Exploring Teacher Perceptions About PLCs

Andrea Cunningham

Dissertation Proposal Submitted to the Doctoral Program

of the American College of Education

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Leadership

August 22, 2022

Exploring Teacher Perceptions About Professional Learning Communities: A Qualitative Study

Andrea Cunningham

Approved by:

Dissertation Chair: Sue Adragna PhD

Committee Member: Phyllis Gerben EdD

Copyright © 2022

Andrea Cunningham

Abstract

Teaching is a profession that influences the lives of future generations and is sometimes viewed as an isolated profession. Many teachers are ill-equipped with the skills, tools, and environment to collaborate with a team to improve student achievement. Professional learning communities (PLCs) were designed to mitigate the isolated environment for teachers. After reviewing the literature on PLCs, there are few studies addressing teacher perceptions. Studies showed a gap in the literature about what teachers know about PLCs. This qualitative phenomenological study helped fill the literature gap by gaining insight and understanding about teachers' experiences and perceptions of PLCs. The study will assist educational leaders and provide tools to support teachers working in a PLC. The adult learning and transformational leadership theories guided the study. The qualitative phenomenological study aimed to effectively understand teachers' perceptions, skills, and tools needed to participate in a PLC. The following questions guided the study: What are teachers' experiences who participate in a PLC, and what are the perceptions of teachers who participate in a PLC? Twenty teachers were purposefully sampled from a pool of 2,000 teachers in a Phoenix school district. The responses gathered from participants indicated both positive and negative experiences with PLCs. The shared experiences were compiled into five themes: (a) communication/collaboration, (b) team structure, (c) leadership, (d) PLC challenges, and (e) data usage. Instructional leaders can devise a PLC plan utilizing these teachers' experiences and perceived challenges. A recommendation for future research should include teachers from similar surrounding school districts.

Keywords: professional learning communities, teacher perceptions, shared vision and values, collective learning, shared personal practice, supportive leadership, and *conditions.*

Dedication

This dissertation is in memory of my father, Peter Morici, who always encouraged me to do my best, never give up, and set high goals for success. I dedicate my dissertation to my family and friends, who gave me continuous words of encouragement when times were tough, and I felt like giving up. I would like to thank my daughters Marissa and Madi for always being by my side through thick and thin. I appreciate my mother, Mary Lou Morici, for always encouraging me throughout the dissertation journey. I will forever be grateful for all of your love and everything you have done to support me. A special thanks goes to my husband, Darren Cunningham, for being a fantastic partner, a friend when I needed him most, and the rock in our marriage.

Acknowledgments

I am eternally grateful to everyone who supported and encouraged me throughout this educational journey. To my dissertation chair, Dr. Sue Adragna, I cannot thank you enough for your insight and quick responses to all of my questions and concerns. Your commitment to excellence challenged me to be a better researcher and writer. Many thanks to my committee member, Dr. Phyllis Gerben. You regularly provided me with valuable feedback and encouraging words.

I want to thank all my family and friends who continuously cheered for me, even at the most challenging times. I appreciate your listening ear when I shared my excitement and struggles. I am blessed to have a supportive group of people who care so much about me.

I want to acknowledge my editor for ensuring the format, grammar, and APA regulations met the American College of Education standards. I learned a great deal about grit, determination, and commitment from my ACE professors. I hope one day to a professor who will give back as mine did throughout this program.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Teachers have a tremendous amount of stress that affects them daily. Factors that contribute to the pressure are (a) differentiation of teaching and learning strategies for students with diverse needs, (b) high-class sizes and student counts, (c) lack of supportive leadership, and (d) lack of collaborative environment (Buttram & Farley-Ripple, 2016). Professional growth with teachers may suffer as they become discouraged with the stresses. Ávalos (2011) shared how teachers leave the profession and are dissatisfied with their jobs because of feeling isolated. Teachers need time to share ideas and collaborate with their colleagues.

Hayes et al. (2020) believed in the importance of teachers' collaboratively learning in schools. Collaboration allows teachers to reflect on their own experiences and find solutions to difficulties they have in their classroom (Hayes et al., 2020). A growing body of evidence supports how shared leadership improves student achievement more effectively than a principal working in solitude (Hurley et al., 2018).

Shared leadership can be accomplished through the work of professional learning communities (Fullan, 2000; Moulakdi & Bouchamma, 2020). Effective professional learning communities (PLCs) help create student academic growth (Moulakdi & Bouchamma, 2020). Common characteristics of professional learning communities are school reform, shared vision and values, collective learning, shared personal practice, supportive leadership, and supportive conditions (Dogan, et al., 2017).

Chapter one gives an overview and evolution of the history of professional learning communities (PLCs). Discussed in this chapter are the theoretical influences of adult learning and transformational leadership theories. The motivation for the study is also explained in this

chapter. Few studies provide an in-depth understanding of teachers' perceptions and experiences working in PLCs.

This qualitative phenomenological study aims to understand the K-12 teacher's perspective of PLCs in a Southwestern United States school district. The research questions will answer: (a) What are teachers' experiences who participate in a professional learning community? (b) What are the perceptions of teachers who participate in a professional learning community?

Background of the Problem

Much research has been done with professional learning communities, but few research publications have explored teachers' perceptions working in a PLC. It is surprising how widespread questions are regarding how schools can successfully implement PLCs to impact student learning (Courtney et al., 2017). Often school districts require teachers to meet as teams and collaborate in a professional learning community either formally or informally. Many different models of PLCs are used around schools and districts.

The problem facing schools in the United States is they have invested considerable time and financial resources into what has become known to be professional learning communities while not clearly understanding the critical attributes of what makes a PLC successful (Hurley et al., 2018). Many schools around the country use PLCs to promote content articulation between teachers. Conversations about the effectiveness and roles of PLCs in schools have often been met with mixed feelings of both enthusiasm and skepticism (Courtney et al., 2017). Some teachers see PLCs as a positive incentive to work together, while others view them as a hinderance. Teachers and administrators have reported challenges with effectively implementing PLCs with fidelity (Courtney et al., 2017).

Educational advocates of professional learning communities find teacher isolation a problem, and the solution is professional collaboration (Archbald, 2016). If teachers do not institute the collaborative PLC process with fidelity, student learning will suffer as a result. Department and grade-level teams have been an integral part of a learning environment, but there is little evidence supporting consistent implementation in school-based teams (Preast & Burns, 2018). Preast and Burns (2018) explained that when problem-solving teams come together and implement plans with fidelity, student academic achievement increases.

Past research has found that when teachers are not implementing data-driven decisions, there is a detrimental effect on students' performance (Preast & Burns, 2018). Preast and Burns (2018) shared how the lack of collaboration, use of student data, and little administrator support lead to poor implementation of professional learning communities. When teachers implement PLCs with fidelity, student academic performance increases (Preast & Burns, 2018). The gap in the literature is that there is little information on teachers' experiences in a PLC (Trilaksono et al., 2019).

Statement of the Problem

The problem facing schools in the United States is they have invested considerable time and financial resources into what has become known to be professional learning communities while not clearly understanding the critical attributes of what makes a PLC successful (Hurley et al., 2018). Despite the multitude of training and resources available for PLC work, most educators still have difficulty implementing effective PLCs (Perry, 2011). Perry (2011) shared how secondary teachers tend to focus on the content they teach rather than on the learning outcomes of students. This will result in lack of student motivation and academic growth.

When PLC teams are not consistent across schools or within school districts, some PLCs lack core characteristics to engage and improve collective work (Preast & Burns, 2018). Professional learning communities can get stuck and must overcome many challenges. Often, teachers have had one presentation from experts on PLCs and have never had other experiences understanding the interworking of a PLC (Levine, 2019). Levine (2019) shared how important it is for teachers to challenge their assumptions and continually work with others to gain insight into new practices. An essential factor mentioned by Levine (2019) is that teachers have developed privacy and autonomy to teach how they want without input and support from others. This way of thinking can create a culture of isolation and make it difficult to see any alternatives to instructional strategies that create success in students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to determine the experiences and perceptions of teachers who participate in a PLC in a school district in Phoenix, Arizona. According to DuFour (2004), a professional learning community comprises committed educators who work together in an ongoing and collective environment that results in student achievement. Successful PLCs focus on student work as a catalyst for understanding student learning. This study will contribute to our understanding of effective PLCs.

The target population was elementary, middle, and high school teachers who have taught and worked with a professional learning community for at least three years. An interview was completed with all 20 teachers in the study. The goal of the study was to understand how teachers perceive and experience PLCs so instructional leaders can best make decisions on how to implement PLCs effectively. As a result of the study, districts could use the findings to prepare or refine their current PLC practice at their sites. The researcher will share this research

with building and district-level leadership to guide their professional development and support for the PLC process.

Significance of the Study

Many studies have been conducted on PLCs. Studies have indicated a significant gap in the research regarding theoretical benefits and actual teacher perceived benefits of PLCs (Raharinaivo-Falimanana, 2017). A study is necessary to understand the commonalities throughout schools to determine best practices of PLCs (Hurley et al., 2018; Levine, 2019). If this study is not conducted, there will be little evidence to identify what key characteristics help teachers be successful through the PLC and increase student achievement. This proposed study will contribute to the knowledge base by providing data necessary to make informed decisions about components contributing to PLC success. The study was conducted in a large suburban public school district.

The information gained from this study will be used to inform educational decision-makers of the benefits and challenges of PLCs in schools. The research will add to the body of knowledge and provide brevity and depth to fostering collaborative learning environments for teachers. Data collected on how teachers experience and collaborate in a PLC will provide educators with an understanding of how factors and conditions influence the success and implementation of effective collaborative cultures.

A deeper dive into PLCs will allow teachers and administrators to uncover hidden factors that derail effective collaboration in PLCs. As a result of the study, districts could use the findings to prepare or refine their current PLC practice at their schools. The researcher will share this research with building and district-level leadership to guide their professional development and support for the PLC process.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

Research Question One: What are the experiences of teachers who participate in a professional learning community?

Research Question Two: What are the perceptions of teachers who participate in a professional learning community?

Theoretical Framework

The transformational leadership theory and the adult learning theory serve as the study's conceptual framework. Applications of both theories explore various ways adults learn and include a transformative style (Corley, 2011). The adult learning theory is an approach to learning centered on the learner and incorporates knowledge and skills by repetition of routines and experiences (Gilstrap, 2013). Adult learners draw on life experiences to make connections to learning, are motivated to seek new knowledge, and are ready to learn when put into a unique position in life (Corley, 2011).

A transformational leader possesses a positive attitude and approach, has knowledge and skills, and inspires others (Berkovich, 2017). Professional learning communities need the support of their administrators to make instructional decisions for the improvement of student learning. To create change in school culture and a vision for learning, instructional leaders must be transformational (Alkrdem, 2020). Kwan (2020) expressed how transformational leaders focus on teacher growth, professional development, and staff management.

The blending of the transformational leadership theory and the adult learning theory create an environment for PLCs to flourish. Combining the two approaches would equip teachers with the skills needed to thrive in a professional learning environment. The literature review in

Chapter 2 provides more specific examples and details about the conceptual framework and theories.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are used in the study and are critical to comprehending the paper's key concepts and ideas. The terms and definitions establish a common understanding when reading the dissertation. The terms are written in alphabetical order for ease of reference.

Adult Learning Theory. Andragogy is the art and science of how adults learn. Andragogy is an approach to learning that centers on the learner and incorporates skills and knowledge from repeated routines and experiences with adults (Gilstrap, 2013).

Assessment. Assessments evaluate the quality of student work and should be frequent, collaborative, adaptable, and responsive to meet the learner's needs (Bergeron, 2020).

Collaboration. When adult learners work cooperatively as a learning community (Brown et al., 2018).

Collective Learning. Collective Learning creates collaborative learning opportunities that benefit students (DuFour et al., 2007).

Data. Information used from student assessments to make instructional decisions and improve student learning (Kwan, 2020).

Professional Development (PD) and Professional Learning (PL). Professional development (PD) and professional learning (PL) are interchangeable terms used in education. When teachers work in a professional learning community, they are provided the proper environment to collaborate with others and create innovative opportunities for learning (Brown et al., 2018).

Professional Learning Community (PLC). Professional learning environments enable adult learners to work together as a learning community and emphasize collaboration and accountability as the keys to success (Brown et al., 2018).

School Reform. School reform is a change in public education to improve instruction and academic standards (Jorgensen et al., 2020).

Shared Personal Practice. Teachers share personal practices when they collaboratively work together in a PLC to engage in discussions that focus on students and instruction (Dogan et al., 2017)

Supportive Conditions. Two essential supportive conditions in a professional learning community: school relationships and school structures (Dogan et al., 2017; Ho et al., 2019)

Supportive Leadership. A principal shows support when promoting academic performance by providing teachers with instructional best practices (Park et al.).

Transformational Leadership Theory. Transformational leaders articulate a clear vision to their staff, build relationships with coworkers, work collectively with employees, and foster a supportive culture. Transformational leaders inspire followers to change expectations and perceptions while working towards a common goal (Liu, 2018).

Assumptions

According to Theofanidis and Fountouki (2018), delimitations should challenge the researchers' assumptions and expose any shortcomings. Researchers make assumptions about relationships, theories, setting of a study, data collection, population, and other areas for analysis (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018).

To have a common understanding of the study, some assumptions were made. An assumption was made that teachers were given the training to understand the process and

procedures of effectively participating in a professional learning community. The interviews were designed to gain participants' honest, reflective, and truthful feedback. Participants names, grade levels, and school were protected from all aspects of the study. Instead of utilizing the participant's name and school, participants were identified as P1 and the school will be identified as S1. An assumption was made that participants all shared their authentic experiences working in a PLC. Results from the study can potentially provide valuable information for administrator when making decisions on PLCs.

Scope of Delimitations

Delimitations are limitations an author consciously sets on a research study. "Delimitations require challenging the assumptions of the researchers and openly exposing shortcomings that might have been better tackled" (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018 p. 155). In this regard, delimitations are in the researcher's control (Theofanidis, D., & Fountouki, 2018). The sampling of teachers in Phoenix, Arizona was chosen for this study. The representative population included district employees who have taught for at least three years and are currently participating in a professional learning community. Interviews were conducted during the 2021-2022 school year to explore teachers' perceptions of participation in a PLC. The study examined a sample of 20 participants.

This study was composed of elementary, middle, and high school teachers in a public school district in Phoenix, Arizona. The study was composed of teachers who had at least three years of classroom experience and participated in a professional learning community. The process to select participants was convenience sampling and was dependent on the researcher's accessibility to the participants. Participants were chosen randomly from elementary, middle, and high schools to represent the population of the school district.

The scope and delimitations are within the researcher's control; therefore, can be recreated in another setting. This particular research setting, time, and methods can be utilized for a future study as teachers from another school district can be used.

Limitations

Limitations in a study address potential weaknesses typically out of the researcher's control, are particular to a specific research design, and will have many different types of constraints (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). Theofanidis and Fountouki (2018) shared a clear definition of a limitation as an imposed restriction that a researcher has no control over. The sample of participants chosen for the research was based on certain limitations.

Although the study will be limited to elementary, middle, and high school teachers, some grade levels were not represented in the data from the interviews due to time constraints. The qualitative study utilized an interview format to identify teacher perceptions of PLCs in a limited geographical area. The sample of twenty participants may seem small; however, the rich data that was collected helped the researcher understand teacher perceptions of professional learning communities. Generalizations of data lie within the opinions held by teachers who participate in the study.

Chapter Summary

Many teachers are not equipped with the proper environment, tools, and skills to collaborate with team members for the success of students. A qualitative research study that investigates teachers' perceptions and experiences can uncover possible solutions to the problem. The study results will help educators make informed decisions on best practices of professional learning communities. To understand the research purpose, the research questions were stated,

and a purpose for the questions was given. Key terms and concepts were established and defined to help clarify the intent of the chapter.

A qualitative phenomenological study on teachers' experiences and perspectives on PLCs was completed. Two theories guided the study. The work of James MacGregor Burns with the transformational leadership theory and Malcolm Knowles who developed the adult learning theory generated the foundation for the research. There are two questions the study answered: (1) What are the experiences of teachers who participate in a professional learning community? (2) What are the perceptions of teachers who participate in a professional learning community? School leaders will gain insight from this study to make future decisions on professional learning communities in their buildings.

A thorough literature review will be conducted in the next chapter. The literature review will investigate the guiding research questions for the qualitative research. A literature search strategy will be described, the theoretical framework will be reviewed, and existing literature will be further explored. The conclusion of Chapter 2 will be a summary of the themes that emerged from the literature review.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Researchers have extensively investigated professional learning communities PLCs. The exploration of teachers working in PLCs and the perceptions of self-efficacy appear to be lacking and need further research (Zheng et al., 2019). The problem facing schools in the United States is they have invested considerable time and financial resources into what has become known to be professional learning communities while not clearly understanding the critical attributes of what makes a PLC successful (Hurley et al., 2018).

The purpose of the qualitative phenomenological study was to explore teachers' lived experiences with and perceptions about professional learning communities. Professional learning communities play an invaluable role in education (Brown et al., 2018). When working in a professional learning community, teachers are provided the proper environment allowing adults to receive professional development, collaborate with others, and create innovative opportunities for teachers (Brown et al., 2018). A gap in the literature about teacher self-efficacy and perceptions about characteristics needed for a PLC to be successful exists (Gilbert et al., 2018).

The literature review presented in the chapter is a critical summary of knowledge and previous findings of PLCs. The research gives details about understanding a PLC and its limitations, strengths, and revealed how the research on PLCs fits into a broader picture. The chapter consists of literature search strategies, the theoretical framework used for the study, a review of literature, contrary findings, and a summary of the research findings. The topics discussed are school reform, shared vision, mission, values, collective learning, shared personal practice, supportive leadership, and supportive conditions.

Literature Search Strategy

Having an open-source approach allows researchers to find quality literature reviews and published papers by utilizing no-cost search engines (Pearce, 2018). The open sources used for the proposed study were Google Scholar, Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), and Social Science Research Network (SSRN). Pearce (2018) believed by utilizing various free and open- source software programs allowed literature reviews to be organized and systematic. Unpaywall and Zotero, free software programs, were utilized to manage the located sources. The American College of Education (ACE) electronic library system provided free access to research literature collection through the EBSCO search engine.

Multiple forms of literature were compiled to create a thorough literature review. According to Jesson and Lacey (2006), the literature analysis process begins by reading and comparing articles and identifying key terms and themes. Themes were categorized and defined to help identify critical findings and gaps in the research. In a research summary, the content informs the reader, clarifies the results, presents a coherent and cohesive argument, and identifies gaps in the literature (Jesson & Lacey, 2006). Jennex (2015) believed summaries create the foundational framework and evidence for a rigorous study while focusing on possible next steps to identify a problem.

Jesson and Lacey (2006) suggested a researcher conducting a literature search should identify and connect keywords, use query tricks and adapt the quest to improve the quality of the results. Keywords and phrases help to focus the literature review (Jesson & Lacey, 2006). Before exploring the literature, it was necessary to identify main ideas, keywords, phrases, and synonyms for "professional learning community.” The words used included but were not limited to professional learning community, PLCs, improving student achievement, student growth,

learning in schools, teacher's professional growth, teacher reflection, teachers working in teams, learning outcomes, professional development, and the principal's role in PLCs. When similar terms appeared in the same articles, different techniques which created new ideas relating to professional learning communities were adopted. The inclusion of the Boolean words "and" and "or" allowed for a more advanced examination of terms. The literature was narrowed by the year of publication, research, and source types. The criteria met the doctoral program requirements of the American College of Education.

Theoretical Framework

According to Corley (2011), "There is no single theory of learning that can be applied to adults" (p. 1). The adult learning and transformational leadership theories align with the study of professional learning communities due to reflective and Socratic thinking processes underpinning each of the concepts (Alkrdem, 2020; Gilstrap, 2013; Kwan, 2020). Applications of the dimensions of adult learning and transformational leadership support the purpose of the study, as the theories explore ways adults learn and include a transformative style which produces change in behaviors (Corley, 2011). Research theories supporting the study of professional learning communities are the adult learning and transformational leadership theories. Both theories provide a theoretical grounding for the research.

Adult Learning Theory

Malcolm Knowles was known for using the term andragogy, the study of adult learning (Gilstrap, 2013). Andragogy is an approach to learning that centers on the learner and incorporates skills and knowledge from repeated routines and experiences (Gilstrap, 2013). Knowles shared three assumptions about adult learners (Corley, 2011).

The assumptions posited by Corley (2011) are:

1. Adults relate life experiences to connect learning.
2. Adults are motivated to seek new knowledge rather than rely on external factors of motivation.
3. Adults are ready to learn when put in a unique position in life.

A research-based analysis applied the adult learning theory, andragogy, and self-directed learning to professional learning communities. Egizii (2015) researched the ideals of andragogy and self-directed learning to improve collaboration in a PLC. Continuous improvement was based on multiple mini changes in which the ideas were created from existing workforce talents (Egizii, 2015). Egizii (2015) noted how all stakeholder accountability and ownership in a PLC is critical to improving organizational practice.

Knowles connected the way adults learn and how adult educators teach (Corley, 2011). Adult educators provide classroom opportunities for student learning in a cooperative environment and connect the lesson to what students already know. As adults, educators understand how lesson objectives should focus on the needs of students, skill levels, and interests Per Knowles, the importance of educators making learning relevant to students is essential. Corley (2011) believed educators continually evaluate student performance and make appropriate adjustments improving learning outcomes.

Communities of learners provide the proper environment which allows adults to receive professional development, collaborate with others, and create innovative learning opportunities for teachers (Brown et al., 2018). In PLCs, participants use the framework from the adult learning theory to harness life experiences and reflect during the PLC process (Corley, 2011; Mullen & Hutinger, 2008). Brown et al. (2018) shared how adult learners who work together as a

learning community, emphasize collaboration and accountability as the keys for success. Safe PLC environments create a space for teachers to discuss the next steps for student learning (Brown et al., 2018).

An effective PLC must have established criteria in place to be triumphant (Brown et al., 2018). Corley (2011) and Brown et al. (2018) share similar beliefs in the requirements for productive PLCs and how adult educators apply knowledge learned. The authors believe adult learners in a PLC form an alliance and take responsibility for a universal curriculum which meets the learning needs of the students. Teachers make assessments based on the prescribed curriculum to evaluate student work (Brown et al., 2018; Corley, 2011). Brown et al. (2018) believed educators reflecting on student assessment data allowed teachers to recognize students' strengths and areas of weakness. Collaborative learning environments provide opportunities for adult educators to create a support system for students needing additional help (Brown et al., 2018; DuFour et al., 2007).

Transformational Leadership Theory

Adult learning theory, which includes self-directed learning, enables leaders to have a mindset to become transformational leaders (Corley, 2011). Transformational leaders are change agents in education. A transformational leader is an individual possessing a positive attitude and approach, knowledge of skills, and has the energy to motivate and inspire others (Berkovich, 2017). Alkrdem (2020), Bryant et al. (2017), and Gilstrap (2013) share the belief about how transformational leaders create positive changes for school culture and a vision for learning. Leaders providing a strategic direction about policies and practices for the school environment transform schools (Kwan, 2020). Transformational leaders focus on teacher growth, professional development, and staff management (Kwan, 2020).

A research-based analysis shows the connection between the transformational leadership theory and professional learning communities. According to Mullen and Schunk (2010) literature in educational leadership resulted when leaders used a transformational approach. PLCs placed high-quality teaching as the primary focus for learning ultimately improving student achievement (Mullen & Schunk, 2010). Mullen and Schunk's (2010) research showed how transformational leaders are salient to improving teaching and learning. Transformational leaders hold a critical role in improving the working conditions of a PLC by creating an environment conducive to teacher collaboration (Mullen & Schunk, 2010).

James M. Burnes founded the transformational leadership theory in 1978 (Berkovich, 2017). Kenneth Leithwood and Doris Jantzi validated the importance of transformational leadership theory and its role in schools (Berkovich, 2017). Transformational leaders lead by example and create bonds with students and staff. The background of transformational leadership theory focuses on reshaping education utilizing the pedagogy of teaching and learning (Alkrdem, 2020; Gilstrap, 2013).

Kwan (2020) believed transformational leaders share common characteristics of instructional leaders. In a learning community, the facilitator carries on the role of the instructional leader (DuFour et al., 2007). When teachers collaborate effectively, common assessments can be created to gather instructional data. In a thriving PLC, the facilitator uses instructional data to measure student growth and take responsibility for staff management ensuring school success (Kwan, 2020).

Transformational leadership and the adult learning theory share common attributes critical to the success of professional learning communities. Transformational leaders understand how learning communities focus on improving teacher's instructional capacity and foster student

learning (Alkrdem, 2020). In PLCs, adult learners share ideas using reasoning and critical thinking skills when transferring knowledge from colleagues (Gilstrap, 2013). Alkrdem (2020) believed PLCs positively influence a school environment and culture. The result of successful PLCs can increase student achievement, teacher impact, and school climate and culture.

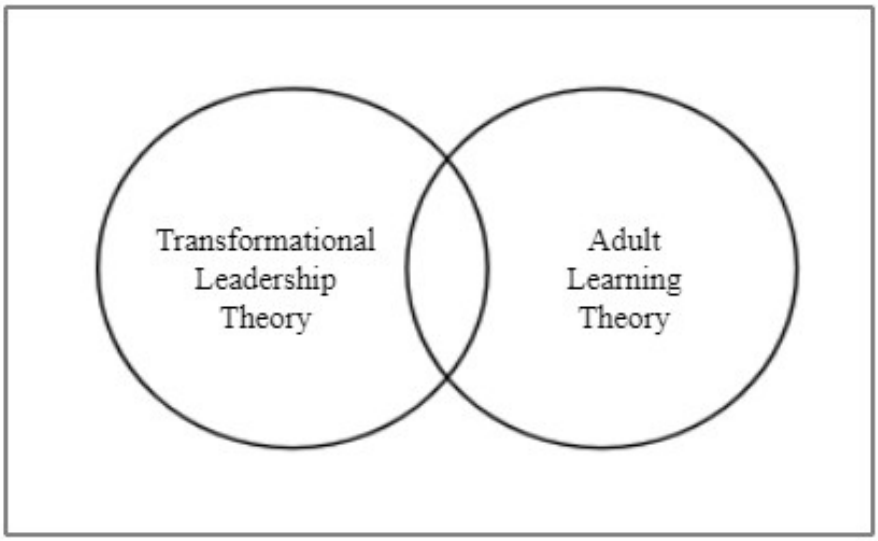
Blend of Theories

The transformational leadership theory and the adult learning theory relate to the research questions by identifying experiences and perceptions of teachers who participate in a professional learning community. Research shows adults learn best when finding value and connection in learning and utilize a systems approach to thinking (Gilstrap, 2013). Gilstrap (2013) identified a systems approach as a problem-solving approach that encompasses the attributes of an entire organization. The way teachers make connections with colleagues is through the collaborative environment in a professional learning community. Gilstrap (2013) believed transformational leaders drove teachers to focus PLC work on data and pedagogy. The adult learning theory parallels the PLC process by having a purpose for learning and applying the content to real-life situations (Corley, 2011).

The depiction of similarities and differences between the adult learning theory and transformational leadership are provided in Figure 1. A description of how the adult learning theory and transformation leadership are alike and different are listed in the theoretical framework above. The intersecting area represents where the two approaches relate to professional learning communities and guide the proposed research. A blend of theories is also identified in the theoretical framework.

Figure 1

Venn Diagram



Note. Similarities and differences between the Adult Learning Theory and Transformational Leadership Theory. Copyright 2020 by Andrea Cunningham

The adult learning theory is critical to understand the application of the PLC process. Leaders become transformational when they apply the adult learning theory to influence and positively affect a school environment (Alkrdem, 2020). Alkrdem (2020) recognized transformational leadership as a practical approach for change and sustainability in schools.

Research Literature Review

After studying peer-reviewed articles published within the past five years, common themes about PLCs emerged. Teachers and administrators have both reported the challenges of implementing PLCs with fidelity (Courtney et al., 2017). Themes relevant to PLCs are (1) reform in schools, (2) a shared vision and values, (3) collective learning, (4) shared personal practice, (5) supportive leadership, (6) supporting conditions, (7) professional development, (8) student outcomes and data, and (9) ownership of work. The nine emerging

themes are explained in Chapter 2. The adult learning and transformational leadership theories share common components used to explain leaders' behavior when creating a change in a professional learning community (Gilstrap, 2013).

School Reform

Since the 1990s, school reform has centered around school choice and increased state accountability measures reflected by reading and math scores (Borda et al., 2018). School reform changes public education and improves instruction and academic standards (Jorgensen et al., 2020). Successful schools build a collective foundation and learning culture by focusing on high student expectations during professional learning community meetings (Buttram & Farley-Ripple, 2016; Dougherty & Reason, 2019; DuFour et al., 2007; Hands et al., 2015). Malcolm Knowles realized adults learn by connecting life experiences to the work they do (Corley, 2011). Participants in a PLC interconnect teaching strategies with other teachers to create collaborative learning opportunities that benefit students (DuFour et al., 2007). Schools with authentic professional learning communities emphasize collaboration and accountability as key elements of success (Brown et al., 2018; McBrayer et al., 2018; Trilaksono et al., 2019).

School reform hinges on teacher self-efficacy and the capacity to realize the importance of a change in teaching practices (Chua et al., 2020). Transformational leaders understand the importance of creating a positive culture and a shared vision for learning, creating school reform (Gilstrap, 2013). Alkrdem (2020), Gilstrap (2013), and Jorgensen et al. (2020) believed reform involves educational theory and instructional best practices. Borda et al. (2018) believed education reform once focused on teaching students and now primarily focuses on student academic achievement. School reform addresses educational inequities around gender, poverty,

and class issues. Jorgensen et al. believed the backbone to education reform is a focused approach to utilizing instructional best learning practices.

Transformation happens when collective capacity is built within an organization, errors are shared amongst stakeholders, and success stories are emphasized during the collaboration process (Fossoy & Haara, 2016). School reform hinges on teacher self-efficacy and the capacity to realize the importance of a change in one's teaching practices (Chua et al., 2020). Alkrdem (2020) and Gilstrap (2013) believed transformational leadership theory reshaped education by utilizing pedagogy based on teaching and learning. Schools transform when building leaders: allow employees to engage in decision-making processes, foster employees as leaders, encourage employee collaboration, promote teamwork, and ensure advanced learning happens (Shdaifat, 2020).

Teachers participating in PLCs supported by building leadership create positive school cultures for reformation (Brown et al., 2018; Buttram & Farley-Ripple, 2016; Dougherty & Reason, 2019; Zhang & Pang, 2016). A quantitative research study examining 32 different schools revealed the critical role building leadership played in PLCs (Vanblaere & Devos, 2018). The literature on PLCs quantified how learning communities support teachers and administrators, resulting in greater student achievement (Schaap & Bruijn, 2018). The collaboration in a PLC is a powerful tool to reflect on teaching practices and create school reform (Brodie & Chimhande, 2020).

Shared Vision, Mission, and Values

Courtney et al. (2017) and Dogan et al. (2017) found that thriving professional learning communities begin with a shared vision, create a common belief system, and articulate a clear mission and vision. Schools with clear mission statements have a common purpose and goals

which indicated clarity and consensus amongst staff (Zheng et al., 2019). Vision statements are an idealistic future state or end goal of a PLC (Courtney et al., 2017). The core values of team members should be agreed upon and aligned for successful PLC implementation (Courtney et al., 2017).

Vision

One of the biggest mistakes a principal can make is failing to create a shared vision (Borda et al., 2018; DuFour et al., 2007). A school vision statement outlines the purpose, the context, and the goals which govern the institution (Allen et al., 2018). Buttram and Farley-Ripple (2016) believed trust and positive school culture are actualized when principals construct a shared vision with the staff and school community. Shared vision statements are used as a framework to plan, practice, and create success criteria for schools (Allen et al., 2018). When staff members collaborate and reflect on the vision, steps for student success become identified (Trilaksono et al., 2019).

Mission

Teams engaging in a PLC build a shared mission and common goals (Brodie & Chimhande, 2020). Mission statements provide the essential work and actionable steps to accomplishing the vision (Allen et al., 2018). The collective action of creating a mission statement with staff and school leadership results in improved student outcomes (Buttram & Farley-Ripple, 2016).

Values

Core values are the foundational beliefs a person brings to an organization (Allen et al., 2018). In creating school mission and vision statements, the staff's core values become apparent. As an educator, core values play a crucial role in identifying a fundamental purpose (Ahn, 2017).

When PLCs collectively build team norms as a group, members align personal values in the process (Mesa & Pringle, 2019).

Collective Learning

Brown et al. (2018); Buttram and Farley-Ripple (2016); Dougherty and Reason (2019); DuFour et al. (2007); and Hands et al. (2015) identified how successful schools build a collective foundation and learning culture by focusing on high student expectations during professional learning community meetings. Malcolm Knowles believed adults learn by connecting on life experiences and applying the experiences to an identified educational practice (Corley, 2011). Participants in a PLC interconnect teaching strategies with other teachers to create collaborative learning opportunities (DuFour et al., 2007). Schools with authentic professional learning communities emphasize collaboration and accountability as key elements of success (Brown et al., 2018; McBrayer et al., 2018; Trilaksono et al., 2019).

Collective learning requires going beyond superficial sharing and allows adults to establish a common purpose of engaging in meaningful dialogue to improving student achievement (Dogan et al., 2017; Rönnerman et al., 2015). When school structures are in place for teachers to come together and share common goals, identify learning targets, and set outcomes for student success, collective learning flourishes (Dogan et al., 2017; Glaze-Crampes, 2020). Thriving PLCs utilize cooperative strategies and provide a common approach for teachers and students (McBrayer et al., 2018; Rönnerman). The collaboration in a PLC allows participants to brainstorm, problem-solve, and generate ideas for new classroom learning experiences (Dogan et al., 2017).

Learning communities empower teachers to participate in activities addressing student learning needs, provide opportunities to facilitate new ideas, and offer coaching support if

necessary (Rönnerman et al., 2015). In a collaborative learning environment focused on student learning, teachers gather to analyze student data and make instructional decisions based on the data. Teachers create a shared understanding about instructional practices by aligning lessons and activities with colleagues (Zheng et al., 2019). The collective learning process allows teachers to feel prepared and confident with daily classroom instruction (McBrayer et al., 2018).

To guarantee teacher collaboration in a PLC, proper structures and components should be created (Vanblaere & Devos, 2018). Dougherty and Reason (2019) declared professional learning communities to be productive in schools when meaningful teams are established. Teachers consider a PLC team relevant when similar content and student populations or grade levels are shared (Dougherty & Reason, 2019). It is critical that interdisciplinary and intradisciplinary teams collaborate to improve teaching practices (Courtney et al., 2017). As a team, teachers work together to review student achievement data, reflecting on teaching techniques and problem-solve strategies to improve student learning (Buttram & Farley-Ripple, 2016).

Authentic collective learning occurs when PLCs focus on student learning by utilizing specific questions which drive professional learning conversations (DuFour et al., 2007). Brown et al. (2018), Dougherty and Reason (2019), and DuFour et al. (2007) identified four questions which needed to be addressed in PLC meetings and required teachers to focus on student achievement. The questions addressed what content students need to understand, how teachers know when learning was mastered, what teachers can do for students who did not understand the content, and what lessons teachers provided to enrich the learning for students who showed proficiency.

Shared Personal Practice

Teachers nurture collegial relationships with other teachers by sharing instructional practices with those in a professional learning community (Levine, 2019; Zhang & Pang, 2016). Chua et al. (2020) completed a qualitative phenomenology study in a Malaysian Chinese secondary school to address student achievement gaps utilizing learning communities. The research focus was teacher perceptions of a professional learning community, professional development, and changes in teaching practices (Chua et al., 2020). From the work of Chua, three themes emerged regarding PLCs: peer coaching was a supportive practice for teachers, shared teaching was beneficial, and collaborative professional development focused on student learning outcomes. All three themes in the Malaysian study mirrored the framework and definition of a shared personal practice as they all relate to peer coaching, shared teaching practices, and professional development focused on student data.

Andragogy, the study of adult learning, incorporates knowledge and skills through repeated routines and experiences (Gilstrap, 2013). Teachers who frequently share professional practices in a PLC engage in collaborative conversations focusing on instruction for student academic success (Dogan et al., 2017; Zheng et al., 2019). Zheng et al. (2019) believed shared practice occurs when teachers observe other classrooms to critique colleagues and provide meaningful feedback. Dogan et al. (2017) indicated how collaborative discussions allow teachers to target specific areas of student need, create viable solutions, and collectively design a plan to apply classroom interventions or enrich student success.

Feldman (2020) believed teachers do not have all of the resources alone to make notable changes for learning. One approach to reforming education emphasizes teachers sharing instructional strategies in a collaborative environment (Brodie & Chimhande, 2020). A concrete

way teachers can discuss instructional ideas in a professional learning environment is by creating grade level or subject-identified teams who collaborate and provide meaningful feedback about student performance (Zhang & Pang, 2016).

Teachers working together in a PLC develop strategies to help students reach academic potential while developing personal best practices of instruction (Brodie & Chimhande, 2020; Feldman, 2020). Working collaboratively as part of a team, teachers collectively build the capacity to strengthen trust and build relationships (Levine, 2019). Equal participation in a professional learning community helps educators achieve a deeper and richer understanding of student learning needs (Levine, 2019).

Brodie and Chimhande's (2020) research in the Data-Informed Practice Improvement Project (DIPIP) concluded, teachers in PLCs spent time sharing ideas on personal practices related to content and pedagogical knowledge. Exploring content knowledge gives teachers opportunities to articulate problems about core curriculum and explore solutions to those problems (Brodie & Chimhande, 2020). The research on the DIPIP project revealed how collaboration and shared teaching practices build opportunities for professional learning for teachers (Brodie & Chimhande, 2020).

In the Toronto public school system, teachers implemented PLCs to re-engage underachieving students in the classroom (Guerrero et al., 2017). The Engaging All Students project was created to center instruction on culturally relevant and responsive teaching practices (Guerrero et al., 2017). Guerrero et al. (2017) specified how the PLC process was the call to action to understand how schools could make systemic changes in student achievement.

The format for Engaging All Students was a professional development model which allowed teachers time to work collaboratively and share teaching experiences with others while

providing a data dive to identify key themes and areas of intervention helping to re-engage students in learning (Guerrero et al., 2017). As a culmination of the project, Guerrero shared how the team created a year-long PLC to measure the results of the shared practices on student achievement. The professional learning community project allowed the team to focus on collaboration and shared approaches to building a system for positive student change in schools (Guerrero et al., 2017).

Supportive Leadership

School leaders in the United States face state and federal demands to increase student achievement and improve classroom instruction by closing racial and ethnic achievement gaps (Gilbert et al., 2018). Building principal support for teachers is understood to be a critical factor in schools successfully implementing professional learning (Park et al., 2019). Principals influence a school system and promote academic performance by establishing goals for the school and supporting faculty members to create a positive organizational culture (Park et al., 2019). Park et al. (2019) believed transformational leaders help teachers by providing them with instructional best practices. Three identified components Park et al. (2019) had teachers use to measure supportive leaders are safety in discussing instructional issues with the principal, empowerment to make decisions about teaching and learning, and assistance with instructional practices.

Safety

Building level leadership is one of the most crucial factors in a schools' success (Gilbert et al., 2018). Leaders who create a safe and supportive school culture of learning show significant gains in student achievement (Park et al., 2019). Supportive leaders do not utilize a top-down approach but lead from the center while working alongside the staff to develop a sense

of trust and security (Dogan et al., 2017). Park et al. believed safe and supportive school cultures allow teachers to make classroom instructional decisions while students reap the benefits of learning.

Empowerment

Principals empower teacher leaders to play a critical role as the facilitator of a professional learning community (Vanblaere & Devos, 2018). The leadership team provides instructional reinforcement to teachers while creating the framework for the PLC (McBrayer et al., 2018). Alkrdem (2020) believed the role of a PLC facilitator should not be taken by the principal or assistant principal. When building leadership empowers teacher leaders to take on the responsibility of facilitating a PLC, staff participation increases (Alkrdem, 2020).

Instructional Support

A shared and supportive structure for learning requires teachers and administrators collectively work together to make decisions which benefit students (Dogan et al., 2017). The process of building teacher capacity to make instructional decisions is distributive leadership (McBrayer et al., 2018). Distributive leaders value teachers learning experiences and support instructional decisions with the administrative team (McBrayer et al., 2018).

Professional learning communities have been a part of school reform efforts worldwide because of the improvements in student, teacher, and school performance (Ho et al., 2019). Buy-in is created from staff when building leadership champions teachers as co-facilitators of a professional learning team (Dogan et al., 2017). Dogan et al. (2017) believed successful and sustainable PLCs have teacher leaders who play a critical role in the learning process (Archbald, 2016).

When building leadership consistently follows through on expectations created for school teams, PLCs thrive (Vanblaere & Devos, 2018). Gilbert et al. (2018) shared how a building principal should allow PLC facilitators to make decisions. The facilitator should be confident in knowing the decisions made will be supported by the administration team (Gilbert et al., 2018). Professional learning communities enable teacher leaders to acquire new skills in developing pedagogy to influence the outcomes for student learning (Gilbert et al., 2018).

Supportive Conditions

Dogan et al. (2017) and Ho et al. (2019) believed successful professional learning communities provide essential and supportive conditions involving relationships and structures. Relationships are critical in building teamwork and camaraderie (Zhang & Pang, 2016). A relationship-centered professional learning community has team members who are open and accept feedback, are willing to learn from each other, and create relationships built on trust (Dogan et al., 2017). Dogan et al. specified how supportive structures in a professional learning community help identify the location, time, and facilities in which the community will operate.

Relationships

A supportive relationship helps develop trust and fosters a culture of sharing and collegiality among teachers (Zhang & Pang, 2016). Dogan et al. (2017) believed professional learning community members should build confidence among teachers and maintaining a positive attitude towards colleagues. Creating a cohesive relationship in a professional learning environment is evident when members value and respect the group's feedback (Dogan et al., 2017).

Ho et al. (2019) believed in developing group norms and expectations allowed a professional learning community to create buy-in and collegiality while creating team identity.

When developing a protocol for team norms, members should agree upon a structure for learning, a commitment to actions, and a detailed process of how the group will follow through on tasks (Ho et al., 2019). Norms allow groups to potentially front-load problems in a meeting and provide a proactive framework and common language to resolve conflicts (Dogan et al., 2017). When a professional learning community struggles to create cohesion and problems arise in the group, the PLC facilitator may need to utilize conflict management skills to keep the group focused and on task (Zhang & Pang, 2016).

Structures

Doerr (2009) and Zhang and Pang (2016) believed school structures that lead to effective PLCs allow a scheduled time for teams to meet, provide physical proximity for the meeting space, and create a clear meeting framework. The importance of securing a specific time designated for PLC meetings is critical for sustaining the PLC process (Ahn, 2017). Professional learning community meetings should be considered sacred times and scheduled consistently on a school calendar (Doerr, 2009). Doerr (2009) believed if planned meetings get hijacked, the result may create poor data conversations and lead to an ineffective PLC.

Ho et al. (2019) expressed how supportive PLC structures create a safe meeting location allowing teachers to open themselves up to colleagues and develop trust. If a safe and supportive environment is not created in a PLC, participants may feel vulnerable when providing open and honest feedback to teammates (Ho et al., 2019). Other critical resources to building an effective PLC and creating supportive conditions for learning are funding, facilities, or materials to implement the process (Zhang & Pang, 2016).

Professional Development/Professional Learning

Professional development (PD) and professional learning (PL) are interchangeable terms used in education. Traditional professional development occurs in a one-time workshop-style environment where an instructor shares a best practice of instruction with a group of teachers and teachers sit passively listening to the content (Durr et al., 2020; Hauge, 2019). Durr et al. (2020) believed traditional professional learning does not promote long-term instructional improvement. Mesa and Pringle (2019) understood that contemporary professional development allowed teachers to direct and evaluate learning in a collaborative and structured environment. Traditional professional learning requires passive participation, while contemporary professional learning is a necessary practice created by educators involved in an interactive team (Mesa & Pringle, 2019).

Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) and Hauge (2019) examined how high-quality professional development is the key to teachers refining instructional pedagogy. Research indicates effective professional learning for teachers is content-focused, incorporates active learning, is collaborative, models best teaching practices, is valuable, offers feedback and reflective opportunities, and provides supportive conditions to be sustainable (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Hauge, 2019). Adults learn best when finding value in personal learning experiences (Gilstrap, 2013). Professional development supports teachers in becoming competent and confident in teaching strategies while creating learning opportunities to grow in the profession (Feldman, 2020).

Feldman and Schechter (2017) specified how teaching could be an emotionally, cognitively, socially, and physically isolating profession. A teachers' primary source of professional learning is personal experiences rather than working with others (Feldman &

Schechter, 2017). The case-study approach to the Friendship School (pseudonym) was designed to understand how special education teachers utilized the PLC process in greater depth. For the study, Feldman and Schechter (2017) conducted 42 interviews with educators over two years. In Feldman and Schechter's research, schools moved away from isolated teacher learning and became more collective by utilizing the collaborative PLC process. The collegiality in learning communities was a benefit to teachers and significantly changes teacher's personal growth as a learner (Hauge, 2019).

Distinguishing features of the professional learning community focus on teachers' long-term and embedded professional development (Feldman, 2020). Student achievement results when professional learning is part of a teacher's daily routine (Durr et al., 2020). Feldman (2020) expressed the importance of how professional learning communities push teachers to focus on collective and reflective inquiry to become better practitioners in the field. Policymakers believe a critical strategy to enhance learning for teachers is the utilization of professional development (Darling- Hammond et al., 2017).

Feldman's (2020) research identified four critical areas for teachers to understand successful PLC implementation: using practical assessments, interpreting assessment data, monitoring student progress, and adjusting instructional strategies based on student learning needs. Feldman (2020) believed professional development should be provided in all four areas to give teachers the tools to understand the proper use for student data.

Cansoy and Parlar's (2017) PLC study in Istanbul included teachers from elementary, middle, and high schools. The research showed a positive correlation between PLCs and professional development for teachers. Professional development in a PLC format allowed teachers to develop the skills, knowledge, instructional and educational practices as a

collaborative group (Cansoy & Parlar, 2017). Cansoy and Parlar's (2017) study revealed why professional learning meetings gave incompetent teachers the trust and safety needed to develop confidence in the professional practice of teaching.

Student Outcomes and Data

Transformational leaders encourage staff members to use student data to make instructional decisions (Kwan, 2020). The results of four studies indicated the primary purpose of a professional learning community was to target and improve student learning outcomes (Glaze-Crampes, 2020; Mesa & Pringle, 2019; Park et al., 2019; Zheng et al., 2019). School communities must work together and support each other to create accountability for learning (Glaze-Crampes, 2020). The utilization of student achievement data must inform and drive instructional decisions to improve student academic achievement (Mullen & Hutinger, 2008).

Student learning occurs when teachers incorporate inquiry, reflection, and analysis of student work into teaching practices (Mullen & Hutinger, 2008). To provide quality learning opportunities for students, teachers should collaborate on standards-based instruction and create common formative assessment (CFA) measures to meet learning targets (Glaze-Crampes, 2020). Teachers use CFAs to form instructional decisions. CFAs should be frequent, collaborative, adaptable, and responsive to meet the learner's needs (Bergeron, 2020).

Common formative assessments allow teachers to collect evidence about student learning, provide feedback to inform instruction, and position students to take charge of personal educational goals (Bergeron, 2020). Bergeron (2020) shared how the need for consistent assessment tools and results from CFAs show students' knowledge of the curriculum. Schools measure the effectiveness of the professional learning community by reviewing the outcomes of student assessment data (Park et al., 2019). Mullen and Hutinger (2008) identified

the importance of teachers analyzing test data in PLCs. After student assessment data is compiled, professional learning teams set goals to improve student learning, adjust lesson plans to meet student needs, refine instructional practices, and evaluate student learning outcomes (Mullen & Hutinger, 2008). Mullen and Hutinger (2008) believed that comparing student learning data with other teachers' data in a PLC team allowed teachers to identify student struggles, teachers' instructional styles, and other student issues.

Ownership of Work

If the goal in a professional learning community is to improve student learning, teachers must be reflective in teaching practices (Glaze-Crampes, 2020). Hauge (2019) showed how teachers focused on students as learners and the importance of collective teacher efficacy. When teachers have a collective sense of efficacy, better strategies promoting student thinking are developed (Hauge, 2019). Teachers should be consistent in evaluating students' work and take responsibility by adjusting learning strategies to improve student outcomes (Corley, 2011).

Teachers must commit to taking ownership of their work when becoming a National Board-Certified Teacher (Birney & McNamara, 2019). The National Board-Certified Teachers (NBCT) certification and assessment process follows the five National Board Core Propositions of teaching practices: teachers are committed to students and the learning, teachers know the subject area and how to teach the content to students, teachers are responsible for managing and monitoring student learning, teachers think systematically about practices and learn from experience, and teachers are members of learning communities (Birney & McNamara, 2019). Birney and McNamara (2019) quantified all five NBCT propositions directly reflect teachers committing to and taking ownership of the work.

According to Henderson (2018), positive organizational cultures are embodied by a foundation of trust and a sense of self-ownership. Henderson (2018) believed collaborative cultures provided the framework of professional learning communities, which promoted individual strengths, weaknesses, and opinions of all participants. Caring teachers understand the moral purpose for learning, believe in the ownership of work, and take collective responsibility for the academic and social-emotional well-being of the school community (Henderson, 2018).

Internationally, considerable efforts have been made to investigate professional development practices for teachers (Avidov-Ungar & Zion, 2019). The qualitative study conducted by Avidov-Ungar and Zion (2019) interviewed teacher leaders and program coordinators to determine perceptions of roles as leaders in a learning community. The authors expressed how a professional development community model reformed an education system, similar to the PLC structure. According to Avidov-Ungar and Zion (2019), teacher leaders in professional development communities take ownership of tasks and leverage skills to guide teams in the learning process. Avidov-Ungar and Zion (2019) discovered how professional development communities (PDCs) were a critical support factor for teachers and school leaders to create sustainability of professional learning in schools.

Zheng et al. (2019) noted how the concept of professional learning communities in China gained attraction since the early 1990s. In Chinese PLCs, teachers display collective ownership of student learning by collaborating with colleagues about instructional practices (Zheng et al., 2019). When teachers work together as part of a collaborative team, there is a collective sense of responsibility and intellectual purpose, narrowing the achievement gaps for students (Doerr, 2009).

Gap in Literature

A gap in the literature about teacher self-efficacy and perceptions around characteristics of successful PLCs exists (Gilbert et al., 2018). The perceptions need more research and can be efficiently addressed through a qualitative study. A phenomenological approach to the study allows a researcher to gather current views from teachers in a PLC. In the completed literature review of 35 articles about PLCs, six were mixed-method studies, eight were quantitative research, and 21 were qualitative. Out of the 35 articles explored, only two of them revealed information on teacher perceptions and experiences in a PLC. There is a deficiency in the comprehensive understanding of the characteristics required to implement an effective PLC and there should be more research in this area.

While teacher self-efficacy is critical to learning in a professional learning environment, consistency and fidelity are keys to the PLC success. Provini (2013) identified characteristics necessary for a thriving PLC. The factors are timely data, teacher buy-in and ownership, a school culture supportive of the learning process, and proper infrastructure for collaboration (Provini, 2013). There is a clear need for additional research focusing on teacher perceptions of PLC characteristics.

Chapter Summary

The literature review recognized professional learning communities as a collaborative environment for teachers and staff to work together and gain professional development focusing on learning for all students (Brown et al., 2018; Dougherty & Reason, 2019; DuFour et al., 2007; Hord, 1997). Professional learning communities allow teachers to work in teams and answer questions focusing on learning outcomes, school reform, and a vision for student success. The literature review revealed key themes about how professional learning communities: (a) create

school reform, (b) utilize a shared vision, mission, and values, (c) learn collectively; (d) share practices, (e) have supportive leadership, (f) enable supportive conditions, (g) require professional development/ professional learning, (h) drive student outcome data, and (i) flourish when teachers and staff take ownership of the work.

The theoretical framework for the study utilized a combination of the adult learning theory and the transformational leadership theory. Adult learning theory revealed how adults learn better when provided a rationale for learning (Gilstrap, 2013). Professional learning communities thrive when the adults understand the focus is on student learning and not on teaching practices.

A gap in the literature exists about teacher impressions around characteristics of successful PLCs (Gilbert et al., 2018). By expanding the study and developing a clear understanding of teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities, the research can help districts make instructional decisions to improve practices with professional learning communities. The findings from the study will be shared with the educational leaders in the school district being researched. The knowledge gained from the qualitative research will inform future professional learning practices worldwide and indicate ideas about how to support teachers in PLCs. The methodological approach to understand the experiences and perceptions of teachers in a professional learning community will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Professional learning communities have been extensively investigated by researchers around the world. The problem facing schools in the United States is they have invested considerable time and financial resources into what has become known to be professional learning communities while not clearly understanding the critical attributes of what makes a PLC successful (Hurley et al., 2018). The purpose of the qualitative phenomenological study was to explore teachers' lived experiences with and perceptions about professional learning communities.

Qualitative research allows participants to provide discernment and understanding of personal experiences (Richards & Morse, 2013). A qualitative phenomenological study gained insight into teachers' lived experiences who participated in professional learning communities. It is essential to understand humans' complex issues in research rather than generalize the results (Marshall, 1996). The qualitative study allowed the researcher to understand how participants derive meaning from the PLC process. The following research questions guided this study:

Research Question 1: What are the lived experiences of teachers who participate in a professional learning community?

Research Question 2: What are the perceptions of teachers who participate in a professional learning community?

The overarching research questions guided the study and helped to understand teachers' experiences and perceptions about professional learning communities. Interview questions provided teachers the opportunity to give detail about their beliefs and feelings regarding PLCs and the impact those had on student learning. The chapter consists of the study design and

rationale, the researcher's role, procedures for research, data collection processes, data analysis, reliability and validity, and ethical procedures.

The data gleaned from interviews of participants was interpreted and provided insight into the experiences and attributes of a PLC. The holistic approach of the research design rendered opportunities for understanding all parts of a professional learning community and allowed the researcher to gain insight into the research questions about perceptions and lived experiences of teachers participating in a PLC.

Research Design and Rationale

"Qualitative research is the systematic collection, organization, and interpretation of textual material derived from talk or conversation" (Grossoehme, 2014, p. 109). Grossoehme (2014) examined how a qualitative study explores the meaning of social phenomena experienced by participants in their natural element and focuses on people's stories. The stories in a qualitative study are expressed in different mediums: conversations, interviews, documentation of notes, or in visual ways (Grossoehme, 2014). The purpose of the qualitative phenomenological study was to explore teachers' lived experiences with and perceptions about professional learning communities. By utilizing a phenomenological approach to the study, data was gathered, and insights were gained about PLCs to answer the research questions.

The purpose of a phenomenological study is to gain lived experiences and a first-person point of view (Grossoehme, 2014). Phenomenology was chosen for this study to achieve a shared meaning of a teacher's perceptions in a PLC and identify what the teacher believes are the critical components of a PLC. A case study approach is not appropriate for this research, as case studies typically draw on multiple sources of information, such as documents, audiovisual materials, observations, and interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

It is critical in a phenomenological study that the research provides a logical, coherent, and systematic process to arrive at a clear description of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Rigor in research identifies different tools in a study used to ensure an investigation is maintained at high levels (Marques et al., 2015). According to Yin (2017), rigor can be identified by the research components by design, questions used in the study, unit analysis, criteria used to interpret findings, and linking data to the results.

A researcher must define the purpose of the study before creating the questions which will guide the research (Rio-Roberts, 2011). The study's advantages in the design allowed the researcher to gain insight into a school district's experiences and perceptions of PLCs. The data acquired from the research will enable the district leadership to understand baseline perceptions teachers have in working with professional learning communities. The benefit of the study is to provide additional research needed about teacher perceptions in PLCs. There have been few studies that examine teacher perceptions and experiences about PLCs.

Qualitative research is used to explore situations referring to preferences, attitudes, and reasons an event occurs (Forero et al., 2018). Individual interviews of 20 participants consisted of open-ended interview questions which provided meaningful information on teacher experiences in a professional learning community. Google Suites in Google format allowed for appropriate time and resource use. The study did not cost any money to the researcher, and the use of Google Suites allowed for time to be allocated adequately for each of the 45-minute interviews.

The design of the study has advantages and benefits for the researcher. The study was conducted at the school district that the researcher had access to with little to no difficulty. Teachers in the school district were required to participate in PLCs; therefore, there were

multiple teachers that were able to participate, if willing, in the study. Using Google as a way to record the interviews, capture notes in Docs, and record trends in Sheets, was a great benefit to the design.

Notes were taken on responses teachers made to the interview questions. A recording of all virtual interviews was used to capture the transcripts of the information. Each recording was transcribed by the researcher for review and shared with each individual participant. Participants checked the transcription process for the validity and reliability of the research.

The organization of data should begin when the transcribed interviews are studied and reviewed through procedures of phenomenal analysis (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) identified the methods as horizontalization of the data, listing meaning units, clustering themes, and developing descriptions of the experiences. These procedures were followed once the data from the interviews and transcript checking of participant responses was completed.

After the interviews were completed, the data was analyzed and thoroughly reviewed. Utilizing phenomenology is the most feasible approach as it allows the researcher to get a global perceptive from all participants. Moustakas (1994) believed by exploring the perspective of many participants, the researcher can gain insight into many different angles and sides of an experience.

Role of the Researcher

In a phenomenological study, the primary instrumentation source is typically the researcher (Balikci, 2019). As the director of a professional development department in a school district in Arizona, the researcher lead a qualitative phenomenological study which identified the experiences and perceptions of teachers who participate in professional learning communities. The researcher did not have any power and was not an evaluator of any of the participants in

their teaching role. The participants and the researcher were employed in the same school district.

Participants who had immediate relatives employed within the school district were included in the selection process. No incentives were provided for participation in the study. No minors under the age of 18 participated in any part of the research. All aspects of the data collection and instrumentation process avoided words and phrases that could be misconstrued as unethical. Leyva-Moral and Feijoo-Cid (2017) shared the importance of the confidentially of participants in the data collection process. All procedures were regularly reviewed to ensure participants felt safe, comfortable, and were provided anonymity. Names and schools were signified with codes. Participant anonymity was preserved as their names will be identified as P1 for participant number 1. Participants were informed that any point in the study, they could withdraw and have their data removed upon request.

All research must have truth value and neutrality to be considered worthwhile (Morse et al., 2002). Qualitative research must ensure the trustworthiness and reliability of data by utilizing credible criteria (Morse et al., 2002). Morse et al. (2002) shared how strategies to obtain credibility should include peer debriefing, persistent observation, and member checks. The recommended strategies mentioned were deployed to manage elements that could have undermined the reliability and validity of interpretation in data collection.

Personal beliefs and views can affect the study in qualitative research. Moustakas (1994) explained the importance of the Epoche in qualitative research. Epoche is when the research sets aside any prejudgments, preconceived ideas, or biases about performing clean research. Bracketing is how the researcher sets aside personal experiences and biases, previous knowledge, and theories about the research topic to truly understand the participants' views. Moustakas

(1994) explained how to bracket, write down information, during research. Bracketing allows for an open dialog or discussion with other researchers about personal experiences, past knowledge, and biases. Moustakas (1994) mentioned how memos or a bracketing journal are an effective way to document when bias arises in research. In the final report, all bracketed information was noted.

Research Procedures

In this qualitative phenomenological study, the researcher gathered data from teachers and educational professionals in a large school district in Arizona. The lens utilized in any investigation is the viewpoint to establish validity (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Interviews were used to gather input from teachers who participate in a professional learning community. Feedback obtained from the interviews helped gather information regarding teacher perceptions and their participation in a professional learning community. Yin (2017) believed the data collected utilizing a structured and reliable process allows a researcher to gain insight into participants' needs.

Population and Sample Selection

The sample in this study represented the population of teachers in a large K-12 school district in Arizona. The school district of study was composed of more than 2,000 teachers and services more than 30,000. The sample population included an interview with 20 teachers in kindergarten through twelfth grade who participated in a PLC during the 2021-2022 school year.

The sampling method included all teachers being invited by email to participate in the study. Participants were chosen by utilizing convenience sampling for the study. Participants were identified by school level: elementary school (ES), middle school (MS), and high school (HS). The purposeful sampling was to ensure that all teachers from elementary, middle, and high

schools were included in the study. The study's inclusion and exclusion criteria was based on teachers with at least three years of teaching experience and who were participating in a PLC at their site.

The researcher followed the district protocols and IRB approval process for including or excluding any group of teachers. The interview process consisted of reaching out to the Human Resource Department of the participating school district for approval (see appendix A). Twenty teachers were chosen from the sampling of all elementary, middle, and high school teachers. The research study allowed the researcher to analyze the PLC process within an individual school setting and across multiple school settings (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

The research instrument used was an interview with 20 teachers. Member checking was conducted to verify the validity and reliability of the data. Convenience and purposeful random sampling were employed to recruit participants who have experiences with the phenomenon being studied and are geographically close in proximity to the researcher (Ellis, 2020; Suri, 2011). Convenience sampling assisted in gathering experiences and perceptions of educators that were easily accessible to the researcher. The purposeful sampling helped to identify teachers in elementary, middle, and high schools.

Grossoehme (2014) expressed how sampling strategies illustrate a theme of study. Participants for the interview were chosen as a sample for the analysis. The participants selected for the study were elementary, middle, and high school teachers who were part of a PLC in the district. Interview participants were contacted by email or phone and provided information related to the study. A follow-up email was sent out to participants to outline the research procedures and protocols. When a potential participant agreed to join the study, a consent form was sent via email (see Appendix B). The consent form gave each participant an explanation of

their rights, procedures, data confidentiality, and security (Grossoehme, 2014). The participants then received an additional email with a welcome letter, and a schedule for the interviews (see Appendix C). After the interviews were conducted, the final interaction was the member reviewing the transcripts. For the member checking process, the participants were sent the transcripts with an email asking if they agree with the transcripts or if they had additional information to add to the statements.

Instrumentation

In this qualitative research study, the researcher utilized recorded interviews and member checking for validity and reliability of data. Interviews were conducted utilizing Google Meet for recording and transcription. If Google Meet was not possible, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, phone calls, or in-person interviews was going to be used to complete the research.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used to compile detailed information for the qualitative study. The use of semi-structured interview questions allows for flexibility in the instrumentation, allowing participants' more in-depth responses (Patton, 2015). The interview questions were designed to enable the participants to provide information in an open-ended and free-flowing format which will help gain insight related to the research questions (see Appendix D).

The first challenge a researcher must face when preparing a phenomenological investigation is to formulate questions that provide social meaning and personal significance (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) described how the questions must be clear, concrete, and defined so the investigation's intent is evident. A definite characteristic of human sciences seeks to uncover the meaning of human experience (Moustakas, 1994).

A phenomenological interview often begins with a brief conversation to create a relaxed and trusting atmosphere (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) believed it is the interviewer's responsibility to create a comfortable climate for participants to respond honestly and comprehensively with their answers. Moustakas (1994) shared the importance of obtaining participant experiences through the informal interview process utilizing open-ended questions when conducting a qualitative interview.

For a novice researcher to provide a high-quality interview, the questions must first be field-tested by subject matter experts (SMEs). Subject matter experts are individuals comprised of a unique set of skills, knowledge, and expertise in a particular content area (Mattoon, 2005). The SMEs chosen had an expertise recognized in the area of professional learning communities and data collection.

Field-tested interview questions used in this study allowed for validity and reliability (see Appendix D). Interview questions were all aligned to the two research questions. Each of the seven interview questions identified the research question it was coorelated to signified by RQ#1 or RQ#2. Appendix E shows the written email communication regarding the interview questions and the responses from the SMEs. Different suggestions were made by SMEs. The first SME asked to add the word "data" to question number five; this was completed. The second SME suggested that all questions asked the participant what their expectations were, not what they perceive other teachers' perceptions would be. Originally the questions were worded differently, but changes were made to get the participant's perspective and not have the participant take on the role of another member.

Member Checking

In the qualitative research process, the researcher carries the role of collecting and analyzing data, leaving room for potential research bias (Birt et al., 2016). Birt et al. (2016) argued subjective interests and beliefs might influence the study. The idea of member checking shows a reliable way to enhance validity in research while mitigating research bias (Grossoehme, 2014). Another way the researcher mitigated research bias was to practice asking the research questions without any facial expressions or other body language influences. Once the analysis of interviews was completed, the findings were shown to each participant for validation. All participants viewed the results and gave needed feedback about the investigation to provide trustworthiness of the data. Grossoehme (2014) suggested that the researcher ask the members if they see themselves in the words or ideas presented.

Data Collection

The data collection process and procedures for the qualitative research study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the American College of Education administration before any research was done. No data were collected until official approval was validated. The School District granted permission to use the facilities, interview participants, and collect data. All participants in the study were sent an informed consent agreement (see Appendix B). The contract was sent via email and collected by the researcher before data collection was granted. The researcher had a list of participants, and once the agreement was signed, they were checked off the list and moved to the interview planning stage of the process.

Individual interviews were done with 20 teachers through Google Meet. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for accuracy. Participants and the interviewer sat face to face in front of the computer to answer the interview questions verbally. Information from the

interviews was collected and recorded utilizing a coding process. Coding can be used to examine participant's responses by labeling short phrases that summarize the content (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019).

Each participant received an email with a calendar notification of the date and time for the interview. The interviewer initiated the meeting with a Google Meet call. Once the interview began, the interviewer let the participant know that the session was being recorded and asked for approval. The interviewer took approximately 30 minutes to ask and receive answers for all interview questions.

Once the interview was completed, the interviewer thanked the participant and shared that a follow-up email with transcribed information will be sent for participant approval. The data was compiled using Google Documents which was sent to participants for member checking. Participants were asked to either approve the transcripts or make changes for clarification.

Data Analysis

A model for data collection and analysis w used. First, the organization of data begins when the transcribed interviews are studied and reviewed through procedures of phenomenal analysis (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) explains the importance of textural descriptions in phenomenology and how the descriptions include understanding the importance of documenting one's feelings, ideas, thoughts, and examples that portray the entire experience. The phenomenological approach was critical for the study. Interviews were completed in 30 minute increments allowing the researcher approximately ten hours of data to review.

The organization of data begins when the transcribed interviews are studied and reviewed through procedures of phenomenal analysis (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) identified the

processes as horizontalization of data, listing meaning units, clustering themes, and developing descriptions of the experiences. Moustakas (1994) procedures above were followed after the data from the interviews and transcript checking of participant responses was completed.

During the interview, notes were taken on the responses teachers make to the questions and documentation on teacher expressions when answering the questions. A recording of all virtual interviews was done in Google Meet to capture the transcripts of the information. Each recording was transcribed by the researcher for review and shared with all participants. Participants checked the transcription process for the validity and reliability of the research (Grossoehme, 2014).

Different methods of determining similarities in relationships are used when transcribing data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Listing and preliminary grouping or horizontalization of information will be the first step (Moustakas, 1994). Clustering and thematizing data will help with finding commonalities of information (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher documented participant reactions to the questions.

The researcher gathered the information from the interviews and check with members during the data analysis process. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) explained, any person who conducts an interview must document any similarities in the data as potentially valuable information. The use of Google Sheets and Documents helped organize the coding process. Utilizing a coding technique assisted in the process of generating themes. Themes were later divided into similar subcategories for the organization of results. The main ideas found were used to compare with the existing literature.

The data-analysis process was comprised Google Meet virtual recordings and notes taken during the participant interviews. The participants were permitted to grant the request for audio

recording. During and after the discussions, the researcher took field notes to document the findings. Groenewald (2004) explained how field notes could be completed in various ways, and multiple coding methods can be utilized to help the researcher make sense of the interviews. Field notes are a critical part of the data analysis because the researcher's notes are interpreting the participants' lived experiences (Groenewald, 2004)

Reliability and Validity

Potential threats to the reliability and validity of data could occur in a qualitative research study. McGarry (2019) shared the importance of how researchers must identify their own beliefs and practices and how they could interfere with the research process. Reflexivity is the process of identifying yourself and your role in the research process (McGarry, 2019). Reflexivity is essential for reflecting on personal biases and perceptions so the researcher does not misinterpret the data.

For a qualitative study to be reliable and valid, the analysis must address trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, and transferability. The results of the study were credible because of the allotment of time the researcher engaged with interviewees during the interview questions (Forero et al., 2018). Forero et al. (2018) believed a study shows dependability by providing detailed tracking of data during the collection process. The research indicated transferability in results when the data can be generalized and transferred to PLCs in other schools/districts (Forero et al., 2018). Triangulating data is a validation process that the researcher used to increase the study's trustworthiness (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Triangulation of the interview data and member checking was used to establish credibility and dependability.

The researcher should implement strategies to create trustworthiness by eliminating bias (Moustakas, 1994). In Moustakas' (1994) research, he mentions the bracketing technique to limit

research bias. The bracketing process allowed the researcher to set aside personal experiences with PLCs and identify the participants' views without having a clouded perspective.

Ethical Procedures

All data collection was performed anonymously to protect the privacy of all participants. Data was protected and saved on a personal drive. Names and school sites were omitted from the research to protect the participant's privacy. Data will be kept for three years and then erased from the drive and destroyed. The IRB approval process was completed along with all participants' human informed consent documents (American College of Education, 2016). Permission was obtained from the school district's Human Resources Department (see Appendix A). To ensure the research was ethical, the researcher created an informed consent agreement that included: participation in research, the purpose of the research, the procedures of the research, the risk/benefit of the research, and confidentiality in the research (see Appendix B).

Information about participants will not be shared with anyone outside of the research. During the defense of the doctoral dissertation, collected data was coded and will be presented to the dissertation committee. The hand written data collected will be kept in a locked file cabinet and virtual data will be stored in an encrypted computer file. Any information about participants was coded and does not directly correlate to identify participants. The researcher is the only one who knows the information about participants, and will not share this with anyone.

The Belmont report indicates that the ethical guidelines of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice are three critical issues that need to be addressed in any research involving human subjects (Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1979). Respect for persons is critical during the study. Individuals will be treated as autonomous agents, and those persons are entitled to protection (Office for Human Research Protections, 2021). Beneficence is

seen as an act of kindness or charity. During the study, the research must not harm the participants (Office for Human Research Protections, 2021). The participant's identifying information will be kept confidential. Justice is meant as the fairness of distribution. The research did not ask anyone to participate in the study whom the researcher had power over.

There were no modifications or adjustments that were needed during the study. All participants had the same opportunity to participate. Requirements for participation were kindergarten through twelfth-grade teachers in the Arizona school district researched, with at least 3 years of PLC experience. Three years of PLC experience was chosen since most teachers who participated in PLCs last year did so during a pandemic year and probably collaborated in PLCs virtually.

Chapter Summary

A qualitative phenomenological approach served as the research method for this study. The qualitative data collected from the interviews addressed the research questions. The overview provided the details and descriptions of all areas of the study related to the methodology, research design, role of the researcher, research process and procedures, instrumentation of data, data collection procedures, analysis of data, reliability, and validity of the data, and ethical procedures followed through the research process. The next chapter will detail the data gleaned from the interviews used in the qualitative phenomenological study.

Chapter 4: Research Findings and Data Analysis Results

As highlighted in Chapter 3, the data collected included an interview with 20 elementary, middle, and high school teachers. Participants were regular education teachers, special education teachers, alternative education teachers, and instructional coaches. The data findings were organized around the two research questions. Data collection was completed, and final emerging themes were developed.

Considerable research demonstrates how professional learning communities improve student learning and ultimately student achievement (Brown et al., 2018; Buttram & Farley-Ripple, 2016; Corley, 2011; Dougherty & Reason, 2019; DuFour et al., 2007; and Hands et al., 2015). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore teachers' lived experiences with and perceptions about professional learning communities. The problem facing schools in the United States is they have invested considerable time and financial resources into what has become known to be professional learning communities while not clearly understanding the critical attributes of what makes a PLC successful (Hurley et al., 2018).

Throughout this chapter, the data collection and analysis methods used in the study, the results on teacher perceptions, and experiences with professional learning communities were explored. Chapter 4 consists of the study findings, the analysis of the results, the data collection, data analysis, results, reliability, and validity of the results presented, and a summary.

The following two research questions guided this study:

Research Question 1: What are the lived experiences of teachers who participate in a professional learning community?

Research Question 2: What are the perceptions of teachers who participate in a professional learning community?

Data Collection

The qualitative research study's data collection process and procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the American College of Education on November 11, 2021. Once the IRB approval was obtained approval, an email invite was sent out with a Google Form link to each educator. Immediately following the distribution email, the volunteers for participation appeared in a Google Sheet. It was rewarding to see more than 20 educators representing elementary, middle, and high schools expressed interest in the study and signed the consent form to set up an interview time slot.

When participants responded to the email through Google Form, the researcher divided participants into three groups: (a) elementary school, (b) middle school, and (c) high school educators. A follow-up email was sent to all interested participants. Participants were to do the following:

1. Read and virtually sign the informed consent agreement.
2. Fill out the Calendly invite sent via email to register for an interview time slot of the participant's preference.
3. Agree to be in attendance virtually for the interview time slot chosen by the participant.

Participants were informed that an interview could not occur until they signed the consent agreement. Informed consent agreements were signed by participants and collected. Forms were printed out and put into a log, and a secured online Google folder was created. The entire process was completed by the end of November 2021. Once participants chose the interview times, a Google Calendar invitation was sent to verify the virtual meeting's date, time, and location. Meetings were set up in 1-hour time blocks, allowing enough time for participants to understand the purpose of the study thoroughly. Participants were able to discuss questions

regarding the study, answer interview questions, and understand the next steps in the member checking process. Interviews were divided into segments: (a) 15 minutes for introductions, (b) 30 minutes for interview questions, and (c) a 15- minutes to summarize participant questions and next steps.

The interview started with a welcome and thank you message from the researcher. The purpose of this welcome message was to allow participants to feel comfortable with the researcher, understand the research and interview process, clarify the anonymity of the study, and develop trust with each participant. Participants were each notified that the Google Meet recording feature recorded the interview, and an additional transcript application was added to Google Chrome. The researcher informed the participants how these tools would help provide clarity and a clear understanding for reliable transcription.

Participant and interviewer virtually sat face-to-face so all questions could be answered verbally. Information from the interviews was documented by Google Meet video recording, Google Meet Transcripts, and field notes were taken by the researcher. All three formats were analyzed for the data. Each interview took approximately 1 hour depending on the participant's length of responses, questions they asked, or knowledge of the professional learning community process.

Some plans were not thoroughly thought through in the planning stages for data collection, and additional modifications were made to enhance the data collection procedures. One step not considered was how to get each participant's consent form signed and returned electronically. Consent forms were sent to participants electronically. Using an electronic signature saved time and secured accurate response rates.

Unexpectedly, many participants wanted to participate in the study and quickly responded. Some interviews occurred, and the interviewee did not provide quality information. Twenty-two participants responded to the research request. The data from interviews with participants who lacked PLC knowledge or detail was not used in the study. The only unusual or surprising event during the interviews was some participants were very vulnerable and passionate about PLCs. To protect human anonymity and the process, several participants said, "I feel so strongly about this; you can share my name."

One processing change to note is the start date of the data collection. In the IRB approval process the start date was reported to begin in January of 2022. The Teacher of Record (TOR) approved to start research as soon as IRB approval was given. Hence, the study started in November of 2021. Thank you notes were sent to each participant to show gratitude for their help and support in this study.

Data Analysis and Results

Qualitative research provides participants an opportunity to share details about their settings and experiences, further allowing the researcher to analyze essential themes on the research topic (Creswell & Miller, 2000). A qualitative approach is critical for this study design, as it allows the researcher to gain a rich understanding of teachers' professional learning community experiences. Creswell and Creswell (2018) shared how a thematic analysis approach to research could be used to break down information (see Table 1).

Table 1

Thematic Analysis Procedures

Phase	Process Description
1. Data Identification	Explore data looking to identify possible themes
2. Coding	Systematically code relevant ideas into themes
3. Identify Thems	Generate explicit definitions of themes through analysis refinement
4. Reporting	Finalize themes connecting to research questions and literature

Note. The four phases of the thematic analysis procedures with a description of each phase.

The chapter presents key findings derived from 20 educator interviews. Each participant answered seven interview questions. Elementary, middle, and high school participants were interviewed to give a district-wide perspective on PLCs. Grade level bands were representative of the school district (see Table 2). Each of the seven interview questions were linked to one of the two research questions.

Table 2

Comparison of District Schools to Participants Interviewed by Grade level

	District School Totals	Participants Interviewed	District Schools by Percent	Participants by Percent
Elementary School	22	10	64.7%	50%
Middle School	7	5	20.6%	25%
High School	5	5	14.7%	25%

Note. Results show the comparison of schools in the district to how many educators participated

The design of this qualitative study allowed participants to present interview answers freely, in any order, and at their discretion. The free-flowing process made participants feel like there was no right or wrong answer. A preview of the interview questions was added to each

participant's Google Meet invitation to allow for processing and reflection before the interview began. The data from interviews organized in this chapter is not based on a specific order of importance.

Information is presented in this chapter by common themes that participants brought to light when sharing their experiences and the current state of the professional learning communities in which they are working (see Table 3).

Table 3

Lived Experiences Connected with Themes

Theme	**Lived Experiences**
Communication/Collaboration	"Collaboration is my strength, one plus one equals three when we work with others."
Team Structure	"PLCs can be a challenge when you do not have a homogeneous structure."
Leadership	"Our facilitator has high expectations for our PLC."
PLC Challenges	"Coordinating schedules with teammates is difficult."
Data Usage	"Formative and summative assessment data is brought to PLC meeting."

Note. Above is a list of themes identified with a direct quote from educators.

Themes were derived from participants' perceptions and experiences in their professional learning community. The themes were created to answer the research questions (see Table 4). Overviews of the results are presented in the following several sections.

Table 4

Themes Aligned with Research Questions

Research Question 1: What are the experiences of teachers who participate in a PLC?	1. Communication/Collaboration 2. Team Structure
Research Question 2: What are the perceptions of teachers who participate in a PLC?	1. Leadership 2. PLC Challenges 3. Data Usage

Note. Above is a list of themes identified and aligned to the research questions.

Communication/Collaboration

A wide variety of components that contribute to effective PLCs include school reform, shared vision, mission, values, collective learning, shared personal practice, supportive leadership, and supportive conditions. None of these components could exist without effective communication between members of the organization. Participants used the terms "communication" and "collaboration" interchangeably. Nearly all participants use either communication or collaboration when describing their PLC. Some participants mentioned how positive communication affects the climate and productivity of the PLC, while others shared experiences when communication was not as effective.

Positive Effect

When participants mentioned that communication positively impacted their professional learning community, most often, it was attributed to the PLC facilitator. It was noted that PLC facilitators are the key to informing the group about agendas, topics to discussions at meetings, and information about data collection and dissemination. A couple of participants even mentioned that the PLC facilitator could make or break the PLC process.

Collaboration was seen in a positive light when one participant described collaboration as " A time to sit down and share ideas or concerns while helping each other." An elementary

school teacher described communication as “A way to network and support each other.” In general terms, most participants described collaboration as a time to sit down together to discuss teaching strategies. Out of the 20 interviews completed, 19 participants used collaboration, communication, and sharing with others when describing their PLC.

Negative Effect

When communication in a PLC group was seen as unfavorable, it typically had to do with the participants in the team. Participants described their PLC as having a positive impact and mentioned how they have worked with complex teams. Veteran teachers who have been part of a PLC for more than a decade shared how they have seen the transition of PLCs and mentioned that the PLC process had taken a "long time to grow" into what they believed was the intent of a PLC.

Teachers from other school districts mentioned that PLCs have evolved. One interviewed instructional coach said she has even seen PLCs become a "gripe fest" to complain about parents and kids. She mentioned how PLCs have taken time to "iron out the process." Teachers who said their PLC environment was negative attributed this characteristic to the team members. The negative attributes mentioned from those participants described how the PLC members were either not participating, some are only doing it for the money or wanted everything their way.

Team Structures

Team structures are determined by participants who meet together regularly. Different teams meet based on their independent needs. Groups include the most sensible participants who can contribute to the discussions. Most participants reported that the team structure either positively or negatively influenced the effectiveness of the PLC.

Positive Influence on the PLC

All participants viewed the intentional development of teams as a positive factor in the PLC process. Most participants expressed the importance of working with their grade level team at the elementary level because they had the same curriculum and instructional needs. Some elementary special area teachers wanted to work with other elective teachers who taught the same content. Elementary art teachers wanted to work with other art teachers to collaborate and share curriculum and instructional strategies that worked with students around the district.

Negative Influence on the PLC

One of the struggles an English Language Learner (ELL) teacher discussed was how she teaches at multiple grade levels and has the challenge to work with one specific PLC; she "does not fit anywhere" because she has students in third through sixth grade. Another similar example a gifted specialist shared is when she works with other gifted teachers around the district, they do not have a lot in common. She shared that her students all work at different levels than other students do, so together in their PLC, all gifted specialists do not have shared data.

Several middle school participants mentioned struggling to have their department broken into grade levels for PLC meetings. One example is when a middle school math team gathered for their PLC meeting, and there were two seventh grade teachers and two eighth grade teachers who did not teach the same content area. Together, they discussed mathematical strategies and broke out into grade levels later in the meeting to discuss teaching standards. Once the group broke into smaller groups, each PLC had only two participants to have data conversations.

A high school English Language Arts (ELA) teacher shared her experience working with her English department in their PLC. While one might think working in an ELA PLC

would be straight forward, it was not. She discussed that not only does she teach tenth grade ELA, but she also teaches several honors classes. She mentioned that she is "the only tenth-grade honors ELA teacher," so her standards and expectations for students are very different from regular ELA teachers. She expressed that she "can't work with other teams as much as she would like to."

Leadership

More than half of the participants mentioned their leader as a critical factor in their professional learning communities' influence, organization, and facilitation. When the 11 participants used the word leadership, they shared the role of their building-level leader and the duties of the PLC facilitator. It was mentioned that both key leadership roles were critical for the PLC process to be successful.

Campus Leadership

Participants included positive and negative comments regarding their building-level leadership. Many participants mentioned the campus leader as a critical role in establishing a high-quality PLC. Many participants said they had been in several different PLCs in different schools, both in and out of the district. One participant mentioned how each building level principal interpreted the PLC process differently. An attribute of the principal participants valued was that their principal encouraged, supported, and reinforced the requirement of attending and participating in PLC meetings. One high school teacher mentioned the principal supported having required mathdepartment meetings weekly to share timely data collection conversations. One elementary school teacher shared how the PLCs at their school were effective due to the administrative expectations put on teachers about the PLC process.

Teachers also mentioned the adverse effects of building-level leadership regarding PLC

expectations and accountability. One middle school teacher said her concern with the campus leadership was how rigid the PLC process was. She noted that teams could not have the freedom and autonomy to decide on PLC agenda items. All agenda items were required to be data-driven. Another elementary school teacher mentioned that the notes they were to turn in to their principal were very rigid and needed to have specific items in the notes. The rigidity did not allow for flexibility and freedom for the PLC members.

Facilitator Leadership

Some qualities brought up regarding effective PLC facilitators were leader organization, a clear meeting agenda, data-driven learning, and on-task behaviors of participants. All participants that brought up their PLC facilitator were complimentary to how the group was run. Only one member said the facilitator chose the agenda items and ran the meeting without any input from the team, which made the PLC not as valuable as it could have been. Six high school participants expressed that their PLC agendas were "busy, full, and regimented." The same high school participant shared that the PLC meetings were "intense and content-heavy" but well organized.

PLC Challenges

When analyzing the data regarding the PLC challenges of participants, almost unanimously, the three common ideas that emerged were time, shared understanding of the PLC process, and team member participation. Elementary, middle, and high school teachers mentioned each of the three ideas. When participants were asked about PLC challenges, it was interesting to see how there were not many variances in the answers between participants and between grade levels.

Time

The most recognized challenge by all participants was how there is not enough time in the day to meet with their professional learning community members effectively. Time was mentioned in various ways: scheduling PLC meetings, the length of time for each session, and the required time allocation for the PLC process. Out of the 20 interviews completed, time was mentioned one of the three ways described.

Common Understanding

Throughout the interviews, it was evident that participants felt as though there was not a district or even school level of shared knowledge about the PLC process. One elementary participant mentioned how the "lack of PLC structure in the district" and "lack of consistency" leads to ineffective PLCs. Another elementary school teacher shared how teachers do not understand the "true intention of a PLC." Elementary school participant number 8 stated, “There is no defined parameter or good clear definition of PLCs."

One middle school teacher shared how it was evident that there is not a "clear understanding of what PLCs are." Another teacher was vulnerable and said, "Across the board, everyone does PLCs differently, and there is no set way that teachers in our district do PLCs." The same teacher even mentioned that she participated in this study because she "wanted to know how the PLC process works." Middle school participant number 5 stated, "Teachers are all at different levels of understanding PLCs."

Team Member Participation

Another highly recognized challenge by all grade levels was team member participation. Several times, it was stated that team members could either "make or break" the PLC process. Working relationships and trust were the key ideas mentioned concerning team member

participation. Participants noted the importance of PLC members feeling comfortable working together. One middle school teacher stated the role of trust and the value placed on working relationships. She mentioned that if people do not like each other, they cannot trust each other. When all participants were asked what motivates them to participate in their PLC, the consistent answer was collaboration and cooperation with their teammates.

When team member participation is seen negatively, the idea stems around team members wanting to do things their way. Other participants mentioned how it is difficult to get everyone on board with the same ideas. One middle school teacher stated that she enjoys working with her current group, but she has been in a past PLC that had conflicts and made it difficult.

Data Usage

Using the correct data in the right way can help educators make instructional decisions that significantly impact student learning and motivation. When participants were asked how their PLC team uses data to examine student growth and what specific benchmarks, assessments,and data they used, it was refreshing to see that almost all 20 participants said, "yes, they do!" When participants used the term "data," it was mentioned in three ways: (a) common formative data, (b) school assessment data, and (c) district benchmark data.

Common Formative Assessments (CFAs)

When a high school teacher shared that her PLC team used CFAs, she stated that the team worked together to create similar units of literature and uniform vocabulary lessons to assess student growth. The PLC team looked at the English Language Arts classic books studies and made a standard list of vocabulary terms and context words for each book. From that list, they created formative assessments for the identified terms. Students then were assessed on the

words in a multitude of ways. Several high school teachers even mentioned how they are now doing common final exams school and district-wide.

School-specific Assessments

Many teachers mentioned different forms of school assessments to share data in their PLCs. Teachers gathered data through Galileo, MAP, NWEA, Spring Math, Ninety-five Percent Group, exit tickets, and a data wall. The elementary school, participant number 8 said that her team uses pre-and post-assessments with writing. Their PLC team collaborates to evaluate their students' progress by utilizing a writing checklist. By working together in their PLC to grade these assessments, the team can have consistency in grading.

District Assessments

Many teachers used the district prescribed assessments as a data collection tool for their PLCs. Teachers gave specific details on how they used StudySync, SchoolCity, DIBELS, Wonders, Really Great Reading, Hagerty, Mimics, STAR Reading, and Eureka Math to share common areas of student strengths and weaknesses. One specific elementary school teacher even mentioned how her team keeps a spreadsheet of their CFAs to track their progress.

Discussion Question Responses

Phenomenology was used in this study to identify the way teachers experience and develop meaning about their professional learning communities in a first person's perspective. Shared experiences and opinions were identified to create robust descriptions. Bracketing was used, which allowed the researcher to put aside personal biases and beliefs about professional learning communities. The semi-structured interview process allowed participants to freely share their perspectives without responding to leading questions. Participant perspectives were analyzed to find common themes.

Horizontalization was also a method used in the study to treat all participant data equally. One person's response was equally as important as another participant's. Quotes relevant to PLC experiences were used to code and identify themes during the data analysis process. The next section includes a detailed description of each discussion question and quotes from participants.

Question 1: Tell me about your experience with PCLs (RQ #1).

All participants interviewed had over 3 years of teaching experience and had been a part of multiple professional learning communities inside and outside the school district. Because question 1 was open-ended and teachers had various PLC experiences, this question yielded the most varied responses. Almost everyone mentioned the importance of teachers working in a collaborative environment for the betterment of students. Some participants said their team uses data when describing their PLC, while others focused on their team aspects.

One clear comment from many participants was how each school, department, grade level, or team structured their PLCs differently. Elementary school Participant 8 was explicit in her statement when she asked, "What is a PLC?" She also said, "There is not a defined parameter." Elementary school participant 9 shared the different expectations of her PLC when she worked at the middle school in the same district compared to her elementary school PLC focus and expectations.

Question 2: What are some challenges or barriers you have experienced with your PLC team during this past school year (RQ #2)?

When teachers shared their challenges and barriers in their PLC, 16 different responses came from 20 interviews. Of those 16 responses, 4 had the highest frequency for PLC challenges. The four were: (a) meeting time/scheduling, (b) inconsistent expectations, (c) difficult team members, and (d) teachers who do not have others teaching a common

curriculum.Teachers' top challenge is the lack of common expectations for professional learning communities.

Responses indicated there is not enough time built into the daily schedule to allow for quality PLCs to be done. Elementary school participant 1 said, "One hour is not enough time to meet, plan, and collaborate with our team. Middle school participant 2 mentioned how it was "difficult getting time to get the whole group together." Another middle school teacher strongly felt that the PLCs at his school tend to become more of a department meeting instead of a true PLC. His belief was supported by this statement, "If we do not have a dedicated time during the duty day, PLCs will not work."

Inconsistent PLC expectations came up as a frequent challenge for many teachers. Elementary school participant 2 mentioned how she felt a lack of professional development and training for teachers working in a PLC. The same participant stated, "There is a lack of structure for PLCs and no consistency."

Several participants mentioned that a common PLC challenge could be the PLC team members themselves. Elementary school participant 10 said, "Teammates can make or break your PLC." High school participant 2 said, "It is difficult to work with teachers who do not want any change." Elementary school participant 1 said, "I was in a past PLC when everyone wanted things their way, and that was difficult." Elementary school participant 9 said, "This year, the teacher I work with is old school and very difficult to work with, so we do not do anything in common."

High school participant 3 discussed how it is sometimes challenging to facilitate a PLC when all math teachers are not teaching the same curriculum. Her statement was, “I am the only one teaching regular trigonometry and precalculus. Two teachers teach honors trigonometry and

precalculus, and one is our calculus teacher. We do not necessarily give the same tests and quizzes." English Language Learners and special education teachers also shared how their job can be unique to the school, and their challenges were to find shared data to share with teachers.

Question 3: How do you transfer instructional strategies from your PLC team meetings into your classroom, and what evidence do you use to support the success of the strategies (RQ #2)?

Most of the respondents (15 out of 20) mentioned collaboration with the team as the primary way to transfer instructional strategies in their classroom. High school participant 1 shared when her PLC meets, all members bring notes, pictures, and test evidence from students. Together they discuss problems, questions, or concerns with their students regarding the data.

Middle school participant 2 shared how these questions drive their PLC, "What is our goal? What are the standards? What can we use to measure success? What strategies will meet our goal?" Elementary school participant 3 said, "In our PLC, we discuss instructional strategies because that is our commonality."

Common assessments were the typical way participants show evidence to support studentsuccess. Twelve participants mentioned common assessments are what their PLC utilize to compare student growth scores. Depending on grade level or content taught, teachers noted how various school, district, and state assessments were used for comparison in their PLC meetings. Elementary school participant 4 shared how her PLC analyzes their common assessments. The same participant authored:

Students take an assessment prepared by the PLC team. Once the assessment is complete, the teachers bring the assessments to the PLC for the team to share. The group discusses how the students did and where students went wrong. Together, PLCs looked at the scores of the

assessments. The team compared the end of the year to the beginning of the year assessments.

The PLC team also compares quiz results to look for student strengths.

Question 4: What motivates you to participate in your PLC? Why (RQ #1)?

A variety of different responses were behind the motivation of being in a PLC. Some responses were: (a) using the information to plan instruction, (b) problem-solving as a group, (c) learning together, and (d) sharing common goals. The top two answers revealed that teachers were motivated by collaboration and student success. High school participant 1 said, "I love working with other similar content area teachers and appreciated the comraderies and friendships built in our PLC." Another high school participant said their PLC members offer support, advice, ideas, and resources. That same high school participant 5 stated, "The PLC helps me become a better teacher."

Question 5: Do you follow up with your PLC team to examine student growth/challenges?If so, what benchmarks, assessments, and data do you use? Please explain (RQ #2).

Most of the respondents (19 out of 20) responded *yes* to examining student growth in theirPLC. The only *no* response came from a middle school teacher. When teachers shared the data used to analyze student growth scores, there were mixed results. Answers were similar to Question 3. The highest responses were data from common formative classroom assessments and district benchmark assessments.

Question 6: Has instructional coaching and teacher mentoring supported the intent of your PLC team? Would you please give an example (RQ #1)?

Instructional coach or teacher mentor support in a PLC had a 50-50 split on the responses. Ten participants said they had used a coach in the past or currently use a coach in their PLC, while the other 10 participants said they had not utilized an instructional coach. participant who

used an instructional coach in their PLC used the coach for modeling instructional practices, resources, or data chats. Elementary school participant 2 stated, “Our instructional coach works with teachers during data chats. She helps teachers identify red and yellow students, not in special education. The coach supports our teachers in building tier two small groups of instruction.”

Participants who said their PLC does not use an instructional coach or mentor did not explain why. They stated their PLC had not used the coach at their site. Elementary participant 10 said, “We have a coach, but she has not been a part of our PLC.”

Question 7: Are there any other successes or opportunities for improvement with yourPLC process that you would like to share (RQ #1 & 2)?

The last question did not yield many new responses. Much of what was stated in the first six interview questions were repeated differently during Question 7. Given the open-ended nature of the question, 10 of the 24 different responses spoke highly of their PLC experiences. PLC successes mentioned were student growth, planning with team, monetary benefit, and administration support. participant shared how they love their PLC group, collaboration, and networking with colleagues. High school participant 6 authored, "Our facilitator does a great job of keeping everyone informed of PLC meeting dates, standards, and our guaranteed viable curriculum."

Participants who shared areas for improvement in their PLC described 14 different suggestions. The most common cause of concern and areas to improve upon was time and scheduling a PLC meeting and the need for professional development training in PLCs. All responses to the discussion questions encompassed participants' lived experiences in a PLC. While participants shared a wide variety of experiences, overall, many of them mentioned

similar themes and critical ideas that occurred. In general, respondents' perspectives regarding professional learning communities and their experiences boiled down to relationships with teammates and having enough time for PLCs to develop thoroughly.

Reliability and Validity

Researchers must be aware of their own beliefs and values and the possibility of those interfering with the research process (McGarry, 2019). McGarry identified reflexivity as identifying the researcher's role in the research process. To be reflexive in the research process, the researcher must put personal biases and perceptions aside. The reflexive process included listening thoroughly to interviewees. When participants asked for input or individual perceptions, they were told it could be shared after the interview. The interview started with a statement about the researcher's role and the importance of keeping personal views free from the interview process.

For the research to have credibility and reduce research bias, member checks were used to document the accuracy of the information and any research bias (Grossoehme, 2014). Participants were notified before the interview that member checking would be done as a follow-up to ensure there was no research bias and the study had credibility. Member checking was defined to participants as a process of sharing information captured during the interview with participants to validate and verify ideas, thoughts, and perceptions. Participants were sent a Google Form to review with highlighted statements for each of the seven questions. Participants were then to read, edit if necessary, and sign the document in agreement that the information represented their thoughts and ideas.

Confirmability and dependability are achieved in similar ways. The results were confirmed with participants and compared to other participant responses during the data

collection process. Member checking is a common technique used to establish research credibility and allow participants to provide feedback on interpreting information, verifying accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The verification process was done before any data analysis. Member checks were completed during the data collection and data analysis processes.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) described how transferability is evident when the researcher provides a thick description of the phenomenon for the reader. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), athick description is when a qualitative researcher provides explicit details of participants' lived experiences while analyzing data. The researcher used objective data and made direct connections to details, allowing educators to conclude reasonable transferability.

Interviews were conducted during times and dates that were convenient for the participants. Time slots were available from early morning hours to late evening hours. The options allowed the participants time and availability that worked with their schedule.

Participants were able to choose weekdays, weekends, and holidays off of work. Different times permitted the participants to feel free from stress and not feel tired after a long day's work. The goal was to create a safe, comfortable, and anonymous research environment allowing participants to share their experiences with no value or judgment being placed on them.

Consistency in qualitative research is defined as the degree to which a study is systematic(Brown, 1988). Brown further explained how consistency in research design should be consistentboth internally and externally. By using inter/intra-rater reliability with member checks, the researcher was able to verify the consistency of information collected. Another way consistency was evident in the study was by utilizing a script application during the interview process. An opening statement was read to each participant. Research questions were asked one at a time, anda closing statement was read verbatim to participants.

Summary

The data analysis and results explained information gleaned from teachers about their experiences and perceptions with professional learning communities. The responses gathered from the participants indicated both positive and negative experiences with PLCs. The shared experiences were compiled into five themes: (a) communication/collaboration, (b) team structure, (c) leadership, (d) PLC challenges, and (e) data usage. By recognizing teachers' experiences and understanding the perceived challenges faced during professional learning communities, school and district level leadership can devise a plan to support the PLC process for the future.

In the next chapter, a description of the findings and interpretations from the study are explained. The beginning of Chapter 5 is a summary compromised of participants' responses regarding their perceptions and experiences in a professional learning community. The end of the chapter explains the study's limitations, implications, recommendations for future research, and a conclusion.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

Teaching is a profession that influences the lives of future generations and is sometimes viewed as an isolated profession. Many teachers are ill-equipped with the skills, tools, and environment to collaborate with a team to improve student achievement. Professional learning communities (PLCs) were designed to mitigate the isolated environment for teachers. After reviewing the literature on PLCs, there are few studies addressing teacher perceptions. Studies showed a gap in the literature about what teachers know about PLCs. This qualitative phenomenological study helped fill the literature gap by gaining insight and understanding about teachers' experiences and perceptions of PLCs. The study will assist educational leaders and provide tools to support teachers working in a PLC. The adult learning and transformational leadership theories guided the study. The qualitative phenomenological study aimed to effectively understand teachers' perceptions, skills, and tools needed to participate in a PLC. The following questions guided the study: What are teachers' experiences who participate in a PLC, and what are the perceptions of teachers who participate in a PLC? Twenty teachers were purposefully sampled from a pool of 2,000 teachers in a Phoenix school district. The responses gathered from participants indicated both positive and negative experiences with PLCs. The shared experiences were compiled into five themes: (a) communication/collaboration, (b) team structure, (c) leadership, (d) PLC challenges, and (e) data usage. Instructional leaders can devise a PLC plan utilizing these teachers' experiences and perceived challenges. A recommendation for future research should include teachers from similar surrounding school districts.

Keywords: professional learning communities, teacher perceptions, shared vision and values, collective learning, shared personal practice, supportive leadership, and *conditions.*

The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' lived experiences with and perceptions about professional learning communities. Participants in this phenomenological study responded to open-ended questions via Google Meet. The data from the interviews were recorded with a Google Meet extension and the interviewer transcribed all responses the participants shared. Themes were generated to organize the results, which were later linked to the research questions. Two research questions guided the study:

1. What are the experiences of teachers who participate in a professional learning community?
2. What are the perceptions of teachers who participate in a professional learning community?

Results indicated teachers had both positive and negative perceptions and experiences with professional learning communities depending on their current and past experiences working with a PLC. Five clear themes derived from the research regarding PLCs. The following sections are a review of the findings, interpretation, summary of the study, limitations, recommendations, implications for leadership, and an overview of the chapter.

Findings, Interpretations, and Conclusions

Critical information was obtained from each participant regarding their perceptions and experiences in a professional learning community. The participants had positive and negative experiences working in a PLC. There were five common themes identified from the feedback: (a) communication/collaboration, (b) team structure, (c) leadership, (d) PLC challenges, and (d) data usage. These themes showed a connection to experiences working in PLCs, companionship with others, and teacher efficacy.

Communication/Collaboration

Participants shared several reasons why communication and collaboration were a critical foundation in professional learning communities. Their responses aligned with DuFour et al. (2007) about the importance of a PLC interconnecting teaching strategies with colleagues to create a collaborative and accountable learning community. Many teachers expressed the value they have when working with their team to collaborate and create lessons with their PLC that improve teaching and learning. Dogan et al. (2017) shared the same connection about the value of collaboration in a PLC and how it allows participants to work together to generate new ideas for learning experiences for students.

A critical factor that contributes to a successfully run professional learning community is the ability of participants to communicate and collaborate with one another effectively. In almost all interviews, participants mentioned their team members were the main reason for PLC experiences to be positive or negative. Participants shared how positive communication in a group influences the climate, productivity, and outcome of the team. When participants mentioned their PLC experience was ineffective, it was attributed to poor communication or collaboration with the team members.

Levine (2019) and Zang and Pang (2016) realized the critical nature of nurturing teacher collegiality. Research indicated how teachers foster working relationships with others when they share instructional best practices with their PLC (Levine, 2019; Zang & Pang, 2016). When participants perceived their PLC experience was successful, they attributed it to a positive working relationship with their team.

Team Structure

When participants discussed the team structures in their PLCs, different formats and configurations existed amongst members. Effective PLCs are created around school structures that support a collaborative environment. Participants concurred with Doerr (2009) and Zang and Pang (2016) about how high-quality structures allow teachers to meet at a scheduled time, provide a common meeting space, and have a clear meeting framework for collaboration to occur.

Most participants described their PLC meeting as a grade level, while others were facilitated by department or content area. Most participants agreed that the team structure at their school was inclusive and incorporated necessary teachers as part of their team. Teachers of English Language Learners (ELL) and gifted students mentioned their frustration about not having a perfect fit for their PLC. Teachers of ELL students and students who are gifted described how they sometimes worked with core content area teachers and other times with grade level teachers to support students. These concerns were similar from school to school.

Leadership

More than half of the participants in the study mentioned how leadership is a critical factor in having successful PLC implementation. Park et al. (2019) shared the importance of building principal support for teachers to have a high functioning PLC. When leadership was mentioned during the interviews, both the building principal and the PLC facilitator were used as a reference. Participants shared how the school principal's involvement was the key to establishing effective PLCs.

When participants mentioned having a positive leadership experience, they concluded by saying their principal encouraged, supported, and reinforced the PLC implementation process.

Individuals who shared the success of their PLC said their facilitator was organized and inclusive of all team members. Park et al. (2019) described supportive leaders as principals who are safe to talk to, empower teachers to make instructional decisions, and help teachers foster best instructional practices.

PLC Challenges

Throughout the participant interviews, several PLC challenges were mentioned by all participants. Some challenges teachers were experiencing in their current PLC were time, common expectations, staying focused on agenda items, keeping the team on the same lesson, and working with difficult team members. While there were varied challenges amongst participants, three particular challenges appeared as common themes. The three main challenges were time, shared understanding, and team member participation.

Time

The number one challenge expressed in PLCs by elementary, middle, and high school teachers was time. Dogan et al. (2017) clearly stated how time, location, and facility were all critical attributes of a supportive PLC structure. It is important for PLC teams to designate an agreed upon meeting time (Ahn, 2017). Teachers mentioned how there was never enough time to meet effectively with their PLC members and complete the tasks necessary to individualize instruction for students. Out of the 20 interviews completed, time was mentioned in a variety of contexts. Teachers referred to time when scheduling PLCs, the length of the meetings, and meeting the required allocation of hours for the PLC process to occur. Teachers felt that meeting for one hour at a time was not enough to dive into data and create effective data-driven instructional decisions.

Common Understanding

Having a school or district shared level of understanding about the PLC process came up in interviews as the second-highest concern by teachers. Thriving PLCs have a shared mission, vision, and values amongst members (Courtney et al., 2017; Dogan et al., 2017). Zeng et al. (2019) believed when schools have a clear mission, purpose, and goals for a PLC, there is clarity amongst staff.

Participants often mentioned a lack of structure and consistency in the PLC process. The inconsistencies were described as school-to-school, grade level-to-grade level, and school-to-district. Participants expressed frustration regarding the lack of professional development and clarity expected in PLCs districtwide. These inconsistencies showed lack of common mission, vision, and values for school PLC expectations. Just as Borda et al. (2018) and DuFour et al. (2007) mentioned in their work, one of the greatest mistakes leaders make is failing to create and communicate their vision.

Allen et al. (2018) stated that professional learning communities should collaboratively engage in creating a shared mission and common goals. Mission statements allow teams to create actionable steps towards accomplishing their vision (Allen et al., 2018). In all interviews, no participants mentioned creating a shared mission, vision, or goals for their PLC.

Team Member Participation

Nearly all participants interviewed shared how PLC members can either make or break a PLC experience. Levine (2019) declared that teachers are able to create collective capacity by building relationships with their PLC team. Building relationships and trusting others were described as critical factors in having a healthy and productive PLC.

Participants who reported having a positive PLC experience shared that their team members collaborated and communicated well with one another. Brodie and Chimhande's (2020) research revealed the correlation between shared teaching practices and teacher professional learning. When a participant had a negative experience in their PLC, the terms *conflict* and *difficult* were associated with a member of their team.

Data Usage

According to Glaze-Crampes (2020), Mesa and Pringle (2019), Park et al. (2019) and Zheng et al. (2019), the foundational purpose of professional learning communities is to improve student achievement. Student achievement data should inform teachers about learning and drive decisions to improve student achievement (Mullen & Hutinger, 2008). All participants articulated how their team used data to inform their PLC work.

Participants described different types of assessments used in elementary, middle, and high school classrooms that informed instructional decisions made. Some assessments the participants in the study used were: classroom, common formative, school, and district benchmark assessments. When teachers use common formative assessments with their students, evidence can be collected and shared during PLC meetings to create educational goals (Bergeron, 2020). Regardless of how assessments were used in PLC work, all participants mentioned the value of using data in PLCs to improve student achievement.

Limitations

The first limitation from Chapter 3 of having too many participants volunteer for the study, did not occur. The second limitation was lack of detailed responses from participants. There were 22 respondents interested in participating in the research. Two of the participants did not give a lot of detail with many of the questions. Because those two participants did not have

sufficient feedback to generate themes, their interviews were not counted in the research. Substantive responses were used in the data analysis ensuring credibility and validity of findings. A third limitation was the context of the study. The location was limited to one school district in Phoenix, Arizona. The instrumentation of the study was the fourth limitation. A future study could include focus groups, a longitudinal study, or participants who were not teachers.

Confirmability was established by participants affirming the information used in the study. Member checking was used to establish confirmability. Redundant ideas and themes raised in the study provided substantial confidence in participant responses. Credibility was established through peer debriefing and persistent observations. The research indicated transferability in results when the data was generalized and transferred to PLCs between schools. The study showed dependability by detailed tracking of data during the collection process.

The participants in the study were teachers in one school district who were currently participating in a professional learning community. The results included participants from elementary, middle, and high schools. Teachers from different grade levels, departments, and schools all had different experiences in PLCs.

Recommendations

The outcomes from this study provide potential topics for future research on professional learning communities. Future research can be conducted to incorporate teachers from different schools or districts around the state. Including a variety of participants from diverse settings could enhance the generalizability of the results. If teachers from other schools or districts were queried to determine their PLC perceptions and experiences, themes could then be compared with the school district researched. Interviewing teachers from other districts would illuminate the generalizability of the study.

An additional layer that would allow the researcher to reveal teachers' perceptions in a PLC would be to disaggregate teachers' years of experience into categories for comparison. The categories could include three to five years of PLC experience, six to eight years of PLC experience, nine to 11 years of PLC experience, and more than 11 years of PLC experience. The participants' themes could be identified by the years of teacher PLC experiences.

Another recommendation for future research would be to survey a large population of teachers from one specific school. By saturating one population, the study could reveal similar or different themes. If a large population from one school was chosen, the study could be compared to other schools to see if similar themes arose.

A final recommendation for future research would be doing a quantitative study on male versus female teachers' perceptions and experiences of professional learning communities. The study could compare the different themes from a male and female perspective. A mixed-method study could link the collaboration and collegiality of men and women.

Implications for Leadership

Principals must engage in specific leadership attributes and behaviors to steward quality professional learning communities for their school. Fullan (2007) identified the importance of initiation, implementation, and sustainability in the change process. Hord's (1997) work uncovered critical leadership abilities that helped improve professional learning communities by recognizing that leaders must share authority, engage without dominating in work, and allow staff to facilitate the work.

Identifying specific leadership practices and behaviors will provide school leaders with the framework and strategies that could be used to increase student academic gains. By encompassing Fullan's (2007) and Hord's (1997) work on leadership and change, school leaders

should be able to recognize the components most critical to thriving professional learning communities. Identifying these important components and implementing them will allow principals to avoid common pitfalls in organizing and facilitating effective PLCs for their school.

As evidenced by teacher responses, principals transform PLC practices when they lead with a positive attitude, are supportive, and have a vision for the PLC process. These three ideas were shared by many participants. Just as Alkrdem (2020), Berkovich (2017), and Kwan (2020) mentioned, transformational leaders focus on teacher growth, support their staff, and clearly articulate what is needed to improve student learning outcomes.

Conclusion

School reform predominantly centers around state accountability measures that are reflected by students' reading and math scores (Borda et al., 2018). The backbone to educational reform is utilizing instructional best practices to increase student achievement (Jorgensen et al., 2020). Professional learning communities are recognized as a best practice of instruction used to increase student achievement (Brown et al., 2018; Buttram & Farley- Ripple, 2016; Corley, 2011; Dougherty & Reason, 2019; DuFour et al., 2007; and Hands et al.,2015).

Professional learning communities have evolved over the past 20 years. The work of Hord (1997), DuFour (2004), and DuFour et al. (2007), allowed school PLCs to create sustainable changes in teaching practices resulting in an increase in student achievement. Despite this declaration throughout the educational community, a mystery remains in identifying what characteristics of a professional learning community teachers use to increase student achievement.

The findings of this study indicated there were five essential themes of PLCs at elementary, middle, and high schools. The themes are communication/collaboration, team

structure, leadership, challenges, and data usage. Participants had both positive and negative experiences with their PLCs depending on the quality of the elements presented in each of the five categories described.

Professional learning communities create a framework for teachers to collaborate as a group rather than work in isolation. New knowledge from this study was recognized in different facets of the research. Evidence showed most teachers who participated in a successful PLCs enjoyed working as a team and collaborating with others who shared a common curriculum. Many participants mentioned the importance of having enough time during the school day to create a PLC environment conducive to focusing on student achievement. Time was recognized as the most challenging hurdle.

Teachers expressed the lack of clarity around professional learning communities throughout the school district. Most teachers were looking for consistency and direction regarding PLC expectations. When PLCs were mentioned negatively, the comments involved conversations around the lack of team member participation and poor attitude.

School and district leaders are investigating ways to develop and implement PLCs successfully. Principals need a clear understanding and vision about the structures to implement PLC successfully. The study results parallel the literature on this topic and provide guidelines for practitioners to facilitate the implementation of professional learning communities in a variety of settings. Key themes helped provide a structure and allow leaders to understand the influences and roadblocks of professional learning communities.

Implications of this research explored what teachers know and can do in professional learning communities. For school and district-level leadership to plan, coordinate, and execute PLCs effectively, it is essential to understand teachers' perceptions and experiences around the

process. This study may allow principals to understand teacher perceptions regarding PLCs while learning how to compensate for any possible challenges that may arise.

References

Ahn, J. (2017). Taking a step to identify how to create professional learning communities-Report of a case study of a Korean public high school on how to create and sustain a school based teacher professional learning community. *Canadian Center of Science and Education, 10*(1), https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v10n1p82

Alkrdem, M. (2020). Contemporary educational leadership and its role in converting traditional schools into professional learning communities. *International Journal of Educational Leadership and Management, 8*(2), 144–171. http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/ijelm.2020.4298

Allen, K.-A., Kern, M. L., Vella-Brodrick, D., & Waters, L. (2018). Understanding the priorities of Australian secondary schools through an analysis of their mission and vision statements. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 54*(2), 249-274. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X18758655

American College of Education. (2016). *IRB Handbook*. https://ace.instructure.com/courses/860602/pages/institutional-review-board

Archbald, D. (2016). System-level instructional leadership- A district-level leadership case implementing PLCs in schools. *NCPEA International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation, 11*(2), 116-150. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1124011.pdf

Avalos, B. (2011). Teacher professional development in teaching and teacher education over ten years. Teaching and Teacher Education: An International Journal of Research and Studies, 27(1), 10-20. https://doi.org/ 10.1016/j.tate.2010.08.007

Avidov-Ungar, O., & Zion, R. (2019). The characteristics and perceptions of teachers engaged in leading professional communities. *Teacher Development, 23*(3), 325-344. https://doi.org/10.1080/13664530.2019.1607772

Balıkcı, A. (2019). A phenomenological research on the evaluation of teacher candidates from the perspective of school administrators. *International Journal of Contemporary Educational Research, 6*(2), 468-482. https://doi.org/10.33200/ijcer.563490

Baxter, P., & Jack, S. (2008). Qualitative case study methodology: Study design and implementation for novice researchers. *The Qualitative Report,13*(4), 544-559. https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol13/iss4/2

Bergeron, L. (2020). An investigation into the relationships among middle school teachers' beliefs about collaboration, their perceptions of formative assessment, and selected teacher characteristics. *Current Issues in Education, 21*(3), 1–18. http://cie.asu.edu/ojs/index.php/cieatasu/article/view/1714

Berkovich, I. (2017). Will it sink or will it float: Putting three common conceptions about principals' transformational leadership to the test. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, *46*(6), 888-907. https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1741143217714253

Birney, L., & McNamara, D. (2019). The curriculum and community enterprise for restoration science STEM + C professional learning model: Expansion and enhancement. *Journal of Curriculum and Teaching, 8*(3), 122–131. https://doi.org/10.5430/jct.v8n3p122

Birt, L., Scott, S., Cavers, D., Campbell, C., & Walter, F. (2016). Member checking: A tool to enhance trustworthiness or merely a nod to validation? *Qualitative Health Research*, *26*(13), 1802–1811. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732316654870

Borda, E., Warren, S., Coskie, T., Larson, B., Hanley, D., & Cohen, J. (2018). Cross-disciplinary, whole school education reform in secondary schools: Three critical

components. *School-University Partnership, 11*(1), 46–56. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1179959

Brodie, K., & Chimhande, T. (2020). Teacher talk in professional learning communities. *International Journal of Education in Mathematics, Science and Technology, 8*(2), 118–130. https://doi.org/10.46328/ijemst.v8i2.782

Brown, B. D., Horn, R. S., & King, G. (2018). The effective implementation of professional learning communities. *Alabama Journal of Educational Leadership*, 5, 53-59. https://eric.ed.gov/?q=source%3A%22Alabama+Journal+of+Educational+Leadership%2&id=EJ1194725

Brown, J. D. (1988). Consistency in research design: Categories and subcategories. *Statistics Corner.* 23-26. https://hosted.jalt.org/sites/jalt.org.teval/files/21_01_23_Brown_Statistics_Corner.pdf

Bryant, J. E., Escalante, K., & Selva, A. (2017). Promising practices: Building the next generation of school leaders. *Journal of School Administration Research and Development, 2*(1), 32–41. https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Promising Practices%3A-Building-the-Next-Generation-Bryant Escalante/09fba8a3a13b8a0d65b2d85dfc8ff46c5803fa32

Buttram, J. L., & Farley-Ripple, E. N. (2016). The role of principals in professional learning communities. *Leadership & Policy in Schools, 15*(2), 192–220. https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2015.1039136

Cansoy, R., & Parlar, H. (2017). Examining the relationships between the level of schools for being professional learning communities and teacher professionalism. *Malaysian*

Online Journal of Educational Sciences, 5(3), 13-27. https://ejournal.um.edu.my/index.php/MOJES/article/view/12521

Chua, W. C., Thien, L. M., Lim, S. Y., Tan, C. S., & Guan, T. E. (2020). Unveiling the practices and challenges of professional learning community in a Malaysian Chinese secondary school. *SAGE Open, 10*(20). https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244020925516

Corley, M. A. (2011). Adult learning theories. *Teaching Excellence in Adult Literacy*, 59. https:/doi.org/10.31729/jnma.5292

Courtney, M. B., Constantine, J., & Trosper, J. (2017). Best practices guidebook: Professional learning communities. Online Submission. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED602054

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixedmethods approaches*. Fifth edition. SAGE Publications, Inc.

Creswell, J. W., & Miller, D. L. (2000). Determining validity in qualitative inquiry. *Theory Into Practice, 39*(3), 124. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15430421tip3903_2

Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M. E., Gardner, M., & Learning Policy Institute. (2017). *Effective teacher professional development. Learning Policy Institute.* https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/effective-teacher-professional-development report

Department of Health, Education and Welfare. (1979). *The Belmont report – Ethical principles* and guidelines for the protection of human subjects of research. http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/belmont.html

Doerr, H. (2009). PLCs demystified. *Principal, 89*(1), 26-30. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ852904

Dogan, S., Tatik, R. S., & Yurtseven, N. (2017). Professional learning communities

assessment: Adaptation, internal validity, and multidimensional model testing in Turkish context. *Educational Sciences: Theory and Practice, 17*(4), 1203-1229. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1148355.pdf

Dougherty, C., & Reason, C. S. (2019). Inside PLCs at work: Your guided tour through one district's successes, challenges, and celebrations. Solution Tree Press.

DuFour, R. (2004). What Is a "Professional Learning Community"? *Educational Leadership, 61*, 6-11. http://www.washougal.k12.wa.us/teach_learn/images/plc_article.pdf

DuFour, R., DuFour, R. B., Eaker, R. E., Many, T. W., & Mattos, M. (2007). Learning by doing: A handbook for professional learning communities at work. *Teacher Librarian, 34*(4), 46. http://soltreemrls3.s3-website-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/solution tree.com/media/pdf/learning-by-doing-3rd-preview.pdf

Durr, T., Kampmann, J., Hales, P., & Browning, L. (2020). Lessons learned from online PLCs of rural STEM teachers. *Rural Educator, 41*(1), 20-26. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1251481.pdf

Ellis, P. (2020). Sampling in qualitative research (1). *Wounds UK, 16*(3), 82–83. https://doi. org/10.1136/

Egizii, R. (2015). Self-directed learning, andragogy and the role of alumni as members of professional learning communities in the post-secondary environment. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences,* 174, 1740-1749. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.01.832

Feldman, J. (2020). The role of professional learning communities to support teacher development: A social practice theory perspective. *South African Journal of Education, 40*(1), 1-8. https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v40n1a1668

Feldman, N., & Schechter, C. (2017). Exploring the professional learning community in a special education school serving pupils with Autism. *International Journal of Special Education, 32*(1), 2-36. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1237130.pdf

Forero, R., Nahidi, S., De Costa, J., Mohsin, M., Fitzgerald, G., Gibson, N., McCarthy, S., & Aboagye-Sarfo, P. (2018). Application of four-dimension criteria to assess rigour of qualitative research in emergency medicine. *BMC Health Services Research, 18*(1), 120. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-018-2915-2

Fossoy, I., & Haara, F. O. (2016). Training master's thesis supervisors within a professional learning community. *International Journal of Higher Education, 5*(4), 184-193. https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v5n4p184

Fullan, M. (2007). *The new meaning of educational change*. Jossey-Bass

Fullan, M. (2000). The Three Stories of Education Reform. *Phi Delta Kappan, 81*(8), 581–584. https://michaelfullan.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/13396051100.pdf

Gilbert, K. A., Voelkel, R. H., Jr., & Johnson, C. W. (2018). Increasing self-efficacy through immersive simulations: Leading professional learning communities. *Journal of Leadership Education, 17*(3), 154-174. https://doi.org/10.12806/V17/I3/R9

Gilstrap, D. L. (2013). Why do we teach? Adult learning theory in professional standards as a basis for curriculum development. *College & Research Libraries, 74*(5), 501-518. https://doi.org/10.5860/crl12-334

Glaze-Crampes, A. L. (2020). Leveraging communities of practice as professional learning communities in science, technology, engineering, math (STEM) education. *Education Scences,10*(8), 190. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci10080190

Groenewald, T. (2004). A phenomenological research design illustrated. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 3*(1), 42-55. https://doi:10.1177/160940690400300104

Grossoehme, D. H. (2014). Overview of Qualitative Research. *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy, 20*(3), 109–122. https://doi.org/10.1080/08854726.2014.925660

Guerrero, C., Shahnazarian, A., & Brown, M. F. (2017). Queer(y)ing culture through professional learning communities: A reimagining of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy. *Penn GSE Perspectives on Urban Education, 13*(2). https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1143356

Hands, C., Guzar, K., & Rodrigue, A. (2015). The art and science of leadership in learning environments: Facilitating a professional learning community across districts. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research, 61*(2), 226-242. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1090689

Hauge, K. (2019). Teachers' collective professional development in school: A review study. *Cogent Education, 6(*1), 1-12. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/2331186X.2019.1619223

Hayes, R., Titheradge, D., Allen, K., Allwood, M., Byford, S., Edwards, V., Hansford, L., Longdon, B., Norman, S., Norwich, B., Russell, A. E., Price, A., Ukoumunne, O. C., & Ford, T. (2020). The incredible years® teacher classroom management programme and its impact on teachers' professional self-efficacy, work-related stress, and general well-being: Results from the STARS randomized controlled trial. *The British Journal of Educational Psychology, 90*(2), 330–348. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12284

Henderson, D. (2018). Staff collaboration for student success: Implementation challenges of professional learning communities and response to intervention. *BU Journal of*

*Graduate Studies in Education, 10(*2), 39-44. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1230351.pdf

Ho, J., Ong, M., & Tan, L. S. (2019). Leadership of professional learning communities in Singapore schools: The tight–loose balance. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 48*(4), 635-650. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143219833698

Hord, S. M. (1997). Professional learning communities: Communities of continuous inquiry and improvement. https://sedl.org/pubs/change34/plc-cha34.pdf.

Hurley, N., Seifert, T., & Sheppard, B. (2018). An investigation of the relationship between professional learning community practices and student achievement in an Eastern Canadian school board. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, 185, 4-18. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1179189

Jennex, M. E. (2015). Literature reviews and the review process: An editor-in-chief's perspective. *Communications of the Association for Information Systems*, 36, 139-146. https://doi.org/10.17705/1CAIS.03608

Jesson, J., & Lacey, F. (2006). How to do (or not to do) a critical literature review. *Pharmacy Education, 6*(2), 139-148. https://doi.org/10.1080/15602210600616218

Jorgensen, H. T., Agergaard, S., Stylianou, M., & Troelsen, J. (2020). Diversity in teachers' approaches to movement integration: A qualitative study of lower secondary school teachers' perceptions of a state school reform involving daily physical activity. *European Physical Education Review, 26*(2), 429-447. https://doi.org/ 10.1177/1356336X19865567

Kuhnert, K. W., & Lewis, P. (1987). Transactional and transformational leadership: A constructive/developmental analysis. *The Academy of Management Review*, *12*(4), 648–657. https://doi.org/10.2307/258070

Kwan, P. (2020). Is transformational leadership theory passé? Revisiting the integrative effect of instructional leadership and transformational leadership on student outcomes. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 56*(2), 321-349. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0013161X19861137

Levine, T. H. (2019). Overcome 5 PLC challenges. *Learning Professional, 40*(3), 64-68. https://learningforward.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/tool-overcome-5-plc challenges.pdf

Leyva-Moral, J., & Feijoo-Cid, M. (2017). Participants' safety versus confidentiality: A case study of HIV research. *Nurse Ethics, 24*(3):376-380. doi: 10.1177/0969733016669865

Lincoln, Y.S. and Guba, E.G. (1985) *Naturalistic Inquiry.* SAGE, Thousand Oaks, 289-331. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767(85)90062-8

Linneberg, M. S., & Korsgaard, S. (2019). Coding qualitative data: A synthesis guiding the novice. *Qualitative Research Journal*, *19*(9), 259-270. https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-12 2018-0012

Liu, P. (2018). Transformational leadership research in China (2005-2015). *Chinese Education & Society, 51*(5), 372-409. https://doi.org/10.1080/10611932.2018.1510690

Marques, K., Camacho, R., & Alcantara, C. (2015). Assessment of the methodological rigor of case studies in the field of management accounting. *Revista Contabilidade & Finanças, 26*(67), 27-42. doi: 10.1590/1808-057x201500280

Marshall, M. N. (1996). Sampling for qualitative research. *Family Practice, 1* (6), 522-525. http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/fampra/13.6.522

Mattoon, J. (2005). Designing and developing technical curriculum: Finding the right subject

matter expert. *Journal of Industrial Teacher*, *42*(2), 61-76. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ753127.pdf.

McBrayer, J. S., Chance, J., Pannell, S., & Wells, P. (2018). A system-wide, collaborative purposeful, and sustainable distributed leadership plan utilizing teacher leaders to facilitate professional learning communities. *Educational Planning, 25*(4), 27-46. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331211610_A_system wide_collaborative_purposeful_and_sustainable_distributed_leadership_plan_utilizing_teacher_leaders_to_facilitate_professional_learning_communities

McGarry, K. (2019). Reflexivity as a process for coming into knowing. *LEARNing Landscapes, 12*(1), 155-170. https://eric.ed.gov/contentdelivery/servlet/ERICServletaccno=EJ1245327

Mesa, J. C., & Pringle, R. M. (2019). Change from within: Middle school science teachers leading professional learning communities. *Middle School Journal, 50*(5), 5-14. https://doi.org/10.1080/00940771.2019.1674767

Morse, J. M., Barrett, M., Mayan, M., Olson, K., & Spiers, J. (2002). Verification strategies for establishing reliability and validity in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 13–22. https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690200100202

Moulakdi, A., & Bouchamma, Y. (2020). Elementary schools working as Professional Learning Communities: Effects on student learning. *International Education Studies, 13*(6). https://doi.org/doi:10.5539/ies.v13n6p1

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Sage Publications, Inc.

Mullen, C., & Hutinger, J. (2008). The principal's role in fostering collaborative learning communities through faculty study group development. *Theory Into Practice, 47*(4), 276-285. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405840802329136

Mullen, C. A., & Schunk, D. H. (2010). A view of professional learning communities through three frames: Leadership, organization, and culture a look at professional learning communities through three contextual frameworks: leadership, organization and culture. *McGill Journal of Education, 45*(2). https://doi.org/: https://doi.org/10.7202/045603ar

Office for Human Research Protections. (2021). *Read the Belmont Report*. https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/belmont-report/read-the-belmont-report/index.html

Park, J.-H., Lee, I. H., & Cooc, N. (2019). The role of school-level mechanisms: How principal support, professional learning communities, collective responsibility, and group-level teacher expectations affect student achievement. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 55*(5), 742-780. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X18821355

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice*, (4th ed.). SAGE Publications, Inc.

Pearce, J. M. (2018). How to perform a literature review with free and open source software. Practical Assessment, *Research & Evaluation, 23*(8). https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1372&context=pare

Perry, A. (2011). *The data teams experience: A guide for effective meetings*. Thousand Oaks, CA: The Leadership and Learning Center.

Preast, J. L., & Burns, M. K. (2018). Effects of consultation on professional learning communities. *Journal of Educational & Psychological Consultation, 29*(2), 206–236.

https://doi.org/10.1080/10474412.2018.1495084

Provini, C. (2013). Why don't professional learning communities work? *Education World.* https://prism.scholarslab.org/prisms/ bfcf99d8-7dad-11e5-902c-8ea0d2149075/visual ize?locale=es

Raharinaivo-Falimanana, J. (2017). Strengthening professional learning communities: Case study of three neighboring schools in Madagascar. *ZEP: Zeitschrift Für Internationale Bildungsforschung Und Entwicklungspädagogik, 40*(2), 18. https://doi.org/10.25656/01:16963

Richards, L., & Morse, L. (2013). Readme first for a user's guide to qualitative methods. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *5*(1). https://doaj.org/article/807f2890af03491899d17b18ef76ea5b

Rio-Roberts, M. (2011). How I learned to conduct focus groups. *Qualitative Report, 16*(1), 312–315. https://nsuds.nova.edu/tqr/vol16/iss1/22/

Rönnerman, K., Edwards-Groves, C., & Grootenboer, P. (2015). Opening up communicative spaces for discussion "quality practices" in early childhood education through middle leadership. Nordic *Journal of Studies in Educational Policy*, 3, https://doi.org/10.3402/nstep.v1.30098

Schaap, H., & Bruijn, E. D. (2018). Elements affecting the development of professional learning communities in schools. *Learning Environments Research, 21*(1), 109-134. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10984-017-9244-y

Shdaifat, S. A. K. (2020). The future role of vocational education teachers in the professional learning communities in public schools from the perspective of principals and academic

supervisors in Jordan. *International Journal of Higher Education, 9*(5), 322-337. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1270759

Suri, H. (2011). Purposeful sampling in qualitative research synthesis. *Qualitative Research Journal (RMIT Training Pty Ltd Trading as RMIT Publishing), 11*(2), 63–75.

Theofanidis, D., & Fountouki, A. (2018). Limitations and delimitations in the research process. *Perioperative Nursing, 7*(3), 155-163. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2552022

Trilaksono, T., Purusottama, A., Misbach, I. H., & Prasetya, I. H. (2019). Leadership change design: A professional learning community (PLC) project in Eastern Indonesia. *International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education (IJERE), 8*(1), 47-56. https://doi.org/ 10.11591/ijere. v8.i1.15662 47.

Vanblaere, B., & Devos, G. (2018). The role of departmental leadership for professional learning communities. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 54*(1), 85-114. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161x17718023

Yin, R. (2017). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods.* Sage Publications Inc. https://doi.org/10.33524/cjar.v14i1.73

Zhang, J., & Pang, N. S. K. (2016). Exploring the characteristics of professional learning communities in China: A mixed-method study. *Asia-Pacific Education Researcher, 25*(1), 11-21. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-015-0228-3

Zheng, X., Yin, H., & Li, Z. (2019). Exploring the relationships among instructional leadership, professional learning communities and teacher self-efficacy in China. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 47*(6), 843–859. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143218764176

Appendices

Appendix A

Letter to School District for Permission

July 21, 2021

Dr. Troy Bales

Superintendent of the Paradise Valley School District

Dear Dr. Bales:

My name is Andrea Cunningham, and I am a doctoral candidate at the American College of Education (ACE) writing to request permission to interview teachers in the district on their experiences with professional learning communities. This information will be used for my dissertation research related to the perception and experiences of teachers in a PLC. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore teachers' lived experiences with and perceptions about professional learning communities.

My interest is to interview 15-20 teachers who are currently participating in a PLC and work at a Project Momentum school.

Important Contacts for this study include:

Principal Investigator: Andrea Cunningham

Email: andrea.cunningham7753@my.ace.edu

Phone: 480-220-3466

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Sue Adragna

Email: sue.adragna@ace.edu

Thank you for your attention to this issue and prompt response. I appreciate your time and consideration of my request.

Regards,

Andrea Cunningham

---------- Forwarded message ---------
From: **Staff.Dan Courson** <dcourson@pvlearners.net>
Date: Tue, Jul 27, 2021 at 10:22 AM
Subject: Request to Interview Teachers
To: Andrea Morici <amorici@pvlearners.net>

Hi Andrea.

Troy shared the letter you sent him regarding your doctorate request to interview 15-20 teachers.

You have permission. :)
Thank you!
Dan

--
Dan Courson, Ph.D.
Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction
Paradise Valley Unified School District
--

Appendix B

Informed Consent for Participation in Research

Informed Consent

Prospective Research Participant: Read this consent form; feel free to ask as many questions as necessary before deciding to participate in this research study. I am always available for you to ask questions before, during, and after the study.

Project Information

Project Title:

Exploring Characteristics of Professional Learning Communities: A Qualitative Study

Researcher: Andrea Cunningham

Organization: American College of Education

Email: andreacunningham7@gmail.com **Telephone:** 480-220-3466

Researcher's Faculty Member: Dr. Sue Adragna

Organization and Position: American College of Education, Dissertation Core Faculty

Email: sue.adragna@ace.edu

Introduction

I am Andrea Cunningham, and I am a doctoral candidate student at the American College of Education. I am researching under the guidance and supervision of my Chair, Dr. Sue Adragna. I

want to give you some information about the project and invite you to participate in this research. Before you decide, you can talk to anyone you feel comfortable with about the study. This consent form may contain words you do not understand. Please ask me to stop as we go through the information, and I will explain. If you have questions later, you can ask them then.

Purpose of the Research

You are being asked to participate in a research study that will assist with understanding the views of teachers as it relates to professional learning communities. This qualitative study will examine the experiences and perceptions of teachers regarding professional learning communities they have worked with during their careers.

Research Design and Procedures

The study will use a qualitative methodology and phenomenology research design. Interviews will be completed with specific participants within two weeks of the final selection process. The study will be comprised of at least 15 participants willing to complete the interview process. Participants are purposefully selected based on location in the suburban school district in Phoenix, Arizona. After all of the interviews are transcribed, notes will be shared with the participants for their review and approval.

Participant selection

You are being invited to participate in this research because of your experience in professional learning communities. Participant selection criteria: Currently a teacher who has participated in a PLC for at least three years.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. It is your choice whether to participate. If you choose not to participate, there will be no punitive repercussions, and you do not have to participate. If you select to participate in this study, you may change your mind later and stop participating even if you agreed earlier.

Procedures

We are inviting you to participate in this research study. If you agree, you will be asked to complete an in-person interview conducted in less than 30 minutes. The type of questions asked will range from a demographical perspective to direct inquiries about the topic of professional learning communities.

Duration

The interview portion of the research study will require approximately 30 minutes to complete. After the interview, your recorded responses will be shared with you for your review.

Risks

The researcher will ask you to share personal and confidential information, and you may feel uncomfortable talking about some of the topics. You do not have to answer any question or participate in the discussion if you don't wish to do so. You do not have to give any reason for not responding to any question.

Benefits

While there will be no direct financial benefit to you, your participation will likely help us find out more about how our school district can make decisions that benefit your team in working in a professional learning community.

Reimbursement

No monetary reimbursement will be available for participation in this study.

Confidentiality

I will not share information about you or anything you say to anyone outside of the researcher. During the defense of the doctoral dissertation, data collected will be presented to the dissertation committee. The data collected will be kept in a locked file cabinet or encrypted computer file. Any information about you will be coded and will not directly correlate, which directly identifies you as the participant. Only I will know what your number is, and I will secure your information.

Sharing the Results

At the end of the research study, the results will be available for each participant. It is anticipated to publish the results so other interested people may learn from the research.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

Participation is voluntary. You may do so without repercussions at any time you wish to end your involvement in the research study.

Questions About the Study

If you have any questions, you can ask them now or later. If you wish to ask questions later, you may contact Andrea Cunningham by email or phone. This research plan has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the American College of Education. This is a committee whose role is to make sure research participants are protected from harm. If you wish to ask questions about this group, email IRB@ace.edu.

Certificate of Consent

I have read the information about this study, or it has been read to me. I acknowledge why I have been asked to be a participant in the research study. I have been provided the opportunity to ask questions about the study, and any questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I certify I am at least 18 years of age. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study.

Print or Type Name of Participant: _____

Signature of Participant: _____

Date: _____

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered to the best of my ability. I confirm

that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily. A copy of this Consent Form has been provided to the participant.

Print or type name of lead researcher: Andrea Cunningham

Signature of lead researcher: _____

I have accurately read or witnessed the accurate reading of the assent form to the potential participant, and the individual has had the opportunity to ask questions. I confirm the individual has freely given consent.

Print or type name of lead researcher: Andrea Cunningham

Signature of lead researcher: _____

Date: _____

Signature of faculty member: _____

Date: _____

PLEASE KEEP THIS INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR YOUR RECORDS.

Appendix C

Email to Interview Participants

Dear Participants-

Thank you for your interest in helping me with my research study on professional learning communities. The interview you agreed to participate in should take no longer than 30 minutes to complete. The discussion will comprise 7-10 opened-ended questions that will allow me to understand your perceptions and experiences in working with your PLC. The information you share in the interview will be kept entirely confidential. I will not be attaching your name or school in any way to identify you with the information you are sharing. I greatly appreciate your help and support to help me to glean insight into your perceptions and experiences working in a PLC.

The interview will be recorded so I can use it to review and transcribe the information. Once I transcribe the information from our conversation, I will be looping back with you to make sure I have captured your thoughts in their totality. I will send you the transcriptions via email and ask you to respond by letting me know if I caught your thoughts as you intended them to be captured.

Interview Date:

Interview Time:

Google Meet Link (if applicable):

Thanks again for your time and participation!

Andrea Cunningham

Appendix D

Interview Questions

Name:

Grade Level:

Subject Area:

Cell Phone Number:

Directions: Please answer the following questions in detail to the best of your ability. By answering the questions openly and honestly, you will provide an in-depth look into your PLC work. Your answers will be confidential and not shared with any school or district leadership. During this research, your name, grade level, content area, or cell number will be completely confidential. For data analysis purposes, you will be identified as Participant 1 School A, Participant 2 School B, etc. Thank you for your participation in this research!

1. Tell me about your experience(s) with PLCs. (RQ#1)
2. What are some challenges or barriers you have experienced with your PLC team during this past school year? (RQ#2)
3. How do you transfer instructional strategies from your PLC team meetings into your classroom, and what evidence do you use to support the success of the strategies? (RQ#2)
4. What motivates you to participate in your PLC? Why? (RQ#1)
5. Do you follow up with your PLC team to examine student growth/challenges? If so, what benchmarks, assessments, and data do you use? Please explain. (RQ#2)

6. Has instructional coaching and teacher mentoring supported the intent of your PLC team? Would you please give an example? (RQ#1)
7. Are there any other successes or opportunities for improvement with your PLC process that you would like to share? (RQ#1 & 2)

Appendix E

SME Field Testing Email

Dear Subject Matter Expert (SME)-

My name is Andrea Cunningham, and I am doing my dissertation on professional learning communities. The qualitative phenomenological study aims to explore teachers' lived experiences with and perceptions about PLCs.

My research questions are:

RQ#1: What are the experiences of teachers who participate in a professional learning community?

RQ#2: What are the perceptions of teachers who participate in a professional learning community?

The intent is to use the questions below to interview 15-20 teachers. I would like your input on whether or not you feel these questions are appropriate for the study and if you would edit, add, or remove any of the questions. I want interviews to last no longer than 30 minutes, so if you believe there are too many questions, please tell me that as well. A follow-up email with your response is greatly appreciated. Thank you for your support of my research.

1. Tell me about your experience(s) with PLCs. (RQ#1)
2. What challenges or barriers have you experienced with your PLC team during this past school year? (RQ#2)

3. How do you transfer instructional strategies from your PLC team meetings into your classroom, and what evidence do you use to support the success of the strategies? (RQ#2)

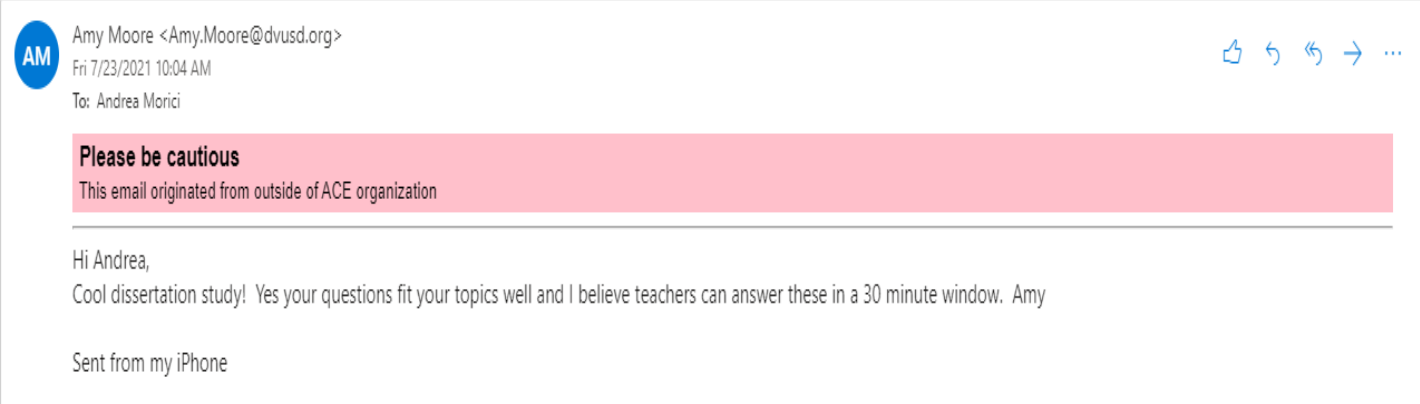
4. What motivates you to participate in your PLC? Why? (RQ#1)

5. Do you follow up with your PLC team to examine student growth/challenges? If so, what benchmarks, assessments, and data do you use? Please explain. (RQ#2)

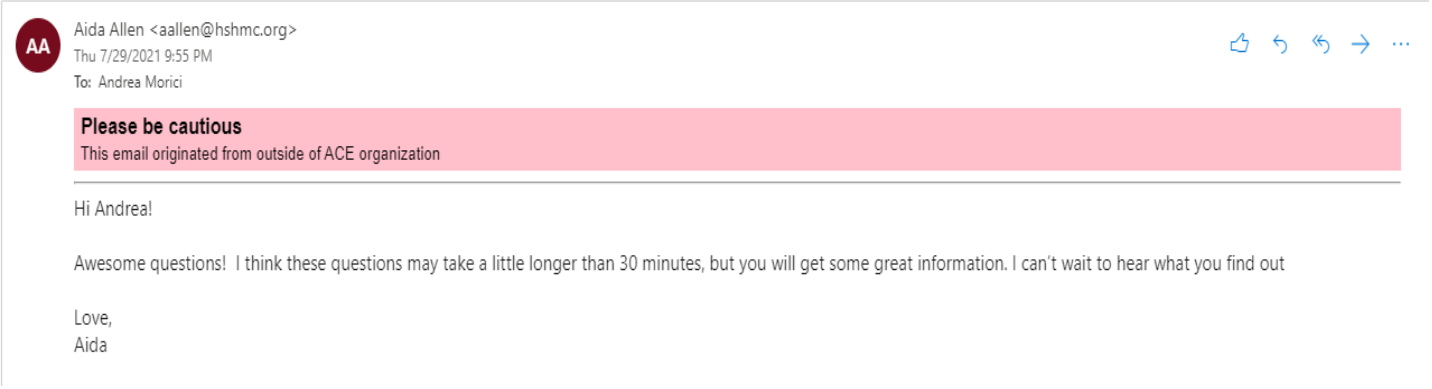
6. Has instructional coaching and teacher mentoring supported the intent of your PLC team? Would you please give an example? (RQ#1)

7. Are there any other successes or opportunities for improvement with your PLC process that you would like to share? (RQ#1 & 2)

Response #1



Response #2



Response #3

SK Staff.Jean Koeppen <jkoeppen@pvlearners.net>
Wed 7/28/2021 2:14 PM
To: Andrea Morici

Please be cautious
This email originated from outside of ACE organization

I think these look good, Andrea. I was thinking about that phenomenon of just documenting PLC work rather than really making it happen..but that may come out in Question 2. I might add the word data in #5...or make it a separate question...it would be interesting to see what outcome data they examine to measure their impact. It might also be interesting to see where they spend their discussion time Tier I, or remediation efforts. I believe that PLCs are often misused to separate kids into groups...not focus on instructional practices.
Hope this helps!

Response #4

PM Principal Missy Martin <melmartin@pvlearners.net>
Mon 8/2/2021 9:59 AM
To: Andrea Morici

Please be cautious
This email originated from outside of ACE organization

Such a great study. You are for sure on the right path!! Keep up the awesome work, and let me know if I can help in any way....look over anything :) Always great to have an extra set of eyes!!

1. **Tell me about your experience(s) with PLCs. (RQ#1)**

2. **What are some challenges or barriers your PLC team faces or has faced during the school year? (RQ#2)**

What are some challenges or barriers you have experienced with your PLC team during this past school year?

3. **How do team members transfer learning into their classrooms and what evidence does your team use to prove this? (RQ#2)**

How do you transfer instructional strategies from your PLC team meetings into your classroom, and what evidence do you use to support the success of the strategies?

4. **What motivates you to participate in your PLC? Why? (RQ#1)**

5. **Do teachers work together to examine student work? Please explain. (RQ#2)**

Do you follow up with your PLC team to examine student growth/challenges? If so, what benchmarks/assessments do you use?

6. **What role, if any, does coaching or mentoring of teachers play in the PLC team? (RQ#1)**

Has instructional coaching and/or teacher mentoring supported the intent of your PLC team? Please give an example.

7. **Is there anything else regarding your experience with PLC that you would like to add? (RQ#1 & 2)**

Are there any other successes or opportunities for improvement with your PLC process that you would like to share?

...