atmosphere. Teacher 2F3 expressed a concern that the district needed to have a shared vision for PLCs and they need to make sure that principals are on the same page for principals seem to be in different places as far as understanding of the PLC process. Furthermore, feedback can positively help PLCs with issues, concerns, or questions. Teacher 2F3 mentioned that she has never had a principal answer a question that has been asked within a PLC feedback form. Teacher 2F3 feels, “It is going to take a lot of time and hard work to get to a place where PLC are successful.”

CHAPTER 5

Conclusions

Introduction

A report on the role of the principal found that the single most influential factor in improving schools is the effectiveness of the principal (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2000). Some might even argue that today's public school principals have the toughest jobs in America. Principals' responsibilities have increased enormously over the past two decades. They are expected to run a smooth school; manage health, safety, and the building; innovate without negative feedback; connect with students and teachers; be responsive to parents in the community; answer to their district; and above all, deliver results (Fullan, 2014). The role of principals has become more demanding with the responsibilities of focusing on collaborative cultures, learning communities, and capacity building (Dufour & Marzano, 2009; Dufour & Fullan 2013; Fullan, 2010; Leithwood & Seashore Louise, 2012).

How can effective principals influence professional learning communities and influence teacher quality to increase educational knowledge of all to ultimately attain high student academic achievement? PLCs have been recognized as a systematic and effective means to improve teacher quality and successful implementation of new reforms (Harris & Jones, 2010). Principals are now facing aspect of their job that they will need to take in order to be an effective leader to continue molding highly trained teachers to meet the needs of today's students. By taking a more active role in PLCS, principals can begin to make those effective changes.

Summary of Purpose

The purpose of the study was to gain insight into the leadership practices of elementary principals to define the key elements of principals' relationship to PLCs. A number of questions are associated with the principal's role: Is there a defined role or does it not exist because every PLC is different? Should a principal take a laid-back approach and remain in the shadows of PLCs and simply allow teachers to discover their own path? Should principals be more in the forefront to manage conversations to make sure teachers are all focused on a similar target? Should the principal be a facilitator in the process and assist when help or clarification is needed? Is the principal's role to help create atmospheres where teacher conversations are open to other teaching styles unlike their own to help move students forward? What should the elementary school principal's role look like, sound like, and feel like in order to produce quality teachers who have quality conversations about their practices to produce quality students? Accordingly, this study sought to uncover the key components needed in the actions of the principal to sustain functional PLCs.

The study focused on three research questions:

1. What level of participation (frequency and guidance) do principals use when meeting with professional learning communities?
2. Does the level of principal participation have an effect on the success of professional learning communities?
3. What are specific strategies principals use to develop and maintain professional learning communities in their school setting?

A total of 119 teachers from all of the elementary schools within the same district completed a survey focused on the principal's role and current district PLC procedures during

the initial phases of this research. Nine individual interviews were conducted with six elementary principals and three teachers (a special education teacher, an ELL teacher, and a regular education classroom teacher) from the same district. The interviewed teachers also completed a concept map to depict how they perceive the PLC process.

Conclusions and Discussion

The data gathered from the teacher surveys, the principal interviews, and the teacher interviews were in direct relation to the purpose of the study. A fair relationship yielded between the teacher survey and the results of the interviews. The teacher and principal interviews served to answer Question 1 and Question 2. The interviews provided information on the level of principal participation and if the level of participation affected their perception of success. The data gathered during the principal interviews provided information on Question 3 and provide information on specific strategies principals use to develop and maintain professional learning communities in their school setting.

Principals spend an increasing amount of time on instruction and it is time well spent, but it does not always yield widespread results (Fullan, 2014). To increase impact, principals are beginning to direct their energies to create a collective culture of efficacy among the PLC (Fullan, 2014). Some of the principals within the district of this study started to notice this needed change and attempted to implement some of these changes through PLC practices.

Participation

Fullen (2014) stated that the principal's role is to lead the school's teachers in a process of learning to improve their teaching while learning alongside them about what works and what does not work. Principal participation was found in all six schools in the study. There were different levels of participation at each school. Some principals believed their participation level was adequate, and some principals felt their level of participation needed to increase. Each principal had unique expectations for how their collaborative teams should operate, which accounted for the differences in expectations of principal participation.

Within one district that only had six elementary schools, each PLC operated completely differently. The principals in this district took varying approaches to the PLC process, which uncovered distinctive definitions of their roles. Four distinct approaches were discovered: Principal Lead Learner, Facilitator, Director/Detailer and Principal Observer/Consultant. These four approaches are depicted in Table 5.1 below.

Principal Observer/Consultant. Some of the principals took a behind-the-scenes approach to implement the PLC process. Principals limited their participation according to how much the collaborating team needed assistance. If and when assistance was needed, the principal stepped forward to assist and then stepped back to allow the group to continue independently until assistance or clarification was needed again. Teachers with principals who took on this role expressed frustration with being able to function with little or no assistance. This approach had low principal participation and low teacher participation.

Principal Director/Detailer. A different approach discovered in this district included a more hands-on approach. Principals in this category completely guided the PLC process. The principal was the director of teacher learning or in charge of all learning and professional development of the staff. Principals who used this approach gave specific directions on the work

of PLCs and how they wanted it to be carried out including discussion and data analysis. This approach had high principal participation, but low teacher participation.

Principal Facilitator - Another approach discovered in this district was a focus on the teacher and on growing the teacher's skills. This approach closely examined what students learned in prior years and filled the gaps in their learning by equipping teachers with all of the information and skills needed to fill the gaps. This approach was completely different from the approach of other schools in the district. This approach opened opportunities for cross-grade level discussions, which created a cohesiveness between teachers of consecutive grades. The principal's role was to formulate and facilitate opportunities for discussion and collaboration among the teachers. This approach had low principal participation, but high teacher participation.

Principal Lead Learner. The last approach discovered stood out among the other approaches. Michael Fullan (2014) used the term "Lead Learner" as such – one who models learning and shapes the conditions for all to learn on a continuous basis. In this approach, the principal was considered the "lead learner." The key to this approach is that the principal is leading the learning but is also learning along with the teachers. They are all active members of a PLC. There was one school that used this approach and this school could create collaborative conversations and whole group presentations, in turn creating a positive professional culture of trusting teachers. This approach had high principal participation and high teacher participation. The idea of a principal serving as a lead learner is also supported by the research of Halverson and Kelley (2017), which documents the positive influence school leaders can have on professional teacher learning. When leaders and educators design learning together, they can reshape culture of any school (2017).

Table 5.1: Roles of Principals in PLCs

	High Principal Participation	Low Principal Participation
High Teacher Participation	+/+	-/+
	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Principal Lead Learner</i></p> <p>A principal who models learning, but also shapes the conditions for all to learn on a continuous basis. Teachers and the Principal partake in the learning process together.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Principal Facilitator</i></p> <p>A principal facilitates the makeup of the collaboration but allows teachers to lead the teacher conversations and provides equal footing for everyone to have a voice.</p>
Low Teacher Participation	+/-	-/-
	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Principal Director/Detailer</i></p> <p>A principal discusses what is working, what is not and provides the details on how to carry out steps in the process. The principal directs teachers on how to collaborate and communicate the approach and accomplishment of desired outcomes.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Principal Observer/Consultant</i></p> <p>A principal sets up communication with teams and sets them free to perform according to pre-set conditions and expectations. There is little to no follow-up from the principal.</p>

+ Positive participation - limited participation

There were six schools and six principals observed in one district, but only these four roles surfaced after analysis of all data. The table below displays “check marks” by the schools

under the defined role of the principal. One interesting alternative discovery was that teachers also supplied a definition of their roles in the different learning communities. This research was completed to discover roles of the principal, but also discovered roles of participants in a PLC. The roles of the teachers were indirectly created by the roles of the principal. The principal indirectly created the teachers' roles based on his or her participation as the school leader.

Table 5.2 Roles of Principals and Teachers at Each Elementary School

	<i>Principal Lead Learner</i>	<i>Principal Director/Detailer</i>	<i>Principal Facilitator</i>	<i>Principal Observer/Consultant</i>
	+/+	+/-	-/+	-/-
School 1C		✓		
School 2F				✓
School 3E			✓	
School 4D			✓	
School 5A	✓			
School 6B				✓

+ Positive participation - limited participation

The roles described in Table 5.2 were derived from the survey data, the teacher interviews, and the principal interviews. It is interesting that Schools 1C and School 3E had teachers who perceived the PLC process as a more positive experience and that collaboration worked the best, did not have principals that used the same approach. It is also interesting that the survey data did not indicate that the teachers in School 5A were extremely satisfied with the way PLCs functioned at their school and presented the principal presented yet another approach.

Conclusively, School 6B and School 2F were the schools where the most dissatisfaction was expressed. This indicated that the teachers took ownership of their definition of the PLC process even if their current principal had inconsistencies in following all of the defined components (participation, precision, and presentation) of a PLC. Teachers in School 3E felt they were able to function adequately as a PLC with the role the principal played. Some teams had an understanding of what a successful PLC entailed but were hesitant and wanted to see the process unfold under the guidance of their principal.

This particular school district set aside the second and fourth Wednesdays of each month as PLC days. On these particular days, all teachers were expected to participate in a grade level or content area PLC meetings where everyone was supposed to study student data and make informed decisions about their instruction and to move students forward. The designated meeting time interfered with principals being able to participate with their collaborative groups. Many of the principals explained how it was almost impossible to interact with all grade level teams within a 90-minute block of time on a bi-weekly basis. Two principals tried to be creative by having all meetings occur in the same location within their own buildings, but problems still arise under these conditions. A possible solution would be to implement a staggered PLC schedule throughout the week or to designate more than just one day every two weeks for teams to meet.

Teachers shared similar views of frustration regarding the limited time of PLC work and the principal's participation based on comments from the teacher survey. Some teachers expressed a negative view of the principal's absence. On the other hand, some teachers felt as though their independence was just the way things were done. They appreciated the principals giving them autonomy to work with their grade-level community on their own.

The principal's presence makes a difference in the culture of a school (Habegger, 2008). The data suggested that some PLC meetings function as a grade group meeting and not a full-functioning PLC meeting. Some data is used to inform teachers about what students are learning, but there was a limited discussion about how data analysis can inform instruction. Two of the six principals (School 1C and School 5A) played a more active role and PLC's, which included providing focus questions for the PLC meeting and more guidance. These schools also had teachers who initially said their schools were doing a favorable job at PLCs during the initial teacher survey.

Precision

Precision in professional learning communities is a factor that has been overlooked for quite some time (Hord, 1997; Johnson & Johnson, 1995). Precision was used in this study to describe the focus and clarity of the data analysis accomplished by PLCs. The teachers involved in PLCs should be precise about what they are seeking to find, focused on one or two questions of interest, and have a clear expectation of the work needed to get there. Inquiry groups who lacked focus and clarity have proven to be problematic and lack trust (Fullan, 2014). The principal can help cultivate and motivate groups of teachers with one focus and one common purpose by using precision when preparing the work of PLCs. Collaborative teams should practice precision and revisit the expectations of PLCs throughout the year as they work, learn, and grow together.

Teachers in the two high functioning schools (School1C and School3E) had similar responses when asked about the focus level of their PLCs. Teachers at Schools 3E and 5A scored high when asked about their understanding of the PLC process. (see Figure 4.2) This difference

in the responses might explain why the teachers in Schools 2, 4, 5, and 6 were less satisfied with their PLC experience. In other words, the teachers believe they understand PLCs well but think that their PLCs fall short of what their knowledge tells of PLC expectations. Hence, they felt frustrated and dissatisfied because of the difference between what it is and what it could be.

This study identified one principal (Principal 5A) who appeared to have high levels of precision, participation, and presentation. This made Principal 5A stand out among the other principals. His practice of precision with PLCs kept his team informed, focused, motivated and enlightened. His practices of participation gave teachers a sense of professionalism and cohesiveness. Teacher 5A2 mentioned many of the positive aspects of the principal at her school during the interview and concept map discussion, which lead to this conclusion. This created a trusting and positive working environment.

He implemented PLC precision practices all throughout the year rather than only at the beginning of the year staff meeting, which is what many of the other principals shared during their interviews. He explained that he constantly revisited the process throughout the year to clear confusion and to continue to build their knowledge base of the PLC process. Some of the precision practices he implemented included beginning the year with an overview of what research says about PLC, planning an agenda for each meeting, and his expectations for how he wanted the collaboration time to flow. I would describe him as a Principal Lead Learner by the way he models learning with his staff. He shaped the condition for all of the PLCs to learn continuously and guided the discussion by including an agenda ahead of time and leading the discussion. He was also present during the PLC meetings and brought all teams together to give an update at the end.

Staff appreciated the way he included a “share-out” time or a presentation time at the end of each meeting in a large group setting as discussed in Chapter 4 by Teacher 5A. Each group was given time to share what they talked about and their findings. This kept everyone informed, stayed on the same page, and provided teachers with information about the performance of previous grade-levels to consider for the upcoming year as students advanced a grade.

Principal 5A also shared that he wants more hands-on experience and guide his teachers with what he wants to focus on instead of the district administration handing down expectations and forms for teams to complete. He voiced concern about how his teachers were more worried about completing the mandated forms than the actual data and conversation about their practices and student learning. He believed the requirement to complete forms has slightly stifled teachers’ creativity.

All principals in this study had an understanding of the PLC process and expectation of what a PLC consists of and the benefits of this approach. Some principals shared that they needed more guidance, perhaps from each other or from the district administration. A few principals acknowledged that they heard what other principals were doing with PLCs and were interested in learning more about their actions or having open discussions on how to implement similar practices. One principal mentioned that she would like more training on how to hold meaningful conversations with the entire staff.

It is important for principals to have a more hands-on approach to leading and guiding learning communities within their school community. The data from this study indicated that it is vital for principals to have a more hands-on approach to leading and guiding learning communities within their school community. A comparison of teachers’ responses to survey questions suggest that teachers perceive the process as more beneficial when principals are more

involved. Under the principal's direction and guidance, meaningful PLC practices can transform schools by encouraging meaningful teacher dialogue to affect teaching practices and enhance student achievement. In turn, teachers also learn more about themselves as educators.

Presentation

This study's examination of the presentation process used in PLCs sparked an exploration of what teachers learn about their students, and equally about themselves as teacher-learners. It is important to look at the presentation of PLC work as a means to close the achievement gap and invite open conversation about students' learning and how teachers can collectively change the outcomes of students learning. Thus, it can also be viewed as a celebration of progress.

The presentation question of the survey asked teachers to rate the effectiveness of how PLC information was shared at their current location. The way in which the question was interpreted by the teachers in the initial survey, may have been different than how the principals interpreted the question. In contrast, the survey data showed that there were reasonable percentages of teachers at many schools who indicated that they were favorable with their presentation experience. Therefore, it appears that teachers answered the survey question by reporting how data was presented within the group, rather than presented to the entire staff. School 5 was the exception because whole school presentations occurred there.

Presentations were an unexplored area in the district. Principals were curious as to how this part of the process would unfold if they implemented presentations with their teams. Principals should invest their efforts in building and designing the school organization in a way that promotes knowledge sharing within the PLC (Benoliel & Schechter, 2017). Therefore, principals must make sure that teachers have the appropriate social skills and have the

opportunities to practice these skills (Meadows & Saltzman, 2002). In this respect, setting time aside for team meetings and focusing on team composition would facilitate knowledge sharing and interpersonal relationships among PLC members in the school.

The principal at School 6 was curious to know what other teams shared or presented, what other teams were actually doing in comparison to teams at her school, what other teams across the district were learning, and the next steps in their planning process, overall. She felt this was valuable information to share and an apt way for everyone to learn as a collective team. This action would benefit the participants in PLCs for they would have their questions answered about the process, learn more about potential directions or actions they could explore with student data, and gain confirmation regarding the importance of PLC work. This conversation would need to be highly organized and focused to make sure the necessary conversations would occur.

Implementing presentations would help develop teacher-leaders and progressive thinkers of the PLC process. It is important for principals to continue to encourage the knowledge of the PLC process with presentations included in the data-driven discussions. The progress of thinking and leading grows the profession and increases the knowledge of educational practitioners, which will also increase students' learning and move students forward.

Trust and Culture

There is a wealth of knowledge in the literature that identifies trust as the most important factor for promoting learning, encouraging the sharing of good practices, and stimulating open collaboration among educators (Tschannen-Moran, 2009). Trust has been one of the most important factors in school improvement and the precondition for establishing a PLC (Hord et

al., 2010). The interviewed principals and teachers reported that a functional PLC has a lot to do with culture and trust more than anything else. Specific questions regarding trust and culture were not asked directly, but these two concepts were brought up and existed as an undercurrent throughout the study. Teacher 5A2 commented on how the principal at her school (School 5A) showed respect and appreciation of the work that was done in their PLCs. In this sense, trust plays a critical role in leader–teacher participation as it can narrow the relational gaps between leaders and teachers (Van Maele, Forsyth, & Van Houtte, 2014). If a school culture includes the value of openness and trust, new learning and ideas are regarded as opportunities for professional development (Hargreaves, 2003).

Trust plays an important part in overcoming barriers to build a professional learning community, which includes conflict avoidance, disruptive competitiveness, and low levels of teacher efficacy (Leonard, 1999). Teacher 5A2 expressed gratitude towards her principal for the way he treated all teachers in a professional manner and created a space for teachers to grow. She also said she respected the professionalism of her principal and how his expectations made them feel respected as professionals. He provided a positive working environment where teachers felt valued and were able to share ideas with little or no hesitation. He immediately knew the importance of building a positive culture by keeping everyone informed and prepared for the meetings through the use of his PLC newsletters. When a principal articulates the vision for a school or a task within a school and provides the resources to make it a reality and a spirit, and then teamwork unfolds (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). The culture of the staff includes their appreciation for where everyone is on the spectrum in regard to understanding students and data and how to reach students. These two factors determine how far they will go on their journey of PLC work. The teachers and principals at School 5A had to learn how to trust each other when

asked to participate in PLC presentations. The culture determines whether or not the staff will develop beneficial conversations and trusting professional relationships. Principals can help build the culture by creating safe practice fields where multiple perspectives are crystallized, enabling PLC network members are engaged in conversations essential for their professional learning and to overcome complex school problems (Hallinger, Lee, & Ko, 2014; Schechter, 2013).

Summary of Discussion

When I first started my research on PLCs, I theorized many concepts around a central idea: Professional learning communities with a focus on teaching strategies that increased student learning would encompass knowledge and understanding of the PLC process, a positive culture, and a principal who participated in the process, provided precision throughout the process, and had presentations with the school community. This concept is depicted in the conceptual framework in Chapter 2 (see Figure 2.1). Throughout this study, the theory changed to fit a different conceptual map in Figure 5.1 shown below.

I came to understand that the principal is pivotal to the process of the PLC. My original questions were:

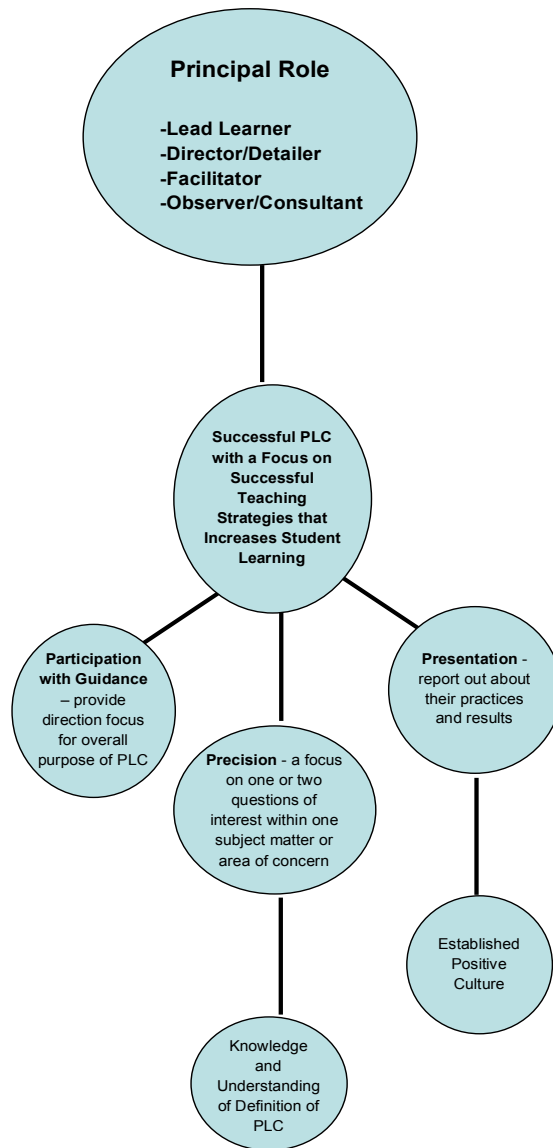
1. *What level of participation (frequency and guidance) do principals use with PLCs?* There were multiple levels of principal participation that lead to different definitions to describe their level of participation. Lead Learner, Facilitator, Director/Detailer, and Observer/Consultant.
2. *Does the level of principal participation have an effect on a PLCs' success?*

The level of principal participation can have an effect on the PLC in some cases, but not all. Some teachers felt as strong in the understating of the PLC process and were able to function with little direction from the principal. Some teachers were not able to function efficiently with little principal guidance. The level of participation can have an effect on the feeling of success of the learning community.

3. What are specific strategies principals use to develop and maintain PLC?

There are different strategies participation principals can use to develop and maintain a successful PLC. Some of those strategies include Participation, Precision, and Presentation.

Figure 5.1: Principal's Role in a PLC



Significance of the Study

The attributes of successful professional learning communities are well documented in current research. Shared vision and beliefs, shared and supportive leadership, team learning, dialogue, supportive conditions, shared practice, and collegiality were found to be common components in schools with PLCs (Andrews & Lewis, 2007; Hord, 1998, 2008; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Olivier et al., 2003; Roundtree & Hipp, 2010). With a focus on improving student learning, working in PLCs has been found to lead to stronger instructional practices.

Principals play a vital role in creating the conditions that lead to improving learning for both the students and adults in their schools (DuFour, 2013). Principals are presented with critical opportunities to build the capacity of teachers and direct the focus of that capacity toward improving student learning (Sergiovanni, 1990). To do this, the principal must clearly communicate the expectations that exist for teachers, build capacity, and monitor and review the process. Unfortunately, research with a focus on the principal's role is limited. There is limited evidence and gaps in the research-literature with a focus on the principal's role. More specifically, the research is limited on the actionable steps that principals take to develop and lead high-performing PLCs. Researchers have, on the other hand, provided multiple studies on the effectiveness of functional PLCs and stressed the importance of having a supportive leader in developing PLCs (Fleming & Leo, 1999; Hord, 1998; Hord & Sommers; Huffman & Hipp), but the principal's role has been perceived as an "on-looker" versus an active participant or a hands-on leader.

Due to how research that focuses on the principal's role is limited, the significance of this study is that it addressed these voids or gaps in the literature and closely examined the role of the

principal in the development of functional professional learning communities. A more definitive understanding of the role is necessary so principals, teachers, and researchers can learn how effective PLCs and effective principals operate. A closer look at the principal's influence is important for supporters of the PLCs movement in schools. The results from this study offer insight on how the work of a PLC is perceived from the teachers' perspective and how the differences in principal participation can affect PLC performance. Schools looking to adopt the process of PLCs will benefit from this study as the findings will inform and influence the practice of the principal. This study helped provide a definition of the principal's role. Thus, school districts, school leaders, and teachers can profit from what the teachers and principals in this study have learned from their experience about principal roles that either foster or hinder PLCs' changes that positively impact student learning (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008).

Suggestions for Future Research

Analysis of the data collected for this study suggest areas in need of additional research. The sample in this study was small. The schools selected in this study were chosen because they were all from one small urban district. It would be valuable to investigate other principals in other school districts of varying sizes to see if the same four roles described (Lead Learner, Facilitator, Director/Detailer, Observer/Consultant) are relevant. More research on the four roles is necessary to determine whether one role is more effective than another in producing student outcomes. Another interesting area worth researching includes whether principal find themselves in more roles than one throughout the duration of the school year. It would bring value to discover if adopting different roles was dependent on context.

Principals' practices leading professional learning communities is another area worthy of further investigation. A more detailed look is needed to help define how principals set up professional presentations with staff and how they create meaningful conversations with their teachers to help build trust and promote a positive culture. It would be interesting to uncover specific strategies principals could use to help cultivate meaningful conversations and expectations to instill feelings of professionalism and teacher leadership.

Lastly, a natural extension of this study for future research would be to identify which principal strategies of precision, participation, and presentation yield the most impact on high academic achievement, positive culture, and a trust amongst staff that is conducive to professional learning communities.

Implications for Educational Practice

Professional learning communities have the power to achieve high levels of teacher knowledge and learning for all students. They have the potential to help schools meet educational standards and future educational expectations. The findings of this study provide examples of everyday practices a principal can partake in that will support a school transitioning into a PLC. Principals should participate in the collaborative teams at their school in some way form or fashion. To take participation a step further, principals can take on a more active role in PLCs by providing professional development about the PLC process and help guide teacher-dialogue and data-discussion by implementing precision and presentations. By providing discussion guidelines or focus areas and summative reports, principals can help give precision to the process and keep the community informed. Whole group presentations can help build

positive collaborative cultures where the sharing of ideas and strategies provide a sense of belonging and professionalism to create a true professional learning community. Principals take on various roles to facilitate the PLC process, including being the Lead Learner, Facilitator, Director/Detailer, and/or Observer/Consultant. These roles help define the level of participation of the principal and the level of teacher input and participation as well. The role of the principal and the components needed to successfully implement professional learning can provide a true professional learning community experience. When a school operates as a PLC, real improvement become possible.

Conclusion

In conclusion, principals play an essential role in implementing the PLC process in schools. They play a crucial role in the process of transforming schools into learning communities by forming the structural and cultural conditions for continuous learning among school members (Szczesniul & Huizenga, 2014). This means that principals must be able to determine the most appropriate structures, systems, and culture for a PLC network to balance the needs, desires, and abilities of the teachers involved (Thornton, Peltier, & Hill, 2005). More than anyone else, the principal has the opportunity and the responsibility to change meetings in which teachers are given administrative information and professional training into gatherings of a collaborative PLC where unique personal-teacher characteristics are valued and respected as a scaffold for authentic knowledge sharing (Benoliel & Schechter, 2017).

I began this study in search of a definition of a principal's role in developing professional learning communities. I found out that there are multiple roles that the elementary principal plays in developing PLCs. These roles come in many forms and yield different results. The roles

discovered were defined as Lead Learner, Facilitator, Director/Detailer, and Observer/Consultant.

I discovered possible strategies including precision, participation, and presentation that could be incorporated by the principal to help build a more inclusive and informed PLC and increase the knowledge of educators about the PLC process and themselves. Principals can establish specific beginning-of-the-year procedures and expectations, including professional development training, to help everyone start the year on the same page. Further, they can incorporate checkpoints throughout the year, including a weekly or biweekly PLC newsletter, to share discoveries with teachers and to keep conversations at the surface. They can include focal points or guiding questions in the newsletter to motivate PLC conversations. It is important to have all collaborative groups share out or present discoveries, next steps, successes, and struggles they face during their collaborative work. All of these measures could be implemented to promote follow-through, accountability, and collaboration. The most important discovery during my research was that separate collaborative teaching groups in a building is not a PLC. A professional learning community only exists in a school when teachers work together collaboratively and collectively and learn from each other to increase their knowledge to enhance teaching and academically challenge students with proven results. This accomplishment cannot be attained without the principal's guidance and participation, precision, and presentation.

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APPENDIX A
Teacher Survey

Consent Form

Subjects completing this form give consent to use responses for research. Individual identities will be kept confidential. If you choose to aid in furthering this study, please complete bottom portion.

Professional Learning Community Teacher Survey

- **I choose not to participate in this research survey at this time.**

Participation

School Name _____

Years of Teaching Experience _____

1. **On a scale of 1-5 with 1 being the lowest score and 5 being the highest score, how would you rate your current building level PLC experience?**

Low 1 2 3 4 5 High

Explanation (Optional)

1. **Please rate the level of principal participation with your current grade level PLCs.**

Low 1 2 3 4 5 High

Explanation (Optional)

Precision

1. **Please rate your site in regards to being focused and revisiting the expectations of a PLC.**

Low 1 2 3 4 5 High

Explanation (Optional)

1. Please rate your level of understanding of the PLC process.

Low 1 2 3 4 5 High

Explanation (Optional)

Presentation

1. Please rate the effectiveness of how PLC information is shared at your current location.(i.e. discovered findings that represent professional growth and/or student performance are presented to colleagues outside your PLC and/or your principal).

Low 1 2 3 4 5 High

Explanation (Optional)

1. Other than your group, do you feel there is another successful PLC group that would be worthy of a professional study?

___ No ___ Yes (If so, provide name and location or contact information below)

Optional

Are you interested in volunteering for an interview regarding this survey and to help with further study of PLCs? If so, please supply your name and contact information at the bottom of this survey.

Name: _____ Email: _____

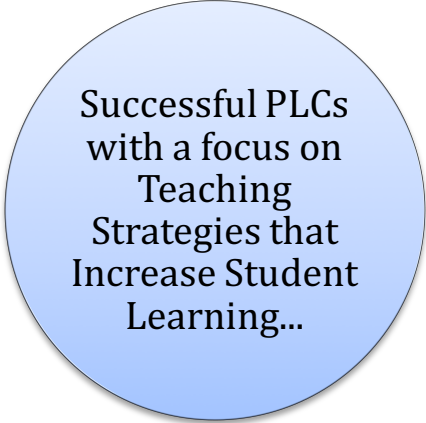
Job Title: _____ Contact #: _____

Thank You for Your Participation!

APPENDIX B

Concept Map

Create a thoughtful concept map of your beliefs around success PLCs. There are no right or wrong answers. The purpose of this activity is to unfold your thoughts and beliefs about PLCs and what make them successful. This tool will help the researcher measure your understanding of the PLC process and guide the discussion.



Successful PLCs
with a focus on
Teaching
Strategies that
Increase Student
Learning...

APPENDIX C

Teacher Interview

Teacher Interview Questions

(Focus of Interview: Principal participation and intervention/guidance, understanding of PLC process and expectation, and understanding of presentation of data and outcome.)

1. How would you rate your current understanding of the PLC process? (Low 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 High) Explain?
2. How would you rate your current PLC's productivity or function? (Low 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 High) Explain?
3. Can you describe a typical PLC meeting that could occur here at this school?
4. Can you explain why you designed your Concept Map in this way?
5. How did you gain your current knowledge about the PLC process?
6. What additional PD do you think is needed throughout the year regarding successful PLCs?
7. Do you think presentation of data and/or information is something necessary for PLC to share? Explain?
8. How do you use multiple sources of data and information to make decisions about teaching and learning?
9. How do you share that information with colleagues?
10. Overall, what do you think the key components are for the development of a functional PLC?
11. How does the principal play proactive role in addressing in the key components of the PLC process?
12. What role does your principal play in the PLC process?

APPENDIX D

Principal Interview

Principal Interview Questions

(Focus of Interview: Principal participation and intervention/guidance, precision of PLC process and expectation, and presentation of data and outcome.)

1. How would you rate your current understanding of the PLC process? (Low 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 High) Explain?
2. How would you rate your staffs overall understanding of the PLC process? (Low 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 High) Explain?
3. Can you describe a typical PLC meeting that could occur here at this school?
4. What is your role in forming and supporting functional PLC at your school and how have you educated your staff in this process?
5. At the beginning of the year, how do you introduce the PLC format?
6. What additional PD do you offer throughout the year to your staff to support PLCs?
7. How do you feel your staff functions in their PLC?
8. How do you make sure everyone understands your expectation of PLC outcomes?
9. How often do you revisit the expectations of PLC with your staff?
10. How often do you require building level PLC to meet?
11. What guidelines do you provide for the meeting? And are those guidelines followed?
12. How often do you attend individual meetings?
13. How does your staff provide you with information about what they are discussing?
14. How often do you provide feedback?
15. How does your staff share their PLC information to the collective and how often?
16. What is one area at your school, as far as the PLC process, that you would like to improve?
17. Why do you think your staff is successful?
18. What do you think your role entails with PLCs at your school?
19. How do you promote a strong cultural atmosphere that encourages professional discussion?

APPENDIX E

Survey Results

Professional Learning Community Teacher Survey Data Results

May-June 2016

School 1C

School 1C Elementary School Survey Results – 17 Participants	Low 1	2	3	4	High 5
Current building level PLC experience?	0 response 0%	0 response 0%	5 = .294 29%	11 = .647 65%	1 = .058 6%
Principal participation with current grade level PLCs?	1 = .059 6%	1 = .058 6%	5 = .294 29%	6 = .352 35%	4 = .235 24%
Site being focused and revisiting PLC expectations?	1 = .058 6%	1 = .058 6%	4 = .235 24%	6 = .352 35%	5 = .294 29%
Level of understanding of the PLC process?	0 response 0%	0 response 0%	6 = .352 35%	5 = .294 29%	6 = .352 35%
How PLC information is shared at current site?	0 response 0%	1 = .058 6%	2 = .117 12%	9 = .529 53%	5 = .294 29%

School 1C Elementary
-17 completed surveys
- ? chose not to complete survey

School 2F

School 2F Elementary School Survey Results – 18 Participants	Low 1	2	3	4	High 5
Current building level PLC experience?	0 response 0%	0 response 0%	7 = .388 39%	2 = .111 11%	9 = .500 50%
Principal participation with current grade level PLCs?	4 = .222 22%	3 = .166 17%	4 = .222 22%	2 = .111 11%	5 = .277 28%
Site being focused and revisiting PLC expectations?	2 = .111 11%	3 = .166 17%	6 = .333 33%	2 = .111 11%	5 = .277 28%

Level of understanding of the PLC process?	0 response 0%	1 = .055 6%	3 = .166 17%	5 = .277 28%	9 = .500 50%
How PLC information is shared at current site?	1 = .055 6%	0 response 0%	8 = .444 44%	4 = .222 22%	5 = .277 28%

School 2F Elementary
-18 completed surveys
-? Chose not to complete survey

School 3E

School 3E Elementary School Survey Results – 19 Participants	Low 1	2	3	4	High 5
Current building level PLC experience?	0 response 0%	3 = .157 16%	2 = .105 11%	8 = .421 42%	6 = .315 32%
Principal participation with current grade level PLCs?	0 response 0%	4 = .21 21%	5 = .263 26%	7 = .368 37%	3 = .157 16%
Site being focused and revisiting PLC expectations?	0 response 0%	1 = .052 5%	1 = .052 5%	9 = .473 47%	9 = .473 47%
Level of understanding of the PLC process?	0 response 0%	0 response 0%	0 response 0%	9 = .473 47%	10 = .526 53%
How PLC information is shared at current site?	0 response 0%	2 = .105 11%	5 = .263 26%	5 = .263 26%	7 = .368 37%

School 3E Elementary
-19 completed surveys
-? Chose not to complete survey

School 4D

School 4D Elementary School Survey Results – 22 Participants	Low 1	2	3	4	High 5
Current building level PLC experience?	0 response 0%	3 = .136 14%	8 = .363 36%	8 = .363 36%	3 = .136 14%
Principal participation with current grade level PLCs?	5 = .227 23%	4 = .181 18%	7 = .318 32%	5 = .227 23%	1 = .045 5%
Site being focused and revisiting PLC expectations?	2 = .09 9%	7 = .318 32%	9 = .409 41%	7 = .318 32%	2 = .09 9%
Level of understanding of the PLC process?	0 response 0%	0 response 0%	5 = .227 23%	11 = .500 50%	6 = .272 27%
How PLC information is shared at current site?	1 = .045 5%	1 = .045 5%	9 = .409 41%	10 = .454 45%	1 = .045 5%

School 4D Elementary
 -22 completed surveys
 -? chose not to complete survey

School 5A

School 5A Elementary School Survey Results – 25 Participants	Low 1	2	3	4	High 5
Current building level PLC experience?	0 response 0%	2 = .08 8%	9 = .36 36%	12 = .48 48%	2 = .080 8%
Principal participation with current grade level PLCs?	2 = .08 8%	5 = .20 20%	9 = .36 36%	6 = .24 24%	3 = .12 12%
Site being focused and revisiting PLC expectations?	0 response 0%	7 = .28 28%	10 = .4 40%	6 = .24 24%	2 = .080 8%
Level of understanding of the PLC process?	0 response 0%	1 = .04 4%	2 = .08 8%	13 = .52 52%	9 = .36 36%
How PLC information is shared at current site?	2 = .08 8%	4 = .25 16%	11 = .44 44%	7 = .280 28%	1 = .04 4%

School 5A Elementary
 -25 completed surveys
 -? chose not to complete survey

School 6B

School 6B Elementary School Survey Results - 18 Participants	Low 1	2	3	4	High 5
Current building level PLC experience?	0 response 0%	3 = .166 17%	11 = .611 61%	4 = .222 22%	0 response 0%
Principal participation with current grade level PLCs?	5 = .277 28%	5 = .277 28%	4 = .222 22%	3 = .166 17%	1 = .055 6%
Site being focused and revisiting PLC expectations?	1 = .055 6%	5 = .277 28%	7 = .388 39%	5 = .277 28%	0 response 0%
Level of understanding of the PLC process?	1 = .055 6%	2 = .111 11%	2 = .111 11%	9 = .5 50%	4 = .222 22%
How PLC information is shared at current site?	3 = .166 17%	4 = .222 22%	7 = .388 39%	2 = .111 11%	2 = .111 11%

School 6B Elementary
-18 completed surveys
-? Chose not to complete survey

Participation w/PLC	Questions 1 and 2 on Survey
Precision of PLC	Question 3 and 4 on Survey
Presentation of PLC	Question 5 on Survey

Total surveyed – 119 Teachers

Total anonymous – 4 (Survey completed, but did not indicate school) voided survey

Total declined – 31 Teachers and did not indicate school

Comments: Student service staff, my PLC are not the same

Choosing Primary and Secondary Schools

-This chart shows combined 4s and 5s from survey to show percentages of favorable actions with PLCs

	Question 1: Current building level PLC experience? Participation	Question 2: Participation with current grade level PLCs? Participation	Question 3: Site focused and revisiting PLC expectations? Precision	Question 4: Level of understanding of the PLC process? Precision	Question 5: How PLC information is shared at current site? Presentation
School 1C	71	59	64	64	82
School 2F	61	39	39	78	50
School 3E	74	53	86	96	63
School 4D	50	28	41	77	50
School 5A	56	36	32	88	32
School 6B	22	23	28	72	22

-This chart shows combined 1s and 2s from survey to show percentages of non-favorable actions with PLCs

	Question 1: Current building level PLC experience? Participation	Question 2: Participation with current grade level PLCs? Participation	Question 3: Site focused and revisiting PLC expectations? Precision	Question 4: Level of understanding of the PLC process? Precision	Question 5: How PLC information is shared at current site? Presentation
School 1C	0	12	12	0	6
School 2F	0	39	28	6	0
School 3E	16	21	5	0	11
School 4D	14	41	41	0	10
School 5A	8	28	28	4	24
School 6B	17	56	34	17	39

Primary Sites will be: School 1C; School 3E; School 5A

Secondary Sites will be: School 2F; School 4D; School 6B

Other Notes:

31 Teachers choose not to participate in survey and marked survey as such and turned in blank surveys. Surveys from 4 Teachers had voided results because they didn't indicate school or location. 3 out of the 4 teachers wrote comments worth mentioning.

APPENDIX F

Teacher Survey Consent Forms

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON
Research Participant Information and Consent Form

Title of the Study: Elementary Principal Role in Professional Development and Learning Communities: How to Support Continual Professional Growth

Principal Investigator: Dr. Julie Mead (phone: 608-263-3405) (email: jmead@education.wisc.edu)

Student Researcher: Rachellee Brown (email: rlbrown8@wisc.edu)

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

You are invited to participate in a research study about three areas of interest: the level of participation (frequency and guidance) principals use when meeting with professional learning communities, if the participation has an effect on the success of professional learning communities, and specific strategies principals use to develop and maintain professional learning communities in their school setting.

You have been asked to participate because you are an elementary teacher who participates in professional learning communities at the elementary level here in the School District of Beloit.

The purpose of the research is to gain an understanding of the principal's role in supporting and sustaining professional learning communities.

This study will include elementary teachers and principals who participate in professional learning communities at the elementary level in the School District of Beloit.

The survey will be conducted at a district/school professional development meeting.

WHAT WILL MY PARTICIPATION INVOLVE?

If you decide to participate in this research you will be asked to complete a 10-15 minute survey. You will also be given an interview option on a volunteer basis to further the study.

You will be asked to complete a 6 question survey.

Your participation will last approximately 10-15 min per session and will require 1 session.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS TO ME?

There is a minimal risk for breach of confidentiality.

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS TO ME?

We don't expect any direct benefits to you from participation in this study.

HOW WILL MY CONFIDENTIALITY BE PROTECTED?

While there will probably be publications as a result of this study, your name will not be used.

If you participate in this study, we would like to be able to quote you directly without using your name. If you agree to allow us to quote you in publications, please initial the statement at the bottom of this form.

WHOM SHOULD I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

You may ask any questions about the research at any time. If you have questions about the research after you leave today you should contact the Principal Investigator Dr. Julie Mead at 608-263-3405.

If you are not satisfied with response of research team, have more questions, or want to talk with someone about your rights as a research participant, you should contact the Education and Social/Behavioral Science IRB Office at 608-263-2320.

Your participation is completely voluntary. If you decide not to participate or withdraw from the study, this action will have no effect on the your relationship with or services received from either UW-Madison or the School district of Beloit.

Your signature indicates that you have read this consent form, had an opportunity to ask any questions about your participation in this research and voluntarily consent to participate. You will receive a copy of the consent form.

Name of Participant (please print): _____

Signature

Date

_____ I give my permission to be quoted directly in publications without using my name.

APPENDIX G

Teacher Interview Consent Forms

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON
Research Participant Information and Consent Form

Title of the Study: Elementary Principal Role in Professional Development and Learning Communities: How to Support Continual Professional Growth

Principal Investigator: Dr. Julie Mead (phone: 608-263-3405) (email: jmead@education.wisc.edu)

Student Researcher: Rachellee Brown-Clardy (email: rlbrown8@wisc.edu)

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

You are invited to participate in a research study about three areas of interest: the level of interaction (frequency and guidance) principals use when meeting with professional learning communities, if the interaction has an effect on the success of professional learning communities, and specific strategies principals use to develop and maintain professional learning communities in their school setting.

You have been asked to participate because you are an elementary teacher who participates in professional learning communities at the elementary level here in the School District of Beloit.

The purpose of the research is to gain an understanding of the principal's role in supporting and sustaining professional learning communities.

This study will include elementary teachers and principals who participate in professional learning communities at the elementary level in the School District of Beloit.

The survey will be conducted at a district/school professional development meeting.

WHAT WILL MY PARTICIPATION INVOLVE?

If you decide to participate in this research, you will be asked to complete a concept map and/or a 15 question interview.

Your participation will last approximately 30-45 min per session and will require 1 or 2 sessions.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS TO ME?

There is a minimal risk for breach of confidentiality.

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS TO ME?

We don't expect any direct benefits to you from participation in this study.

HOW WILL MY CONFIDENTIALITY BE PROTECTED?

While there will probably be publications as a result of this study, your name will not be used.

If you participate in this study, we would like to be able to quote you directly without using your name. If you agree to allow us to quote you in publications, please initial the statement at the bottom of this form.

WHOM SHOULD I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

You may ask any questions about the research at any time. If you have questions about the research after you leave today, you should contact the Principal Investigator Dr. Julie Mead at 608-263-3405.

If you are not satisfied with response of research team, have more questions, or want to talk with someone about your rights as a research participant, you should contact the Education and Social/Behavioral Science IRB Office at 608-263-2320.

Your participation is completely voluntary. If you decide not to participate or withdraw from the study, this action will have no effect on your relationship with or services received from either UW-Madison or the School district of Beloit.

Your signature indicates that you have read this consent form, had an opportunity to ask any questions about your participation in this research and voluntarily consent to participate. You will receive a copy of the consent form.

Name of Participant (please print): _____

Signature

Date

_____ I give my permission to be quoted directly in publications without using my name.

APPENDIX H

Principal Interview Consent Forms

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON Research Participant Information and Consent Form

Title of the Study: Elementary Principal Role in Professional Development and Learning Communities: How to Support Continual Professional Growth

Principal Investigator: Dr. Julie Mead (phone: 608-263-3405) (email: jmead@education.wisc.edu)

Student Researcher: Rachellee Brown-Clardy (email: rlbrown8@wisc.edu)

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

You are invited to participate in a research study with three areas of interest: the level of interaction (frequency and guidance) principals use when meeting with professional learning communities, if the interaction has an effect on the success of professional learning communities, and specific strategies principals use to develop and maintain professional learning communities in school setting.

You have been asked to participate because you are an elementary principal who participates in elementary professional learning communities here in the School District of Beloit.

The purpose of the research is to gain an understanding of the principal's role in supporting and sustaining professional learning communities.

This study will include elementary teachers and principals who participate in professional learning communities in the School District of Beloit.

WHAT WILL MY PARTICIPATION INVOLVE?

If you decide to participate in this research, you will be asked to complete a 15 question individualized audio-recorded interview.

The interviews and/or concept maps will be conducted with teachers and or principals of Beloit Schools, in Beloit, WI. The location of the interview will be at the interviewees discretion at undisclosed locations outside of the school district. Session will last approximately 30-45 min.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS TO ME?

There is a minimal risk for breach of confidentiality.

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS TO ME?

We don't expect any direct benefits to you from participation in this study.

HOW WILL MY CONFIDENTIALITY BE PROTECTED?

While there will probably be publications as a result of this study, your name will not be used. Your responses will be coded for confidentiality. That data that you provide will be linked to the data that your teachers provide. Your identity will never be revealed. Your teacher's identity will never be revealed. Precautionary measures will be assessed and established throughout this research to maintain confidentiality (i.e. identifying factors within quotes will **not** be used).

If you participate in this study, we would like to be able to quote you directly without using your name. Audio-recorded interviews will be accessible to the researcher and the principal investigator. Recordings will be retained for 2 years. If you agree to allow us to quote you in publications, please initial the statement at the bottom of this form (i.e. identifying factors within quotes will **not** be used).

WHOM SHOULD I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

You may ask any questions about the research at any time. If you have questions about the research after you leave today, you should contact the Principal Investigator Dr. Julie Mead at 608-263-3405.

If you are not satisfied with response of research team, have more questions, or want to talk with someone about your rights as a research participant, you should contact the Education and Social/Behavioral Science IRB Office at 608-263-2320.

Your participation is completely voluntary. If you decide not to participate or withdraw from the study, this action will have no effect on your relationship with or services received from either UW-Madison or the School district of Beloit.

Your signature indicates that you have read this consent form, had an opportunity to ask any questions about your participation in this research and voluntarily consent to participate. You will receive a copy of the consent form.

_____ I give my permission to be quoted directly in publications without using my name. (Identifying factors within my quotes will **not** be used).

Name of Participant (please print): _____

_____ Signature

_____ Date

_____ I give my permission to be quoted directly in publications without using my name.