LEADERSHIP IN THE BARRINGTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

Working within the collegial model and relying on Hord’s (2004) *Five Dimensions of a Professional Learning Community* as a thematic schema, this phenomenological research study explored the essence of leadership in the successful Barrington Public Schools Professional Learning Community (PLC) in Barrington, Rhode Island. This study discovered a thematic thread of capacity building – personal, interpersonal, staff, and organizational – through the lived experiences of leaders who developed, implemented and sustained the successful Barrington Public Schools PLC. Focusing on collaborative organizational structures, a cultural of learning, and a dependence on professional staff as the primary influences framing its investigation, this study confirmed the attributes of supportive and shared leadership in a successful PLC and brought to light the role of school leaders in empowering the collective capacity of the Barrington Public Schools PLC.

Finally, the findings of this study expanded on PLC literature from a practitioner perspective by conceptualizing the DuFour (2007) “loose-tight” leadership model and by providing strategies for school leaders aspiring toward best practice in the successful implementation of PLC initiatives and system wide reform.

**Keywords:** professional learning community, collegial model, supportive leadership, shared decision making, phenomenological study, “loose-tight” model
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Chapter 1: Introduction

By 2011 and into 2012 Barrington Public Schools was facing a potentially serious crisis of leadership. Many of its building and central office administrators had plans to retire or had just retired depleting almost two hundred years of successful school leadership experience from the district. Over the course of a generation, these school leaders had worked tirelessly to individually and collectively build Barrington Public Schools into a district nationally recognized for its outstanding student achievement success. The collective loss of these school leaders heightened an awareness of their positive and undeniable influence on the success of Barrington Public Schools and brought to light the continuing impact of their leadership on the practices of school leaders who remained in the district. In the weeks and months leading up to the transition in Barrington Public Schools, there were many unanswered questions about the individual and collective capacities of its successful leaders. Exploring the answers to these questions would prove to be a critical problem of practice for this study, and potentially provide an analytical framework for new Barrington School leaders to move forward in their mission to ensure the achievement of every student.

During this period of leadership transition, the continued success of Barrington Public Schools was not taken for granted. Its present success had not happened overnight, rather it had evolved over many years with the work of high functioning leadership, a professional faculty, and supported by a community that embraced substantive education reform. Barrington’s new leaders were transitioning into a K-12 public school district with approximately 3,400 students located in a suburban community of Rhode Island ten miles from the capital city of Providence. The district includes three pre K – 3rd grade schools, one grade 4-5 school, one middle school grades 6-8, and one high school. There was a lot to be proud of in the district; in the most recent
report of the Rhode Island Department of Education (“InfoWorks,” 2010) five of the six Barrington schools were awarded the No Child Left Behind - Adequate Yearly Progress designation of “commended” and many have been recognized as schools of national excellence (“Rhode Island,” 2012). Barrington Public School students have also been recognized for outstanding achievement as National Merit Scholars, Presidential Scholars, and have been ranked at the top of the state for awards in science, math, robotics, art and music (Lee, 2011). With a 92% college attendance rate and ranked by all measures of assessment (NECAP, SAT, PSAT, AP, NEASC) as one of the leading school districts in Rhode Island, Barrington Public Schools is undeniably a district with leadership and academic distinction.

In a recent audit by the national non-profit educational organization Teachers21, Barrington Public School’s success was attributed in large part to its journey to become a PLC and its “focus on excellence and a collaborative culture” that produced ensuing student achievement results (Appleton, 2012, p.3). Modeled after the work of Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker and Thomas Many, Barrington’s PLC began in 2005 and embodied the DuFour et al. three BIG IDEAS that represent the core principles of a PLC: ensuring that all students learn; building a culture of collaboration; and a focus on results (Appleton 2012, p.5). Auditor Pamela R. Appleton commended Barrington Public Schools as a fully functioning PLC:

The Barrington Public Schools should celebrate their accomplishments and the fact that they are a fully functioning Professional Learning Community with many strengths evident. … In all reports written or read by this evaluator there is a consensus that this is a high quality district that serves as a model for others in RI and through organizations such as New England League of Middle Schools (NELMS) and others. Barrington has much to be proud of as to its mission to become a Professional Learning Community.
For most traditional schools and districts including Barrington Public Schools, there are many benefits and challenges inherent in the dramatic changes in leadership as well as organizational structure, culture, values, goals, and practices required by a PLC (DuFour, 2006; Hord, 2004). Educator Andy Hargreaves explains “When a school becomes a professional learning community, everything in the school looks different than it did before and this is certainly true of leadership in a PLC school and district” (as cited in DuFour et al., 2004, p.172).

Understanding the individual and collective capacities of the school leaders who have successfully led and continue to lead the Barrington Public School PLC is the problem of practice addressed in this study. This phenomenological study will seek to unearth the rich insight of Barrington Public School leadership practices from the perspective of those who have experienced the phenomenon – both from those who have retired and those still leading - for the purpose of developing a deeper understanding of their influences on the district leadership. Through the lived experiences and personal voices of the Barrington Public School leaders who have created, implemented and sustained the successful PLC, this study will seek to enlighten and support Barrington Public Schools as it moves forward to ensure the achievement of every student.

**Significance of the Problem**

Barrington Public Schools has a long and celebrated history of successful leaders who effectively grew individually and collectively to advance the district to meet the educational demands of the 21st century. Understanding how these leaders and their leadership developed and continuously evolved is critical to moving the district forward during its transition as many leaders retire and others begin anew. This study will be significant to the future practice of
leadership in the district by developing a deeper and richer understanding of these practices, motivations, and influences, in effect, the essence of its school leadership within its successful PLC.

This study will also be significant to the scholarship of current educational leadership in a PLC by infusing this body of literature with first hand voices and actual accounts of high performing leadership practices. While the research has clearly demonstrated that leadership plays a significant role in developing, implementing and sustaining a high functioning, successful PLC, there is a dearth of studies that include the actual voices of the leadership participants who have successfully lived this experience.

The voices in this study will be a significant addition to this PLC scholarship that first surfaced to investigate PLCs as an alternative to the teaching in isolation practiced in the United States in the 1960s. The research became more explicit in the late 1980s and early 1990s with studies that found successful schools were characterized by “collective commitments to student learning in collaborative settings” (Rosenholtz, 1983). In remarks before the 1995 annual conference of the National Staff Development Council, researcher Milbrey McLaughlin commended PLCs as progressive, innovative school improvement. “We are closer to the truth about school improvement than ever before,” she said, “The most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is developing the capacity of school personnel to function as a professional learning community” (as cited in DuFour, 1997, p.1). Today education reform expert Michael Fullan (2006) reports that interest in PLCs has moved beyond the “whisper” of researchers to a growing “rallying cry” among practitioners (p.16). He has lauded the work of Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour and Rober Eaker as the “gold standard” of PLCs (Fullan, 2012, p.3).
By early 2008 Barrington Public Schools had fully embraced the PLC initiative modeled by DuFour et al. and with it had successfully redefined its school leadership within its new organizational structure and collaborative culture. This new PLC leadership is undeniably complex and requires a multifaceted, in depth, framework to ultimately understand it. While DuFour and other PLC research investigated the influence of leadership within PLC districts (Hord, 2004; DuFour, 2001; Sparks et al., 2005); the significance of this study will seek to expand on this research by discovering the practices and cogitations of PLC leadership – its essence – through the unique voices of the actual school leaders who have lived the experience. The personal voices of the leaders in this study will expand on PLC leadership scholarship and, at the same time, prove to be significant to the practice of future leadership in the Barrington Public School district.

Purpose

This research study is intended to achieve three goals. The first goal of this research study is to develop a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of leadership in the context of the successful Barrington Public Schools PLC. The study of leadership in all fields has been a lifelong educational and personal pursuit. As a student and professional in both government and education, I developed an interest in understanding the complexities of leaders and their leadership. This study offers me an opportunity to delve deeper into a study of leadership through the experiences and perspectives of school leaders who have created, implemented and sustained real education reform in a successful PLC.

The second goal of this research is to improve my professional practice and potentially enhance the leadership practice in the Barrington Public Schools PLC by reflecting on and sharing the successful practices of school leaders that will be uncovered in this study. As a
Librarian and Department Chair in the Barrington Public Schools, I have personally worked with many school leaders and I have great respect for their work ethic, willingness to embrace school improvement and most importantly, their commitment to the education of every student. I have participated in the implementation and sustainment of the Barrington PLC. I have observed different leadership styles and strategies often wondering what the rationale was behind decisions relating to culture and organizational structures and how the influences of a PLC environment impacted those decisions. This study will provide me with the opportunity to better understand how to support leaders and to further develop my own leadership skills and best practices in the district. Potentially this study will also provide an opportunity for Barrington Public School leaders to reflect on their leadership experiences and in doing so discover new meaning and understanding of their own leadership in the Barrington Public Schools PLC that perhaps they did not know before this study began.

The third goal of this study to is to add to the body of knowledge and scholarship on the thoughts, views, perceptions, practices and challenges of school leadership within a successful PLC from the personal perspective of school leaders living this experience.

**Research Questions**

The primary research question for this study is:

- What do school leaders perceive as the **essence** of school leadership in the Barrington Public Schools PLC?

The secondary research questions for this study are:

- What do school leaders perceive are the defining and transformative **experiences** of their leadership in the Barrington Schools PLC?
- What do school leaders perceive are the defining and transformative **influences on**
their leadership in the Barrington Schools PLC?

- What do school leaders perceive are the defining and transformative influences of their leadership on the Barrington Schools PLC?

The primary research question is holistic and concerned with the phenomenon of leadership in the context of the Barrington Public Schools PLC. “Essence” in this research question is defined as the basic, real, and invariable nature of a thing or its significant individual feature or features; essentially; despite appearances; absolutely essential; critical; crucial; of an inward nature, true substance, as opposed to what is accidental, illusory; something that exists, or an immaterial entity (Merriam, 2012). In addition, while this study recognizes that a PLC inherently shares leadership among many people in a school community, for the purposes of this study the term “school leader” shall be defined as an administrative, non-union position with an official job title and job description that expressly indicates a leadership position.

The secondary questions are concerned with leadership practices and cogitations – the underpinnings – of the essence of leadership.

All questions assume the premise that Barrington Public Schools is a successful educational organization and has a long and documented record of student achievement. None of the questions precipitate any intention to evaluate individuals, their leadership styles, strategies or performance in any way. The sole purpose of these questions is to uncover the essence of leadership through the self-reflection and discovery of the participants; “by peeling back the various layers” (Mostert, 2002, p.2) of the thoughts, beliefs and feelings of school leaders in the Barrington Public Schools PLC.

These questions were developed in the phenomenological tradition with the intention of providing for the greatest flexibility and broadest range of inquiry and reflection. The exploration
of personal perspective is, by its definition, uniquely individualized and open ended. These research questions reflect the opportunity for freest thought, deepest inquiry and most genuine personal reflection. In addition, with a clear focus on the Barrington Public School leaders, these questions are sensitive to the context of the study.

Theoretical Framework

Professional learning communities are educational organizations structured with the specific purpose of ensuring accountable student achievement results through collective responsibility and continuous improvement (DuFour et al., 2005, p.5). Implicit in the creation, implementation and sustainment of a PLC is whole system reform; a paradigm shift from teaching to learning, from isolation to collaboration, from the practices of administrative management, transactional and instructional leadership to transformational leadership; leadership that is based on the collective action of those empowered to participate and with a reliance on vision (Leithwood, 1992; McIntyre, 2003).

Informing this study’s exploration of leadership in the Barrington Public Schools PLC is the collegial theoretical model expressed primarily by Bush (2003; 2007), Sergiovanni (1979), and influenced by Senge (2000; 2006) and Hargreaves (1994). The schemata of leadership within a PLC will be supported by the The Five Dimensions of a PLC developed by Hord (1999; 2004) and conceptualized by the “loose-tight” framework expressed by DuFour (2007), Eaker and Gonzalez (2006), and Many and Ritchie (2004).

Theoretical models are frames of reference to conceptualize and analyze the complexities inherent in organizational structures. Sergiovanni (1979) explains how models are critical for practitioners as well as scholars, “Models determine what problems are critical for a particular profession and provide the practitioner with a theoretical framework for understanding and
dealing with problems. …They come complete with a convincing internal logic, a set of assumptions, postulates, data and inferences about some phenomenon” (p. 12). Educational research is especially suited to the use of theoretical models and frameworks because when applied faithfully they can realize strategies for universal reforms (Fullan, 2010). Advising on the use of models in school leadership, Owens (2004) summarizes, “Theory is useful because it provides a basis for thinking systematically about complex problems, such as understanding the nature of educational organizations. Theory enables us to do four useful things: (1) describe what is going on (2) explain it (3) predict future events under given circumstances, and - essential to the professional practitioner – think about ways to (4) exercise control over events. This lays the groundwork for the professional practice of school leadership” (p. 69).

Serving as a rationale most relevant to the context of this study, the collegial model relies on collaborative organizational structures, the development of cultural norms and shared decision making as the primary influences framing an investigation of the PLC leadership phenomenon. Supporting the collegial model in this study, Hord’s (1999; 2004) Five Dimensions of a PLC identifies and organizes the attributes and thematic structure of a successful PLC and the loose-tight leadership framework created by DuFour (2007), Eaker and Gonzalez (2006) and Many and Ritchie (2004) conceptualizes leadership through the practices, processes and priorities of school leaders.

The collegial model. Growing out of the 1930s as an effective counter force on behalf of the human side of organizations, the collegial model was initially known as the human relations movement, its metaphoric roots were organic suggesting that organizations are analogous to living organisms and can either grow or wither in ill health (Sergiovanni, 1979). Collegial theories and those emphasizing the predominant influence of human nature within the
organizational structure have significant implications for individual motivation, the role of shared decision making, and the unlimited potential of work groups. Sergiovanni (1979) explains how these philosophical underpinnings have implications in today’s educational systems, especially PLCs, “Collegial theories emphasize personal specialization. Personal specialization permits individuals to function as experts who enjoy discretionary prerogatives and who are bounded more by client needs and expert abilities than by carefully delineated duties and tasks” (p.15).

Focusing on the influences of a motivated, professional staff as well as a democratic decision making process, Bush (2003) describes the four central features of the collegial model as: normative in nature relying on prescription of structure; including significant numbers of professional staff with the expertise and right to shared decision-making; having a common set of values held by members of the organizations that guide the activities of the organization; and sufficiently small to enable democratic, consensus decision making. In addition, he asserts that the collegial model fosters a perception of morality based on its equalitarian values and shared leadership. Consensual decision making in the collegial model stands in juxtaposition to the hierarchical imposition of decision making that is “…morally repugnant, and inconsistent with the notion of consent” (Bush, 2003, p.8; Petro, 1992).

**Collaboration.** According to Bush (2003) the greatest presumed benefit of the collegial model is the influence of collaboration on an organization, especially an educational organization with a professional staff. Fullan (2010) characterizes this collaboration as building the “collective capacity” of an organization – the ability of the whole organization to improve conjointly. He asserts, “Collective capacity generates the emotional commitment and the technical expertise that no amount of individual capacity working alone can come close to
matching” (Fullan, 2010, p. xiii). Building “collective capacity” through collaboration is a structural and cultural tenet of a PLC (DuFour, Eaker & DuFour, 2005) and is strongly associated with increased student success (Datnow, 2011; Rosenholtz, 1983). According to Eaker et al. (2002) schools that function as PLCs are always characterized by collaboration:

Teacher isolation is replaced with collaborative processes that are deeply embedded into the daily life of the school. Members of a PLC are not ‘invited’ to work with colleagues: they are called upon to be contributing members of a collective effort to improve the school’s capacity to help all students learn at high levels. (p. 5)

While collaboration can take many forms in both PLC and non-PLC schools, the act of professional staff coming together as an observance of “informal consultations” and “socialization” does not meet the definition of collaboration embodied in the collegial model (Bush, 2003, p, 67). Collaboration must instead be authentic and is defined as at times spontaneous, not mandated by administration, always with directed purpose, teacher-generated, with focused, reflected inquiry (Hargreaves, 2009; Datnow, 2011; Beatty, 2011). Mandated meetings with predictable outcomes or administrator dictated professional development are not authentic collaboration and are examples of what Hargreaves (1994) refers to as “contrived collegiality.”

While criticized by some scholars as being vague, conceptually amorphous and ideologically sanguine, (as cited in Beatty, 2011, p.262) Hargreaves’s (2009) “contrived collegiality” speaks to what is certainly the reality of some practice and important to identify in a PLC. The collegial model addresses this “contrived” collaboration by moving beyond one-dimensional collaborative evidence to explore in addition both the structure of the organization with shared leadership and consensual decision making, as well as the influences of a
professional staff on the collective responsibility and common purposes of the organization (Bush, 2003). The emphases of shared leadership and common values with collective responsibility are all characteristics of what Senge (2000; 2006) coined *Learning Organizations*; a model of progressive system wide improvement through on-going reflection, teamwork, and a shared purpose. All of these characteristics are relevant to the exploration of leadership in the creation, implementation and sustainment of a PLC. (Beatty, 2011; DuFour, 2006; Hord, 2004).

**Systems thinking.** In his seminal work, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* and its educational equivalent *Schools that Learn*, Peter Senge’s (2006) paradigm conceptualizes organizations best able to meet the changing demands of the 21st century as collaborative in both process and culture. He explains, “It is becoming clear that schools can be re-created, made vital, and sustainably renewed not by fiat or command and not by regulation, but by taking a learning orientation. By learning orientation he means involving everyone in the system to express their aspirations, build their awareness and develop their capabilities together” (Senge, 2000, p. 5). As with the collegial model, Senge (2006) relies heavily on system thinking and the organic nature of interconnectedness. He defines systems thinking as the process by which organizations develop an awareness of complexity, interdependencies, change and leverage; utilize collaboration and teamwork to fight isolation; and create and support a shared vision (p. 78). Senge (2006) summarizes; “System thinking is a discipline for seeing wholes. It is a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static ‘snapshots.’... And system thinking is a sensibility – for the subtle interconnectedness that gives living systems their unique character (p. 68).

The collegial model as well as Senge’s (2006) systems approach with its reliance on collaboration, interconnected structures and vision, and its organic orientation toward
progressive self-awareness and learning rather than prescriptive programs or dictated controls is uniquely suited to exploring leadership within the Barrington Public Schools PLC. Also supporting this exploration is Hord’s (1997; 2004) *Five Dimensions of a Professional Learning Community*, a thematic structure that identifies and characterizes the practices and attributes of a PLC. Relying primarily on the scholarly investigations of Rosenholtz (1983), Senge (1990), McLaughlin and Talbert (1993), Hord’s *Five Dimensions* is critical to this study as a schematic to understand the characteristics of a PLC within the collegial model.

**Five dimensions of professional learning communities.** Hord’s (1997; 2004) *Five Dimensions of a Professional Learning Community* supports this study’s conceptualization of the Barrington Public Schools PLC as a unique, evolving, learning organization. Hord (2004) explains, “PLC is not an improvement program or a plan, but it provides a structure for schools to continuously improve by building staff capacity for learning and change” (p.14). *The Five Dimensions* identify the interconnected nature of PLCs, their collaborative democratic structures of shared decision making and their leadership strategies that develop staff capacity and ultimately collective responsibility for student learning. The dimensions include: supportive and shared leadership; shared values and vision; collective learning and the application of learning; supportive conditions; and shared person practice. These attributes are understood by Hord (1997; 2004) to be interwoven with simultaneous effect on each other and uniquely applied depending on individual educational settings.

While Hord (1997; 2004) believed the PLC concept could have multiple configurations based on its contextual setting, she also asserted that all the characteristics identified in the *Five Dimensions* had to be apparent for the successful conveyance of system wide reform (as cited in “Professional,” 2004). Hord (1997; 2004) foreshadowed Fullan (2006), who later wrote that
professional learning community was “a term that travels faster and better than the concept” (p. 1) and who suggested that its greatest challenge was one of superficiality; the superficiality of believing that real reform could be accomplished by only applying structural changes and without applying its deeper substance of cultural changes as well. By using Hord’s *Five Dimensions* as a framework for school leadership, this study meets the challenge of superficiality by not only identifying the structural characteristics of the Barrington Public Schools PLC but as importantly, by investigating the essence of school leadership in relation to its substance; to discover the existence and interconnected influences of reflective inquiry by a professional staff, authentic collaborative relationships, shared decision making, and continuous learning.

Beginning with the *Supportive and Shared Leadership*, all five of Hord’s (2004) dimensions rely significantly on school leadership as critical to ensuring the substance of a PLC. She writes, “It is clear – if also somewhat ironic – that transforming the school organization into a learning community can be done only with the leaders’ sanction and active nurturing…” (Hord, 2004, p. 8). According to Hord, this active nurturing requires the school leader to include others in the decision making process in the school organization and provide the collaborative structures, professional learning opportunities, resources, and collegial supports for this shared leadership to take root and be effective.

In the *Shared Values and Vision* dimension, Hord focuses on the most critical tenet of a PLC; accountable student learning. She explains, “A core characteristic of the professional learning community is an undeviating focus on student learning…” and this focus translates into a PLC vision identifying students as academically capable and a staff that realizes every student’s potential (Hord, 2004, p. 9). According to Hord, the school leader must continually communicate this vision of learning in ways that foster staff buy-in and responsibility which over
time develops the values of collective commitment. Hord identifies school leadership practices such as being visible, recognizing staff achievement, and including the whole staff in developing the school’s vision as crucial strategies to share values and support this vision of learning (Hord, 2009).

In the Collective Learning and Its Application dimension, Hord emphasizes the ongoing professional development of the school leader and the staff and the role of collaborative relationships to support the mission of student learning. These relationships are characterized by reflective dialogue and inquiry, the interactions that lead to improved learning through creative problem-solving, and increased willingness to “work harder” (Hord, 1999, p. 7). Citing her study on elementary school PLCs, Hord (1999) describes the principal’s role in building collective learning:

The principals were each proactive about their own professional development… always scanning the horizon for new information that would improve learning and student success at their schools. They would then apply that new information at their schools, overtly modeling the learning and its application. In so doing, each principal left her imprint on her staff. Essentially, each woman [school leader] turned her own ongoing learning into capacity building among the staff of her respective school and each staff used its increased skills to improve learning conditions for students at the school. (p. 3)

According to Hord (2004), school leaders who develop their own professional practice, model this practice for their staff, apply their new practice and then work collaboratively with their staff have a lasting impact on student learning.

Hord’s (2004) Supportive Conditions dimension also relies on building staff capacity to create school structures to determine “when, where, and how the staff regularly come together as
a unit to do the learning, decision-making, problem solving, and creative work that characterizes a professional learning community” (p. 10). To make these conditions a reality, the school leader creates the time for the staff to meet, ensures that space is available, makes data accessible, supports ongoing learning, models discussions, and takes time to build trust (Hord, 2009, p.22).

Evidence of a school leader’s trust is a central tenet to all the Five Dimensions and especially to the final dimension, Shared Personal Practice that requires an educational environment in a PLC that is caring and, “…values and supports hard work, the acceptance of challenging tasks, risk taking, and the promotion of growth” (Midgley & Wood, 1993, p. 252 as cited in Hord 2004, p. 11). This environment is fostered by school leaders that encourage teacher leaders, feedback and ongoing learning. Some of the specific actions by school leaders that build trust are accepting group decisions even when they were different than the school leaders, establishing means for staff feedback, to listen and respect concerns of staff, recognizing and praising teachers, setting a tone of support and encouragement, giving teachers’ power to adopt new curriculum, creating committees so staff can make major decisions (Hord, 2004, p. 40).

The “loose-tight” leadership style. Expanding on Hord’s Five Dimensions that characterizes school leadership in a PLC as collaborative, with shared decision making and supportive, this study will also rely on the “loose-tight” leadership model developed by DuFour (2007), Eaker and Gonzalez (2006) and Many and Ritchie (2004) that characterizes leadership as both bottom up support and top down pressure to effectively improve schools and districts. This framework supports the collegial model through its reliance on collaboration and its dependence on a professional staff who are bounded by their client needs (Sergiovanni, 1979) and the moral and equalitarian goal of learning for all. This model is especially relevant for the purposes of
this study because it defines school leadership within a framework that emphasizes the practitioner perspective by identifying the actions, interactions and strategies of leadership within a PLC. In addition, the “loose-tight” leadership model also supports the context of this study because its authors DuFour (2007), Eaker and Gonzalez (2006) and Many and Ritchie (2004) are the architectural inspiration for the Barrington Public Schools PLC.

The “loose-tight” model grew out of a thirty year evolution of school leadership best practice that began with a progressive movement away from the mundane managerial tasks of the school leader’s job to focus instead on clinical supervision of classroom instruction. According to DuFour (2002), this focus on teaching and instruction missed the more substantive issues of student learning and achievement results. He explains, “The shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning is more than semantics. When learning becomes the preoccupation of the school…the structure and culture of the school begins to change in substantive ways” (p. 13). He identifies the principal as the catalyst and watch guard of this change explaining, “Principals foster this structural and cultural transformation when they shift their emphasis from helping individual teachers improve to helping teams of teachers …More succinctly, teachers and students benefit when principals function as learning leaders rather than instructional leaders” (DuFour, 2002, p. 13).

According to DuFour (2002), the actions of a learning leaders should include: creating collaborative teams; giving teachers time to collaborate; providing focus, parameters and processes to follow for teachers who are used to working in isolation; guiding questions for the school community to pursue; training, resources; data on students’ performance; encouragement, recognition and celebration as teachers progress. As importantly, the learning leader also confronts individuals or teams of teachers who fail to fulfill their responsibility to student
Learning leaders are practitioners who have a multifaceted approach to school improvement making both structural changes that are often easier and immediate, as well as cultural changes that are more difficult but have a lasting impact. Eaker & Gonzalez (2006) explain, “Learning leaders recognize the importance of school structure, but they also tackle the more difficult and more complex task of shaping school culture…” (p. 8). In this view, shaping school culture depends on leaders who are “passionate and hold deep, intense convictions; leaders who reach out to lift each member of the community to his or her place of greatest potential” (p. 10). Leaders who “…motivate, and inspire, they create a sense of confidence and optimism regarding success…they model tenacious persistence. They stay the course” (p. 11).

Staying the course in a PLC requires a learning leader to adopt a “loose-tight” leadership style that “fosters autonomy and creativity (loose) within a systematic framework that stipulates clear, non-discretionary priorities and parameters (tight)” (DuFour, 2007, p. 39). In effect, this leadership style calls on school leaders in a PLC to balance the urgency for continuous and widespread change and accountable results with shared decision making, collaborative teams, and a reliance on a wellspring of personal trust. Many and Ritchie (2004) give guidance on how this paradox of leadership can be achieved:

There are times when a principal must be direct, set clear objectives, establish specific timelines and create expectations for collaborative teams. …Likewise there are times when principals need to give faculty time to work and encourage them to make decisions about what students should learn, how common assessments are developed and what interventions to put in place for students who don’t learn. This is time for the principal to “loosen up” and give the collaborative teams more responsibility. It takes both
understanding and a considerable amount of energy to get the idea of a professional learning community off the ground. (p. 6)

Once a PLC has been launched, DuFour (1999) gives the learning leader four actions to successfully operationalize a “loose-tight” leadership style:

One, lead through shared vision and collective commitments rather than rules and authority; two, create collaborative structures that focus on teaching and learning and provide time for teachers to collaborate; three, pose questions that help the school focus on issues of teaching and learning; and four, provide staff with the training, information, and parameters they need to make good decisions. (p. 63)

Building on Hord’s *Five Dimensions*, the “loose-tight” leadership framework conceptualizes the role of school leaders within a PLC and supports the collegial model to inform an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of school leadership in this study.

**Research Design**

In addition to the collegial model, Hord’s *Five Dimensions* and the “loose-tight” leadership model expressed by DuFour (2007), Eaker and Gonzalez (2006) and Many and Ritchie (2004), this study also relied on the phenomenological research design as a framework to discover the essence of leadership in the Barrington Public Schools PLC. Based primarily on the work of Moustakas (1994), Creswell (1998; 2009), and supported by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2012), this phenomenological study investigated and sought to uncover the essence of school leadership in the Barrington PLC through the individual thoughts, perceptions and actual accounts of five Barrington Public School leaders. This study sought to discover how leaders make sense of their leadership.

The phenomenological research design supported the purpose of this study by
successfully transforming the lived experiences of five school leaders into the essence of the leadership phenomenon. (Moutstakas, 1994, p. 27). In this study, the phenomenological research design supported the development of meaning by “…blending what is really present with what is imagined as present from the vantage point of possible meanings; thus a unity of the real and the ideal was ultimately constructed (Moustakas, 1994, p. 27). Using semi-structured, in-depth interviews and a data analysis thematic reduction process, an understanding of the human experience of school leadership in the Barrington Public Schools PLC was achieved.

The exploration of personal perspective is, by its definition, individualized and open ended and requires a strategy of inquiry that is especially true to the interpretations of the human experience. This phenomenological research framework allowed for the greatest flexibility, the opportunity for freest thought, deepest reflection and most personal inquiry with its reliance on personal, in-depth and reflective interviews. Expressed by Moustakas (1994), the data in this study was collected by “obtaining descriptions of experience through first-person accounts in …interviews (Moustakas, 1994, p. 21). The phenomenological research design supported this reliance on the lived experiences of persons who experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2009). Five school leaders with almost 100 years of combined experience in the Barrington Public Schools participated in the semi-structured interviews at the end of the 2011-2012 school year resulting in over 232 pages of transcribed text. All participants were interviewed for at least one hour with some interviews lasting much longer and requiring more than one session. All participants were initially asked the same questions and each interview included a variety of follow up questions based on the initial responses of the participants. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed before the data analysis began.

In addition to the in-depth, personal data type and the semi structured collection method,
the phenomenological framework also supported an inductive data analysis process that
developed meaning by building “…patterns, categories, and themes from the bottom up [and]
organizing the data into increasingly more abstract units of information” (Creswell, 2009, p.
174). This inductive process is described by Creswell (2009) as requiring a back and forth
between the themes and the database until a comprehensive set of themes is established. The 232
pages of verbatim text interview data was analyzed according to this inductive process suggested
by Creswell (2009), phenomenological reduction prescribed by Moustakas (1994) and was
supported by the six step process of data analysis suggested by Smith, Flowers and Larkin
(2012). The views, thoughts and personal reflections and perceptions of the school leader
participants were structured into six super-ordinate themes and expressed in this study providing
new insight and cutting through taken-for-granted assumptions and challenging accepted norms
(Creswell 1998; 2009) of leadership in a PLC. This inductive analysis developed an exhaustive
understanding of the phenomenon of leadership within the Barrington Public Schools PLC that
was unknown before this study.

The phenomenological methodology was also uniquely suited to this study because
phenomenological studies are particularly effective at bringing to the forefront the experiences
and perspectives from individuals who can and may challenge structural and normative
assumptions (Moustakas, 1994). The literature indicates that the attributes of PLCs are based in
large part on their context (Hord, 1997; DuFour, 2006; Fullan, 2006), thus for the purposes of
this study the context of the Barrington Public Schools PLC had to be understood from the
perspective of those intimate with the district’s PLC and leadership.

In addition to the intimacy of the participants to the phenomenon, this phenomenological
framework also allowed for substantive depth and reflection of the interview participants through
“intersubjective communication” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 57), the back and forth between the researcher and the participant. During the back and forth interview question and answer, interpersonal knowledge and experience was discovered in this study (Moustakas, 1994, p. 57). The data analysis in this study also included member checking to ensure inter-subjectivity and validity. To accomplish this Moustakas (1994) suggests that each participant “carefully examine the unified description” of the study and provide “additions and corrections be made” (p. 111). This allows for an opportunity for a “correcting” of conscious experience as “checking with others regarding what they perceive, feel, and think” (p. 95). Creswell (2009) also supports the process of member checking and suggests the researcher take back parts of the polished product, such as the themes, to the participants for them to determine whether they feel the themes are accurate (p. 191). I followed these suggested procedures for member checking and compiled a descriptive list of the super-ordinate themes and statements of conclusion and emailed them to each participant for their reflection, commentary and approval. All of the participants responded and their feedback was included in the data analysis of this study.

As well as recognizing the contextual nature of PLCs, this study also allowed for a method of inquiry that reflected the interconnected wholeness of the PLC concept. According to Moustakas (1994) the phenomenological framework “…is concerned with wholeness, with examining entities from many sides, angles, and perspectives until a unified vision of the essences of a phenomena or experience is achieved” (p.58). Interviewing a diverse group of school leaders of different genders, years of experience, who had held different leadership positions for various amounts of time, with backgrounds in other districts and with various education and involvement with the PLC concept, this study presented “…an integrated and inseparable relationship of subject and object and of parts and whole” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 21).
This diverse group of participants helped this study discover school leadership from the perspective of individual leaders as well as from the perspective of leadership’s integrated interconnectedness and its influence on system wide reform.

Finally, the phenomenological methodology’s heavy reliance on *epochs* which in Greek means to “refrain from judgment, to abstain from…ordinary way of perceiving things” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33) was especially useful and relevant to the success of this study. Specifically, I followed a bracketing processes which included writing down my prejudgments, opinions and thoughts regarding school leadership in the Barrington Public Schools in a notebook before the development of the research question began and continuously during the whole research data collection and analysis process in order to bracket any thoughts, judgments and potential bias. In the words of Hycner (1985), I did not pretend to stand in “…some absolute and totally presuppositionless space. To say this would be to fall into the fallacy of “pure objectivity” that natural science has often been prone to …. (p. 281) but every legitimate attempt was made by me to recognize and bracket my connection to the study site, participants and topic by a purposeful bracketing process of reflection, written transcription of my thoughts in a journal, and close reading of those thoughts during the study procedures.

**Limitations**

It was the intention of this study to investigate, to explore, and to develop a deeper understanding and awareness of the phenomenon of school leadership within the context of the successful Barrington Public Schools PLC. This study did not intend to prescribe a blueprint for school leadership or to measure the effectiveness of school leaders or school reform in the Barrington Public School PLC. By every measure of achievement Barrington Public Schools PLC and its school leadership are effective and successful. Rather, the purpose of this study was
exploratory and as such relied on a conceptual framework and research methodology that allowed for the greatest flexibility, depth of reflection and authentic connection to the contextual reality of the Barrington Public School PLC. This study did not pre-suppose any findings and was not intended to produce causal theories or directly prescribe a change in leadership practice.

The intention of this study was exploratory and reflective with the purpose of enlightening the Barrington Public School district as it moves forward during a transition time when many leaders are retiring and others are beginning anew. In addition, the purpose of this study was to give voice in the PLC scholarship to those who have actually experienced the school leadership phenomenon in a successful PLC. Finally, while the study findings may not be strictly transferable, they will certainly be considered with interest by other practicing school leaders as well as education scholars who will be interested in the findings and the perceptions of the study participants who have thoughtfully and insightfully shared their leadership story; the story of their successful journey to develop, implement and sustain the Barrington Public Schools PLC.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

There is a voluminous amount of scholarly research investigating the topics of PLCs, school leadership, school leaders, and system wide reform. The body of literature in the genre of corporate leadership is even greater. A keyword search using the word “leadership” on EBSCO produces thousands of results from national and international studies offering multiple theories regarding every aspect of leadership from personality traits to wardrobe selections, from management processes to organizational restructuring. The phenomenon of PLCs has also been recurrently studied with a variety of purposes and in a variety of contexts. This is not to suggest however, that everything is known about these phenomenon and more cannot be learned about each separately and that more cannot be learned about how these phenomenon interact together.

As the landscape of school reform continuously changes, scholarly research studies on PLCs and leadership are continuously relevant and vital. This is especially true in the case of this study as it investigated the phenomenon of school leadership in a successful PLC from the perspectives of those who are living the experience. It is a first-hand exploration to discover the essence of the phenomenon of leadership in a never before researched context and included the voices of successful leaders, in effect, adding to the practice of school leadership and to the body of knowledge on leadership in a PLC.

A review of the literature is critical to ground this study in scholarship as well as to strengthen its relevancy from a practitioner perspective. This literature review will include both scholarly and professional studies for these reasons. This review will help to support this study’s framework by investigating the themes of leadership relevant in a PLC. For the purposes of this study, the following considerations were addressed while reviewing the literature on PLCs, school leaders and school leadership:
The phenomenological nature of this study requires a broad range of themes to be explored and is only limited by the perspectives of the school leader participants. Therefore, this literature review reflects a comprehensive study of themes in school leadership and PLCS;

The theoretical framework used in this study is a collegial model with an emphasis on the influences of school leadership on both the structural and cultural aspects of a PLC. Therefore, this literature review reflects a wide range of topics such as shared leadership, professional collaboration, the development of common values, the role of trust and shared decision making in regard to this phenomenon;

While there is not one definition of PLC, common attributes need to be present for a system wide paradigm shift of reform. This literature review will focus primarily on Hord’s (1999; 2004) *Five Dimensions* as a thematic schemata to characterize leadership within a PLC and will also investigate a comprehensive review of the literature on system thinking for school reform;

Finally, this study relies on the “loose-tight” leadership model expressed by DuFour (2007), Eaker and Gonzalez (2006), and Many and Ritchie (2004) to understand the best practices of school leaders within a PLC. Therefore, this literature review will include an in-depth review of DuFour et al.’s “loose-tight” leadership in a PLC.

**To Inform an Understanding of System Wide Reform: The Emergence of the PLC Concept**

The emergence of the PLC concept was developed as a paradigm shift in educational organizations to meet the demands of the No Child Left Behind accountability movement (Hughes & Kritsonis, 2006) and has deep roots in private sector organizational management demands for improvement (Lunenberg, 2010). Economic and global competition has been a
recurring theme in American educational reform and played a decisive role in the nation’s resurgence of improved and accountable education results. Cuban (2002) gives a historical perspective of the influences economic competition has had on national educational accountability writing, “…even as far back as 1880s and 1890s top industrialists expressed strong fears that U.S. products were losing ground to those made in Britain and Germany” because of effective international technical schools and their highly skilled workforce (Cuban, 2002, p. 175).

Similar economic competition concerns spurred calls for improvement and accountability well into the 20th century. In 1983 President Ronald Reagan spoke to education’s role in international competition with the seminal document *A Nation at Risk*. *A Nation At Risk* ushered in the era of modern accountability implemented in the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (“Nation,” 1999). United States Secretary of Education Arne Duncan summed up the present day global economic pressures on education in his reaction to the *Condition of Education* report issued by the National Center for Education Statistics, saying “Today’s report is another wake-up call that our students are treading the waters of academic achievement while other countries’ students are swimming faster and farther. Our students have stagnated educationally, putting our long-term economic security at risk” (Duncan, 2009, para. 1).

Education’s close partnership with business was intensified in response to the demands for global economic competitiveness and from the government and public perception of American corporate superiority at home and abroad. Whether these assumptions were true or not, this interconnectedness between business research and school reform proliferated and promulgated organizational restructuring studies that have served as the scholarly backdrop for the present day PLC (Lunenburg, 2010).
The business research most influential on the organizational structure of the modern day PLC and most relevant to the purpose of this study is Senge’s work (2000; 2006) *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* and its education companion *Schools That Learn*. Relying on the collegial model with its humanist perspective, Senge’s (2000) study asserts that system wide structural changes can provide breakthroughs of the heart and mind and in the process improve organizational results. Senge’s reliance on system wide reforms which create opportunity for personal and professional collaboration and improved results is also supported in studies by Hord (1992; 1998; 2004), DuFour, et al. (2004; 2005; 2009), Arroyo (2011) and in the work of Stoll & Bolam (2006).

Senge’s (2000) interconnected, holistic view of system reform supports the collegial and organic concept of *community* in a PLC and informs this study’s examination of Barrington Public Schools PLC. He defines community as one that “is nurturing, supportive sometimes challenging but always a caring container wrapped around the school and the development of children” (p. 461). Senge’s (2000) disciplines of change parallel those in a PLC: creating individual and shared vision; personal mastery from continuous reflection and learning; group interaction through dialogue and skillful discussion; and recognition of the influences of interdependency on an organization (p. 8).

Other whole system reform studies also address and emphasize the important role human capital plays in system wide reform (Fullan, 2010; Hargreaves & Shirley as cited in Fullan, 2010, p. 5). Both Fullan (2010) and Hargreaves & Fullan (2009) present the idea of “collective capacity” in their studies defining such capacity as the exponential improvement of an organization as a result of the *collective action* of individuals within the organization. This reliance on human capital to support whole system reform was also highlighted in a study by
Hansen (2009) who concluded that collaboration is not an end in itself (as cited in Fullan, 2010, p. 5). None of these studies rely exclusively on collaboration as a means to achieve whole system reform, but all recognize the role of collaboration and human capital development in the systematic improvement of organizations.

Still with a reliance on human capital, Leithwood and Louis (1998) articulate a variation of the whole system reform paradigm and the concept of the learning organization. Their research asserts that the structures of an organization must support the processes of collaboration. Sowing the seeds of the PLC concept, Leithwood and Louis (1998) argue that these processes must not be prescribed and should be flexible enough to meet the ongoing demands of externally imposed reform initiatives but authentic to their context and supportive of collaboration (p. 6). These processes are defined by Leithwood and Louis (1998) as “activities engaged in by individuals and groups within the school…to make sense of their environment and to master the challenges posed by that environment and those mechanisms used by organizational members for such sense-making and problem-solving (p. 69).

Once system wide reform is in place, business research highlights the challenges of continuous improvement in organizations (Collins, 2001; Fullan, 2010). Collins (2001) in his study on the subject writes, “Good is the enemy of great. And that is one of the key reasons why we have so little that becomes great. We don’t have great schools, principally because we have good schools” (p. 1). Many studies support the finding that continuous improvement in schools is also rare and depends on many factors (Elmore, 2000); some assert the crucial role of school leadership (Hord, 2004). Although the business literature as well as the education research has little agreement on what actions and characteristics constitute best leadership practices for whole system reform. For example, while Senge (2000) concludes that principals must lead without
control (p. 441), on the other hand, Fullan (2010) suggests that “…larger systems have ‘resolute leadership’ … and these leaders cause others around them to be resolute” (p. 4). While the research is contradictory regarding the style and practices of exemplary school leaders (“What We Know,” 2003; Bozman, 2011), in the case of PLC studies, the literature is in agreement that the role of effective school leadership is essential to a successful PLC (DuFour, 2002; Hord, 2004).

To Inform an Understanding of PLC Structure and Culture: Hord’s Thematic Framework and a Focus on Collaboration

While PLCs find their structural origins in whole system reform, their student-centered philosophy is rooted in the tradition of John Dewey’s (1859-1952) progressive movement. In the vision of Dewey, the founders of the PLC phenomenon believe that children are active and not passive learners and with individualities that have to be understood and stimulated in the learning process. PLCs use vocabulary such as “student learning styles” and “multiple intelligences” to describe their pedagogical philosophy reflected by Dewey (1899) a century ago in his book School and Society. Dewey taught that students were not vessels to “pour in” facts, but a “drawing out” of their interest in learning that must dominate instruction (Reese, 2005, p. 139). Dewey insisted that this instructional focus on creativity and personal responsibility would “make all children masters of their own economic and social fate” as well as provide for the democratic equality of the nation (Reese, 2005, p. 141).

A review of the literature suggests that the modern phenomenon of PLCs has been true to Dewey’s (1899) teachings with its equalitarian purpose of high expectations and successful results for all students (Stoll & Bolman, 2006; Fullan, 2003; Reeves, 2005). Seminal studies corroborate the moral imperative of the PLC and find the primary merits of a PLC are its
potential for proven student achievement results. (Hord, 2004; DuFour, et al., 2005; Morrissey, 2000b) Studies by Hord (1992; 1998) and DuFour et al. (2005) suggest the best way to understand PLCs is through a framework that categorizes the PLC physiognomies into themes. These studies have reported that when understood as a whole, these themes provide a useful framework within which to help understand the essence of a PLC. Informed by Hord’s (2004) *Five Characteristics of a Professional Learning Community* and DuFour (2006) *Big Ideas*, this study will rely on the PLC themes:

**Supportive and shared leadership.** Administrators, along with teachers, must be learning, questioning, investigating and seeking solutions for school improvement and increased student achievement. “…The traditional pattern that ‘teacher teach, students learn and administrators manage is completely altered. There is no longer a hierarchy of who knows more than someone…” (Hord, 2004, p. 8).

**Shared values and vision - collective responsibility.** One of the core characteristics of a PLC is an undeviating focus on student learning (Louis & Kruse, 1995 as cited in Hord, 2004, p. 9). Staff are encouraged not only to be involved in the process of developing shared vision, but to use that vision as a guide in making all decisions about teaching and learning in the school. The individual staff member is responsible for his or her actions, due to shared vision and values; the common good is placed on par with personal ambition. These values create the norms of self-awareness, self-criticalness, and an increasingly effective professional organization, utilizing the commitment of its members to seek ongoing renewal and improvement (Sirotnik, 1999; Little, 1997 as cited in Morrissey, 2000b).

**Collective learning - results oriented.** Teachers in a PLC move beyond “we believe all students can learn” found in the mission statements of schools around the world. The focus on
results forces them to delve deeper and to grapple with the questions that drive a PLC. Individually and collectively they ask: “If we truly believe all kids can learn, what is it that we want them to learn? How can we be certain all students have learned it? How can we respond to assist those students who are not mastering the intended outcomes? (Eaker, et al., 2002, p. 6).

**Supportive conditions.** Hord (2004) describes supportive conditions as “when, where and how the staff regularly come together as a unit to do the learning, decision-making, problem solving, and creative work that characterize a professional learning community” (p. 10). These conditions include both physical and structural factors such as scheduling, technology, space, etc., that enable shared leadership, collective learning and shared practice, professional development, and respect and trust among colleagues.

**Shared practice.** Just as most school reform efforts provide appropriate learning environments for students, there should be such an environment for teachers as well. Teachers too need an environment that values and supports their hard work and provides for their continuous learning and professional development (Hord, 2004, p. 11). Researchers have found that in a PLC teachers continuously seek and share learning to increase their effectiveness for students and act on what they learn (Leo & Cowan, 2000).

Other scholars also suggest additional themes significant to an understanding of PLC leadership. For example, mutual trust, respect and support among staff members, and extending the community beyond teachers and school leaders to support staff, networks and partnership, looking beyond the school for sources of learning and ideas (Stoll & Bolam, 2006, p. 227; Cranston, 2009).

In a PLC, these themes do not stand alone and should not be understood as ends in themselves. Rather they interact with the expressed and ultimate purpose of improved student
learning. Multiple studies have investigated improved achievement goals for all students in a PLC, including historically disadvantaged and disenfranchised students (Elbousty & Bratt, 2010; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995 as cited in Hord, 2004; Datnow, 2011; Rosenholtz, 1983). Although it is important to note that studies also suggest that the performance of a PLC in relation to instructional improvement in a high performing school may be less apparent than in low performing school. Bryk, Camburn, and Louis (1999) found that in a high performing school with a long history of providing challenging, intellectual work for its students might be orienting its professional interaction towards conserving existing practices rather than changing them (as cited in Stoll & Bolam, 2006, p. 229). The implication of research measuring PLC achievement success is only marginally relevant for the purposes of this study. Barrington Public Schools PLC has sustained a long record of success, this research study is not attempting to measure or in any way quantifying a causal relationship between the Barrington Public School success and its PLC. Instead it seeks to understand the essence of leadership in the Barrington Public Schools PLC from the perspective of school leaders.

**Collaboration.** For the purposes of this study and within the context of the collegial model, it is most relevant to examine the literature that relates to the influences within PLC success, specifically the influences of collaboration. Petro (1992) defines collegial formations as a “…pursuit of which entails certain privileges and also certain obligations. Collective is the operative concept in search for collegiality. Collegiality is defined as the establishment of a group with a common purposes and standards and through these shared ideas” (p. 286).

Many studies (Newman & Wehlage, 1995; Hargreaves, 1994; Louis, Leithwood et al., 2010; Hughes & Kritsonis, 2007; Maloney & Konza, 2011) suggest that the primary factor related to the success of a PLC is the effects of authentic collaborative structures and practices
shaped by leadership practices, that become interactive processes of teacher teams and a supportive, results oriented culture. Morrissey (2000b) explains the influences of collaboration as a benefit to teaching and learning finding that teachers can improve their practice in a PLC: The [PLC] structure provides a context of collegiality, which supports teachers and administrators in improving their practice through learning new curriculum and instructional strategies and the methods for interacting meaningfully with each child. (p. 3)

Newman and Wehlage (1995) also found that collaborative structures can strengthen PLCs and enhance student learning through improved teacher practices observing that a goal of better teaching practices would be considered unachievable without collaboration and linking collaboration to shared purpose. Additional research also points to the collaborative practices of teacher teams such as team teaching, common planning time, planning formative assessments and extensive professional development as supporting student achievement (Leonard & Leonard, 2003).

Studies have also concluded that the benefits of collaboration in a PLC can be found beyond teacher practice to a more comprehensive change in a school culture (Leonard & Leonard, 2003). Eaker, DuFour and DuFour (2002) suggest PLCs are the primary method to reculture schools and the most important facet of the reculture process and sustainment is collaboration.

Examining the influences of collaboration on school wide change, Fullan (2010) supports these findings and characterizes collaboration in a school as building the “collective capacity” of an organization – the ability of the whole organization to improve conjointly. He asserts, “Collective capacity generates the emotional commitment and the technical expertise that no
amount of individual capacity working alone can come close to matching” (p. xiii). Building “collective capacity” through collaboration is more than putting structures in place or creating processes (Newman and Wehlage, 1995; Louis, Leithwood et al., 2010). Fullan (1999) describes effective collaboration as how teachers as a group and as a subgroup together examine how well students are doing; they relate this to how they are teaching and make continuous refinements individually and with each other.

DuFour and Eaker (2005) suggest how these groups and subgroups can collaborate authentically through leadership practice such as having scheduled time for collaboration built into the school day and year; making the purpose of the collaboration explicit; giving school personnel training and support to be effective collaborators; and having educators accept their responsibility to work together as true professional colleagues (Alberta, 2006, p.34).

Research by Morrissey (2000b) supports DuFour and Eaker (2005) and explains the collaborative process as engaging all staff to work together to “seek best strategies and instructional practices to engage their students in learning and make the necessary adjustments to respond to the students’ diverse learning needs” (p. 6). Such collaborative work is grounded in reflective dialogue and inquiry that moves beyond conversations to significant school improvement – curriculum, instruction, assessment and the school’s culture (Schmoker, 2005; Morrissey, 2000b). Other studies support these findings on authentic collaboration and suggest it should be embedded in routine practices, built into the school day and school calendar, results oriented, guided by clear norms, directed toward specific and measurable performance goals, focused on key questions associated with learning (DuFour et al., 2004; Barth, 2006; Maloney & Konza, 2011).

Hargreaves (1994) and others (Beatty, 2011; Dantow, 2011; Bennet et al., 2003) warn
that school leader mandated professional development or social interactions are in juxtaposition to authentic collaboration. These are examples of what Hargreaves (2009) refers to as “contrived collegiality.” He warns that:

While innovations have inspired great gain, much has also been lost. Relationship-driven cultures of collaboration have been converted into formula technologies of specifying clear goals and conducting regular meetings to analyze performance data and develop intervention plans as to meet the targets connected to these goals. Far too often, cultures of collaboration have turned into the worst kind of contrived collegiality. (p. 31)

Hargreaves “contrived collegiality” also known in the literature as “mere collegiality” speaks to what is certainly the reality of some practice. To successfully create, facilitate and support the structures and culture that ensures meaningful collaboration, PLCs must rely primarily on school leaders (DuFour & Marazano, 2009; Gano-Phillips et al., 2011; Sparks et al., 2005; Hord, 2004; Hughes & Kritsonis, 2006). Effective leadership not only ensures authentic collaboration, but also depends on it as well. Shared, collaborative leadership is recognized by the literature as critical to the implementation and sustainment of a PLC (Spillane & Diamond, 2007; Sergiovanni, 1984; Evans, 2011). In The Human Side of School Change: Reform, Resistance; and the Real-Life Problem of Innovation, Evans (2001) explains the relationship between shared leadership, or in his terminology participatory leadership, collaboration, and school improvement which are the hallmarks of a PLC:

School improvement is embedded in an ethos of empowerment and collegiality. The second wave of the restructuring movement has concentrated not just on redesigning curriculum and instruction but on realigning roles and relationships to unleash teachers’ energy and influence and enhance their professional cooperation and support. To fulfill
these priorities, administrators are to practice participatory leadership. (p. 229)

Exploring the literature in regard to shared leadership (also known in the literature as participatory, distributive and transformative leadership) will further inform this research study by identifying the shared and collaborative roles, actions and interactions of school leaders within a PLC.

**To Inform an Understanding PLC Leadership: Utilizing the “Loose-Tight” Leadership Model**

Leadership is sometimes studied distinct from the actions, feelings and purposes of leaders (Babo & Ramaswami, 2011; The Council, 2008; Donovan, 2010; Murphy, 1998). An example of this literature is *The School Leaders’ Educational Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC 2008* (Brumley, 2010). Adopted by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration, these standards – and corresponding studies – focus on the ISLLC prescription of school leadership (The Council, 2008, p. 3). Most are devoid of the personal perspectives and interactions of school leaders, the organic nature of leadership as well as the inherent complexities in schools. These studies compartmentalize school leadership into functions with the purpose of quantifying function priority. Wallace Foundation President M. Christine DeVita explains these standards, “The national conversation has shifted from ‘whether’ leadership really matters or is worth the investment, to ‘how’ to train, place, and support high-quality leadership…” (The Council, 2008, p. 3). The ISLLC Standards expression of leadership is as a series of somewhat technical – either managerial or instructional – functions, organizational processes or actions operating in isolation within a bureaucratic environment. This perspective is not entirely compatible with the collegial model adopted by this study and is limiting to a full description of the phenomenon being researched.
Instead, this study’s review of the literature on leadership in a PLC moves away from either a top down authoritarian model, a charismatic sage, or even an instructional leader (Sparks, 2005) to one that focuses on an interrelated, shared view of leadership expressed through the thoughts, perceptions, motivations, and practiced actions of learning leaders who employ structural and cultural transformations as a strategy for accountable school improvement (DuFour, 2002). Such learning leaders use both top down pressure and bottom up support to build staff capacity, interpersonal capacity and organizational capacity (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001). Building capacity is the result of the learning leader’s “loose-tight” leadership expressed by DuFour (2007), Eaker and Gonzalez (2006), and Many and Ritchie (2004) and helps to frame this study’s exploration of school leaders and their leadership in the context of the Barrington Public Schools successful PLC.

The efficacy of school leadership continues to struggle in a challenging paradox: how can school leaders be supportive and share decision making if there is a cultural aversion to collaboration, deprivitation of practice or a resistance to change? DuFour (2007), Eaker and Gonzalez (2006), and Many and Ritchie (2004) argue that the answer lies in learning leaders who practice “loose-tight” leadership with bottom up supports and top down pressures. DuFour (2007) explains:

Leaders who create schools and districts capable of sustained, substantive improvement are not laissez-faire in their approach to education but rather are skillful in implementing the concept of simultaneous loose-tight leadership…. This leadership approach fosters autonomy and creativity (loose) within a systematic framework that stipulates clear, non-discretionary priorities and parameters (tight). (p. 39)
Many (2009) agrees confirming that:

- Principals need not apologize for having high expectations and holding teachers accountable for implementing the big ideas of a PLC. Indeed, given what we know now, I would argue that it is unconscionable to allow teachers to ignore best practice or sabotage legitimate school improvement efforts that reflect the big ideas of PLCs. It is equally irresponsible, however, to expect teachers to change their practice substantially without the necessary time and support they need to succeed. (p. 9)

DuFour (1999) offers four strategies for school leaders to successfully accomplish this balance: lead through shared vision and collective commitments rather than rules and authority; create collaborative structures that focus on teaching and learning; pose the questions that help the school focus on issues of teaching and learning; provide staff with the training, information, and parameters they need to make good decisions.

A review of the literature on school leadership supports DuFour’s (1999) suggested strategies. With a focus on the actions and interactions of school leaders practicing both bottom up supports and top down pressure, the literature reflects best practice in school leadership through three interrelated thematic trends: increasing staff capacities for continuous learning; modeling learning and interpersonal capacities for collaboration; and shaping school culture with an organizational capacity for learning.

**Increasing staff capacities for continuous learning.** Some of the broader conclusions of studies that focus on increasing staff and personal capacities for continuous learning suggest that school leaders must have an ability to deal with friction and tension, particularly in the early stages of PLC development (Hord, 2004) and must focus on their own professional development and be able to grow the capacities of organizational members (Leithwood & Louis, 1998; King,
By developing structures that foster participation in school decisions (Leithwood & Louis, 1998) and providing and monitoring the impact of professional development (King, 2002; Schmoker, 2001; Marx, 2005), these studies conclude that trust is built among the faculty (Marx, 2005) and the faculty, in turn, is able to make good decisions that benefit student learning (DuFour & Marzano, 2009).

**Modeling learning and interpersonal capacities for collaboration.** The research also points to the importance of modeling learning and collaboration as a tool for school leaders to increase their staff and personal capacities for continuous learning. The primary studies conclude that modeling means a school leader must be visible as learner to staff (Hord, 2004; Carmichael, 1982), demonstrate high performance expectations by focusing unremitting attention on student learning (Leithwood & Louis, 1998; King, 2002; Schmoker, 2001), assume higher levels of personal commitment to organizational goals and extra capacities for accomplishing goals (Leithwood & Louis, 1998), and institute values and model best practices by knowing curriculum, instruction and assessment (Leithwood & Louis, 1998; Marx, 2005). The studies conclude that this type of leadership is most effective and successfully leads through shared vision and collective commitments rather than rules and authority (DuFour & Marzano, 2009).

**Shaping school culture with an organizational capacity for learning.** According to the research, collective commitments will ultimately shape school culture with a focus on learning but school leaders must have a realistic understanding of the change process – recognize and accept resistance to change – nurture those who understood the value of becoming a PLC and persuade those who had yet to recognize the strength of a PLC (Hord, 2004). Studies by DuFour (2002) and King (2002) call on school leaders to have vision, articulate beliefs, serve as change agents and use data-driven decision making to precipitate change.
Understood as an interrelated whole, these findings regarding the actions and interactions of school leadership in a PLC provide a roadmap for school leaders to empower the collective capacity of their school to lead substantive changes towards improved teaching and accountable student achievement results. In a study of secondary school principals, Singh (2005) summarizes similar findings, “…leadership should be viewed as a process that encourages and accommodates shared decision-making and shared leadership in the spirit of enabling people to want to act” (p. 11).

In conclusion, this research review evidences the interconnections between shared leadership practices, continuous improvement, and student learning in the PLC organization. It demonstrates how the collaborative, supportive and trusting relationships of the school leader - known as loose leadership (Many & Ritchie, 2004) works in concert with vision, focus and accountability – known as tight leadership (DuFour, 2007) – to guide, support, and to act as a model for other school wide authentic collaborations. In addition, it evidences that shared decision making influences structural and cultural changes in a PLC that ensures student achievement results. Finally, a review of the literature also verifies the strong relationship between school leadership practices, building collective capacity and effective system wide reform.
Chapter Three: Research Design

Research Question

The goal of this research study is to describe and to fully discover meaning and gain a unique awareness of the phenomenon of leadership within the successful Barrington Public Schools PLC. To investigate the phenomenon of leadership from both a scholarly and practitioner perspective, the research questions in this study rely on the personal perspectives and voices of Barrington Public School leaders who have lived the experience and who have the closest, most detailed and intimate connection to the phenomenon of leadership addressed in this study (Creswell, 1998).

The central research question for this study is, “What do school leaders perceive is the essence of school leadership in the Barrington Public Schools Professional Learning Community.” This research question is holistic and intended to develop description and explanation, understanding, complexities, details, and context; it is a research question that connects with all the components of this study (Maxwell, 2005). “Essence” in this research question is defined as the basic, real, and invariable nature of a thing or its significant individual feature or features (Merriam, 2012).

The associated sub questions in this study are concerned with leadership practices and cogitations – the underpinnings – of the essence of leadership. The sub questions are:

- What do school leaders perceive are the defining and transformative experiences of their leadership in the Barrington Schools PLC?
- What do school leaders perceive are the defining and transformative influences on their leadership in the Barrington Schools PLC?
- What do school leaders perceive are the defining and transformative influences of their
leadership on the Barrington Schools PLC?

The purpose of these sub questions is to narrow the focus of the study (Creswell, 2009), give guidance and to “engage the total self of the research participant” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 105).

All questions assume that the Barrington Public Schools is a successful education organization that has a long and documented record of student achievement. All of the questions do not precipitate any intention to evaluate individuals, their leadership styles, strategies or performance in any way. The sole purpose of these questions is to uncover the essence of leadership through the self-reflection and examination of the participants; “by peeling back the various layers” (Mostert, 2002, p. 2) of the thoughts, beliefs and feelings of school leaders in the Barrington PLC.

These questions were developed in the phenomenological tradition with the intention of providing for the greatest flexibility and broadest range of inquiry and reflection. The exploration of personal perspective is by its definition uniquely individualized and open ended. These research questions reflect the opportunity for freest thought, deepest inquiry and most genuine personal reflection (Smith et al., 2012). In addition, with a clear focus on the Barrington Public School leaders, these questions are sensitive to the context of the study and they all “…sustain personal and passionate involvement” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 105) of the researcher. This study is an opportunity for me as the researcher to examine and explore the perceptions, practices and organizational philosophies that characterize the complexities of leadership in the Barrington Public Schools PLC.

Methodology

A qualitative methodology was used to support an investigation of these questions. According to Locke et al. (2010) reliable results require good questions matched with carefully
selected research methods (p. 86). Qualitative methodology was a good match to address the
research questions in this study for many reasons including: the data collection happens in the
setting where the phenomenon is experienced making it intimately connected to the
phenomenon; the researcher actually gathers the data needing little support by or influence from
other researchers; the data analysis is inductive allowing for a back and forth between the data
and the analysis that supports thematic findings that go beyond the data; collaboration between
the researcher and the participants also supports emergent understanding; and multiple
perspectives and many different factors that influence leadership are able to be included and
combine in this study to develop a holistic understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998;
2009).

Qualitative methodology is not new to the scholarly research investigating the topics of
PLCs, school leadership, school leaders, and system wide reform. In a recent review of the
literature, these topics had been recurrently studied with a variety of purposes, in a variety of
contexts and using a variety of qualitative research designs. There is a deficiency in the literature
regarding the phenomenon of school leadership in a PLC from the practitioner’s point of view
and from the perspective of the schools leaders who are experiencing the phenomenon. A
qualitative methodology employed in this study helps to address these deficiencies in the
literature and at the same time conveys the importance of the phenomenon to select audiences of
school leaders who might benefit from understanding the practices and behaviors of successful
school leaders in the Barrington Public Schools PLC (Creswell, 2009).

With the primary purposes of exploration, description and developing an understanding
of the phenomenon of leadership in the Barrington Public Schools PLC, this study is informed by
the philosophical traditions, methodological techniques and practices of phenomenological
research as described primarily by Moutstakas (1994), and supported by Creswell (1998; 2009) and Smith et al. (2012).

Moutstakas (1994) describes the aim of phenomenological research to be the determination of “what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it. From these individual descriptions, general or universal meanings are derived, in other words, the essences or structure of the experience” (p. 13). Phenomenology is both a research method as well as a philosophy with roots dating back to the teachings of Kant and Hegel and modernized by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) who is regarded as “the fountainhead of phenomenology in the twentieth century” (Groenewald, 2004, p. 3). Husserl and his disciples were concerned with the discovery of meaning and essences in knowledge and taught that blending what is really present and what is imagined as present is, in essence, reality. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 27). Reality, Husserl taught, only exists “in the minds and eyes of the beholder” (Locke et al., 2010, p. 187). What appears in consciousness is the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26).

To get to the essence of a phenomenon, Husserl’s philosophy was designed to require more than simple observation by the researcher. Discovery and meaningful description was promulgated by a method of reflection referencing facts, ideas, and events in a stream of consciousness seen through the lens of a participant. The participant’s reality is confirmed only by “repeated looking and viewing while the phenomenon as a whole remains the same” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 47). Husserl asserted that “Ultimately, all genuine, and in particular, all scientific knowledge rests on inner evidence: as far as such evidence extends, the concept of knowledge extends also” (as cited in Moustakas, 1994, p. 26).

Husserl’s teachings are supported by the later work of Giorgi (as cited in Merriam, 2002;
King and Horrocks, 2010), Moustakas (1994) and others (Creswell, 1998) always with a focus on the psychological and human influences of the phenomenon and always through the perspective of the participants. According to Creswell (1998), one of the major deviations between the earlier philosophers and later phenomenologist researchers is the concept of *epoche* where the researcher brackets – or attempts to bracket - his or her own preconceived ideas about the phenomenon in order to discover meaning through the voices of the informants (p. 54).

This study is especially suited to the methodology of phenomenology for many reasons. Phenomenology is concerned with the study of a phenomenon from the perspective of the individual (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological approaches are based in the paradigm of personal knowledge (Lester, 1999) with an internal bias and an emphasis on personal interpretation. This study examines leadership through the self-reflection of persons experiencing leadership in a PLC. “Reality” in this study is understood to be the unchallenged perceptions of leadership within the PLC and not perceptions of those outside of this “reality.” This study accepts the subjectivity of these participants and relies on their intimacy with the phenomenon whereby giving voice to the practicing school leaders, a voice not often found in the literature.

In addition, phenomenological studies are particularly effective at bringing to the forefront the experiences and perspectives from individuals who can and may challenge structural and normative assumptions (Moustakas, 1994). This study relies on the personal, in-depth and reflective thoughts of the participants who have this personal knowledge and can express a deep, private and particular understanding of the phenomenon of leadership within the Barrington Public Schools PLC that might be unknown or not considered before this study.

Phenomenological approaches are also effective at surfacing deep issues and making voices heard while providing insight by cutting through taken-for-granted assumptions,
prompting action or challenging complacency. It is not the intention of phenomenological inquiry to mandate new meaning as authoritative; rather it examines the range of experiences possible, how they can be described and how language has the ability to communicate these experiences to others (Mostert, 2002).

The phenomenological approach of this study also recognizes the complexity and interconnectedness of phenomenon of school leadership and the community of persons in a PLC. It relies on “intersubjective communication” to come to a deeper understanding; the back and forth of social interaction to discover what is really true of the phenomenon that includes interpersonal knowledge and experience (Moustakas, 1994, p. 57). This study utilizes the personal voices, in-depth reflection, the actions and the interactions of school leader participants as data to support a thematic, and by extension, deeper understanding of the phenomenon of school leadership in the Barrington PLC.

**Site and participants.** The site, participant sample size, criterion, rapport and accessibility in this study were purposefully selected based on the research questions and purposes of this study and its phenomenological research design (Creswell, 1998; 2009).

**Site of study - Barrington Public Schools.** The site of this study was the Barrington, Rhode Island Public School District. Barrington Public Schools is a K-12 district with six schools and approximately 3,400 students. The site chosen for this study is a single site which is appropriate for a phenomenological study (Creswell, 1998, p. 111). In addition, the site was chosen for the following reasons: (1) By all measures, Barrington Public Schools is recognized as a high achieving and successful school district (“InfoWorks, ” 2010) (2) the district and building school leaders have been recognized as exemplary and as significant contributors to the success of the PLC reforms implemented and sustained in Barrington Public Schools (Appleton,
through district “gatekeepers,” as the researcher I was able to gain access to the school leaders who have intimate knowledge and experience with the phenomenon (Creswell, 2009) (4) my personal and professional commitment to the Barrington Public Schools stimulates and sustains this study (Moustakas, 1994).

**Site of data collection.** The physical location of data collection for this study was at various venues in the Barrington Public School buildings, libraries and offices. These locations were in the natural setting where participants experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2009). The primary criteria of the site locations were the comfort, convenience and privacy of the participants in order to facilitate uninterrupted, confidential, in-depth, interviews with back and forth conversations, the free and open exchange of ideas, insights, thoughts, beliefs, viewpoints, opinions and reflections (Smith et al., 2012). The final decision for all site locations was made by the participants (Smith et al., 2012). Because the confidentiality of the participants was of primary importance and the recording devices used during the interview had to have minimal background noise, the sites were standard office size areas with limited access by the public or other staff. There were two recording devices in case one failed, one device was a Sony and one device was an Olympus. The sites were easily scheduled and required no preliminary set-up or preparation. Furniture and lighting were comfortable and available to both the participant and researcher.

**Sample size.** There were five school leaders who participated in this study. In the phenomenological tradition, the sample size of participants may vary between 5 -25 participants, all who have lived the phenomenon (Kruger and Stones, 1981, p. 150). Kruger and Stones (1981) explains the reasoning for this number of participants in a phenomenological study, “By making use of a variety of subjects, the possibility of finding underlying constants or themes in
the many forms the experience takes is greatly increased” (p. 127). Because of the small size of the district and the very low turnover of school leaders, the number of potential leader participants with intimate knowledge and experiences in the Barrington PLC was limited. In addition, I had limited accessibility to some of these potential participants because they were retired and working and living outside of the district.

Another reason this study had five participants was because of the “vast amount of data that emerges from even one interview” in a phenomenological study (Hycner, 1985). Five participants provided over 232 pages of transcribed interview data and these participants were able to “…fully describe the experience being researched” (Hycner, 1985, p. 294). Kvale (1996) summarizes the sample size criteria a researcher should use in qualitative interviews, “Interview as many subjects as necessary to find out what you need to know” (p. 101).

**Diverse criterion sampling.** Every participant was chosen because of their characteristics and unique experiences relating to the phenomenon of school leadership in the Barrington PLC. Creswell (1998) refers to this type of selection of participants as “criterion sampling” (p. 118) where all participants meet a primary criterion. In this study, the primary criterion was having experience relating to the phenomenon of school leadership in the Barrington Public School PLC (Creswell, 2009, p. 9).

In addition to criterion sampling, Moustakas (1994) also supports the necessity of including a diverse group of participants in a phenomenological study in order for the broadest range of perspectives to be collected. According to Moustakas (1994) participants in a phenomenological study are considered “persons” and not subjects and as such are actually co-investigators in the study. As co-investigators participants need to have interest and some investment in understanding the phenomenon and each should be considered a person as a whole
being, complete with past experiences, attitudes, beliefs and values. The participants have to be understood in a holistic way who have lived in a world of experience, replete with both cultural and social influences and their human complexities have to be recognized and integrated in this study (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114).

Therefore, in addition to their experience as leaders within the Barrington Public School PLC, the five participants were chosen based on their range of human complexities. Four school leaders were male, one was female. All held different leadership positions for various amounts of time in the Barrington Public Schools. Some participants held multiple positions as school leaders in the Barrington Public Schools. All but one school leader had over ten years of experience in other districts outside of the Barrington Public Schools. Most participants had been school leaders in the Barrington Public School during all phases of the PLC initiative, creation, implementation and sustainment.

All participants have graduate degrees with various specialties such as curriculum, administration, counseling, and business management. All participants have expertise in PLC as well as other school wide reform initiatives. All had considerable knowledge of PLC principles, processes and practices and have extensive professional development training in PLC including workshops, conferences and site visits. Some participants were recognized as experts in PLC and have presented at conferences regarding the creation, implementation and/or sustainment of the Barrington School PLC.

In addition to the criteria of experience and diversity of human complexities, all the participants of this study were also chosen because they “…not only have had the particular experience being investigated but also are able to articulate their experience” (Hycner, 1985, p. 294). The phenomenological methodology of this study required participants to have the ability
for a robust and interactive sharing of thoughts, ideas, beliefs, reflections during in-depth interviews. All of the school leaders chosen for this study are self-reflecting, thoughtful, knowledgeable, and extremely articulate and are proficient verbal and written communicators.

Participants in this study were also all known to me professionally through my position in the Barrington Public Schools. This collegiality and rapport helped to set the stage for successful in-depth interviews. Smith et al. (2012) describes in-depth interviews as “a conversation with a purpose” (p. 57) and the established rapport with a participant allows the researcher to have a more free and in-depth exchange of thoughts, ideas, beliefs and reflections. As Merriam (2002) reports, the establishment of a good level of rapport is critical to gaining depth of information, particularly when investigating issues where the participant has a strong personal stake. Smith et al. (2012) agree explaining that interviews that resemble conversations will “…facilitate a comfortable interaction with the participant [and] will, in turn, enable them to prove a detailed account of the experience under investigation (p. 59). Maxwell (2005) also stated that developing rapport with participants in a study is “…an essential part of [a researcher’s] methods and how [a researcher] initiates and negotiates these relationships is a key design decision” (p. 82).

While there were advantages of knowing the participants in the study, there were also potential challenges as well. Because I was employed in the district and was a subordinate of the school leader participants, extra care was given to the IRB application and the protection of the confidentiality of the respondents, their right to voluntarily withdraw from the study at any time, and the security of the interview data collection and storage (Creswell, 1998).

Once the final proposal for this study was approved by Northeastern University College of Professional Studies and the formal process of IRB approval was completed, I met with each potential participant individually and requested their participation in the study according to the
verbal participation script (Appendix A). Upon agreeing to be in the study, each participant was then given a printed document of the interview questions (Appendix B), and the Signed Informed Consent of the Participants document (Appendix B) to consider and sign before the scheduled interview. Finally, according to the procedure outlined by the Barrington Public Schools Superintendent of Schools, I submitted a copy of the study proposal, the IRB approval and the Signed Informed Consent of the Participants document to the Superintendent who presented my request to the School Committee who approved the request. Once the participants were all fully informed and protected, Northeastern University and the Barrington Public School district had successfully approved the study, the data collection process was ready to begin.

**Data collection.** The data type and flexible collection procedures in this study reflect the fundamental purpose of this phenomenological research study: to build a rich, complex understanding of the phenomenon of school leadership in the Barrington Public Schools PLC through the everyday lived experiences of those who are closest to the phenomenon and know it best (Moustakas, 1994). The data type and collection procedures in this study respect the inherent interrelated nature of the school leadership phenomenon and allow for in-depth exploration, responsive redirection and new discoveries in order for unknown relationships, insights and themes to emerge.

Specifically, this study follows a multifaceted approach of data collection that relies primarily on the in-depth interviews of school leaders. These interactive interviews were designed to “…facilitate the elicitation of stories, thoughts and feelings about the target phenomenon (Smith et al, 2012, p. 56) of school leadership and included the personal insights, thoughts, beliefs, viewpoints, opinions, reflections, and views of school leader participants. In addition, this study also relied on follow up conversations and email documentation with
individual school leaders as “member checking” described by Creswell (2009) as a means to determine the accuracy of the findings and provide an opportunity for the participants to comment further on the phenomenon of school leadership. Finally, this study also recognized the researcher’s self-reflection, bias, judgments and beliefs as potential data and addressed the need to bracket these according to phenomenological procedures outlined by Moustkas (1994) and Creswell (1998; 2009).

**In-depth interviews.** This phenomenological study relied primarily on in-depth, face-to-face, semi structured, long interviews with an informal, interactive process “aimed at evoking a comprehensive account of the person’s experience of the phenomenon” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114). These interviews were the “raw material” used for future analysis in the study and the quality of the original interviews was decisive for the quality of the later analysis (Kval, 1996). The interviews were designed and implemented with the goal of maximizing the depth of description of the phenomenon of school leadership that the participants experienced in the Barrington Public Schools PLC (King and Horrocks, 2010).

The interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the participants in June and July at the end of the school year and conducted in comfortable locations previously described in this study. By waiting until the end of the school year, the school leaders had more flexibility and availability in their very busy schedules. The interviews were all conducted individually (Smith et al., 2012) and began with a short social conversation aimed at creating a relaxed and trusting atmosphere as suggested by Moustakas (1994) and supported by Smith et al. (2012) who note that participants should have “…space to think, speak and be heard” (p. 57).

As the interviewer, my first goal was to create a climate in which the research participant felt comfortable and would respond honestly and comprehensively (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114).
Kvale (2007) describes the first minutes of an interview as “decisive” explaining, “The interviewees will want to have a grasp of the interviewer before they allow themselves to talk freely and expose their experiences and feelings…” (p. 56). This study depended on a data collection strategy that evoked detailed, creative engagement by the participants with an intimate focus and willingness “to tell their stories, to speak freely and reflectively and to develop their ideas and express their concerns at some length” (Smith et al., 2012, p. 56). While the research recommends that great care be taken to “help the participant get used to talking” (Smith et al., 2012) all of the participants in this study were immediately comfortable and willing to share their thoughts and recount their leadership experiences. They were cooperative, well-motivated, eloquent, knowledgeable, and consistent; they would be characterized by Kvale (1996) as “good interviewees.” All of the interviews lasted over an hour and some of the interviews more than two hours as suggested by Creswell (1998) depending on the participant’s availability and responses. It is important to explain that while the interviewees were eloquent and coherent, the interviews were much more than social conversations (Smith et al., 2012). The participants stayed on topic, did not wander off (Kvale, 1996) and reflected on their experience as relevant to the research project (King and Horrocks, 2010).

Sensitive to the time demands of the interviewees and with a focus on obtaining substantive knowledge, I prepared for the interviews before hand and attempted to manage the conditions of the interviews with sensitivity and forethought (Smith et al., 2012). Prior to the interviews I developed open ended interview questions following the protocol described by Creswell (1998; 2009) and suggested by Smith et al. (2012). These interview questions were brief and simple (Kvale, 1996) and included ten primary questions each with at least two sub questions to direct the follow up conversation (Appendix D). I gave each participant a copy of
these questions well ahead of the interview so they would feel more comfortable knowing what
to expect (Creswell 1998; Smith et al., 2012) and also to be able to prepare their reflections in
advance of the interview if they wished. These questions did not have a rigid structure; in my
role as the interviewer, I often modified the follow up questioning in order to facilitate
“spontaneous, rich, specific and relevant answers from the interviewee (Kvale, 1996, p. 145).
However, I never completely abandoned the interview questions and redirected the interviewee
back to the questions if necessary.

**The role of the interviewer.** In the role of interviewer I followed the criteria suggested by
Kvale (1996) and Smith et al., (2012) which included being knowledgeable about the topic and
following a clear procedure. In addition, I was sensitive to the participants allowing them to
proceed at their own rate of thinking and speaking, giving as much time as needed to allow for
the fullest answer possible while refraining from interrupting to allow for a free and full flow of
ideas and listening attentively for nuances of meaning. My questioning was effective; posing
clear questions, asking one question at a time, keeping the interview on topic, continuously
questioning and reflecting on the information shared, remembering and relating earlier
statements to ask for elaboration.

During the interviews as well as during the entire study, ethical considerations were a
primary concern and always on the forefront of my mind. Semi structured interviews are in the
words of Kvale (2007) “a construction site for knowledge” where ethical issues permeate as
participants feel free and safe to talk of private events; private events that would later be made
available for public use. In the role of interviewer, I always balanced the study’s need for the
most in-depth, first-hand information with my ethical respect for the integrity of the school
leader participants. In addition, because of my role as a subordinate to the school leaders during
the interviews, I also balanced the study’s need for information with being overly intrusive as well as accidently leading the participants in a direction (Smith et al., 2012). I believe this balance was achieved by carefully monitoring the effect of the interview on the participants and relying on the advice of Smith et al., (2012) who suggest that during an interview:

> It may be that the participant feels uncomfortable with a particular line of questioning and this may be expressed in their non-verbal behavior or in how they reply. [The interviewer] needs to be ready to respond to this, either by backing away from that issue, by rephrasing the question more cautiously or sometimes by deciding that is would be inappropriate to continue altogether. (p.66)

To support this intense monitoring for ethical concerns as well as to focus intently on the topic (Moustakas, 1994), I used an interview protocol to take notes during the interview as prescribed by Creswell (1998). The protocol included copies of the interview questions and space to write key phrases used by the respondents, as well as my own notes pertaining to the direction of the questioning. I did not want to interrupt the answer flow of the interviewee and at times they would raise interesting points that I wanted to make sure to follow up on. I also wanted to have as much back up verbiage in the event the audio tape was hard to comprehend or failed at any point during the interview. This interview protocol proved to be an essential tool during the interview allowing me to successfully follow up, keep my own thought process on task and manage the time efficiently by keeping the interview moving, not allowing myself to interrupt and bracketing my personal thoughts (Creswell, 1998). I also used this interview protocol at the end of each interview to write follow up notes, observations, thoughts and reflections that later clarified and supported the data analysis process (Kvale, 1996).
Transcription. Once all the interviews were completed I began the process of transcribing the interview audio files. The interviews were recorded by two digital recorders just in case one recorder had technical difficulty or failed. After each interview, I downloaded both copies of the audio files to a computer and to an external hard drive. This storage and handling of the interview data protected the confidentiality of the participants and was well suited to qualitative research (Creswell, 1998). In addition, the phenomenological methodology of this study focusing on an in-depth understanding of the thoughts, views, feelings and opinions of the participants seeking to examine personal experience in depth and as such required “…full verbatim transcription” (King and Horrocks, 2010, p. 143).

Transcribing interview data is changing oral language into written language and as such is transforming data from one form to another. According to Kvale (2007) this process involves a series of important judgments and decision (p. 93). I chose to personally transcribe the data for the following reasons: to protect the confidentiality of the participants; to begin the data analysis process by immersing myself in the data; to have flexibility on the format of the print transcription and have control over any editing, and to ensure the credibility of the data.

Utilizing Microsoft Word®, I created a table with three columns, the first column included the file name and digital time checkpoint from the audio file; the second column included the interview question, and the third column included the interviewee response. I played the audio files in Windows Media Player® in “slow mode” and simultaneously typed a verbatim account of the audio file putting the text into the appropriate table column. I did not “tidy up” mispronunciations or uncompleted sentences as suggested by King and Horrocks (2010) because I did not want to transform or influence the data in any way. There were no technical terms or jargon that I could not transcribe. Overall, I did not have any problem with the sound quality of
the files although I had to replay some sections to hear every word for a complete transcription. I printed a copy of the transcription every time I completed a question and saved the transcribed files on a computer and an external hard drive. Once an interview question and answer was transcribed, I created a new row on the Word® table and began the process again until all the interviews were completed. This table was later expanded during the data analysis process to include explanatory commenting, themes, clustering, and patterns (See Appendix D) and was used in combination with the interview protocol notes and “member checking” email correspondence with the participants as the data for this study (Creswell, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; King and Horrocks, 2010).

Data analysis. With all the school leader interviews completed and the data successfully transcribed, the systematic data analysis process began. This study utilized a combination of the phenomenological data analysis methodologies presented by Moustakas (1994) and the six step Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) developed by Smith et al. (2012).

While there are some differences, all phenomenological data analysis methodologies share the primary characteristic of being a process through which the essential meaning of a phenomenon – the essence - is developed by using an in-depth analysis of the personal perspectives of those who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998, p. 51). It is an inductive analysis presented in a reduction process moving the researcher from the concrete view of the participant perspectives towards a more abstract view of the essence of the phenomenon (King and Horrocks, 2010). This interactive process is described by Creswell (2009) as requiring a back and forth between the themes and the data until a comprehensive set of themes is established.

Moustakas (1994) characterizes this data analysis process as phenomenological reduction
and relies on thematic clustering as well as on the importance of *epochs*, the bracketing of bias and prejudgments of researchers in order to focus on and explicate the essential nature of the phenomenon (p. 91). Smith et al. (2012) builds on this concept of phenomenological reduction with a more concrete six step analysis process providing “a practical focus on processes and strategies for analyzing data, and for organizing and developing the analysis” (p. 80) making phenomenological analysis more manageable for the novice user (p. 81). Smith et al. (2012) deviate from Moustakas (1994) on his assertion that a researcher can effectively extricate any influence on a phenomenological analysis explaining, “Although the primary concern of IPA is the lived experience of the participant and the meaning which the participant makes of that lived experience, the end result is always an account of how the analyst thinks the participant is thinking...” (p. 80).

Because phenomenology is not a monolithic tradition and there is a range of different strands of thought within it that have different implications for research practice (King and Horrocks, 2010) this study was able to employ a combination of Moustakas’s (1994) bracketing technique in order to minimize my potential as the researcher to influence the study with personal bias and prejudgments as an employee of the Barrington Public Schools. At the same time, it relied on the Smith et al.’s (2012) six step analysis to provide a concrete set of procedures to support my inexperience as a novice researcher.

**Before the study began – bracketing.** When I was in the process of investigating a problem of practice to research, my professional and personal goals and interests led me to the study of school leadership. As an employee in the Barrington Public Schools, I had observed and experienced first-hand the leadership practices in the district and I was interested to learn more about leadership influences within a successful PLC in order to improve my own leadership
skills and further support student learning in the district. To research this phenomenon, my preconceived ideas, judgments, and opinions about leadership in the Barrington Public Schools had to be bracketed and cast aside so not to influence any part of the study. One of the reasons that phenomenological methodology is appropriate for this study of school leadership within the Barrington Public Schools PLC is that it allows for this bracketing, the setting aside, of my prejudgments, biases and preconceived ideas about leadership and allows for new ideas to surface. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85).

Before beginning this study, I intently focused on, reflected and wrote in a journal all of my prejudgments about school leadership practices in the Barrington Public Schools and then physically put these notes aside to bracket them off and to remind myself to keep them at bay, to store them away, through the course of the study. It was actually easy to identify these prejudgments and bracketing proved to be an excellent preparation for deriving new knowledge in this study, a process described by Moustakas (1994) as setting aside predilections, prejudices, predispositions and allowing things, events and people to enter anew into consciousness, and to look and see them again, as if for the first time (p. 85). Throughout the processes of this study – from the development of the research question, to the data collection, during the data analysis and finally with the conclusion of the findings - my ideas, judgments and opinions about leadership in the Barrington Public Schools PLC have stayed securely stored and bracketed and have had no influence on this study. My knowledge of the success of the district was not bracketed; I knew the Barrington Public Schools was successful but I did not make any suppositions as to the influence of leadership in that success.

**Step One-Reading and re-reading.** With the bracketing completed and the 232 single spaced pages of verbatim interview data successfully transcribed, the step by step data analysis
of this study began. Smith et al. (2012) describes the first step in the data analysis process as the reading and re-reading of the verbatim transcripts to immerse oneself in the original data (p. 82). According to Smith et al. (2012) repeated readings allows the overall interview structure to begin to take shape for the researcher and permits the analyst to gain an understanding of how narrative can bind certain sections of an interview together (p. 82).

My reading of the transcripts was very slow and reflective. I began by simultaneously listening to the audio file and reading silently in order to proofread the transcribed text. Reading the first time, I stayed focused on the text, evaluating every word for accuracy to make sure I transcribed exactly as the participant responded.

The second time through, I was reading, listening and also concurrently reflecting remembering back to the interview and asking myself questions to begin to make connections with the text and to really get to know the participants through their words. I asked myself: Was the school leader answering the question directly? Was he/she hesitating and holding back answers? Did they stay focused? How were their emotions presented? Did they bring notes? Were they feeling comfortable? Did they contradict themselves? I began to realize that I did not remember all the exact words of the school leaders during the face-to-face interviews and their words were at times overshadowed by their expert presentation skills.

During the third full reading of the transcript, I did not listen to the audio file. I read slowly and began to identify detailed sections of rich content (Miles and Hubberman, 1994). These sections were usually summaries of participant points of view or concerns and issues they spoke at length about. I completed the third full reading with a comprehensive overview of the data and an appreciation for the incredible amount of time the school leaders had committed to this study.
Step Two - Initial noting & exploratory commenting. The second step in the data analysis process began with what Smith et al. (2012) describe as the initial noting or exploratory commenting stage (p. 83). This step examines semantic content and language to produce “a comprehensive and detailed set of notes and comments on the data” (p. 83).

Organizing the vast amount of data was an ongoing priority during this analysis. To include initial noting on the verbatim transcript proved to be workable in the Microsoft Word® table that I had created previously. Working with the existing document, I added two additional columns on the table and labeled both of these columns Explanatory Notes. The Microsoft Word® data document now had five columns: Part (of audio tape); Question; Response; Explanatory Notes; and Explanatory Notes.

I read the transcript again and began to really focus on the details of the participant responses. Directly in the Word® document I underlined what I believed were important statements made by the participants. Statements that specifically and descriptively expressed their view. With the underlining complete, I read the whole transcript again this time with the purpose of making explanatory notes of the participant responses. I did not just read the previously underlined text, but used it as an internal check to verify that I was continuing to focus on similar points of interest.

During this reading, I was working to understand the participant thoughts, views and concerns as suggested by Kvale (2007). I made many notes in the Explanatory columns such as “role of trust building with the press,” “be sure to give timely response of what you did and why you did it,” “dealing with a lot of issues simultaneously- prioritize by determining if it is a crisis or will become a crisis or will be litigated.” The notes were in my own words and were not verbatim quotes, but were specific and descriptive based on the participant responses. I
continued to ask questions about the data and remained very close to the “participant’s explicit meaning” (Smith et al., 2012, p. 83).

During the final reading in this step, I again simultaneously listened to the audio file and re-read the transcript and took great care to identify and differentiate the linguistic and conceptual comments of the participants. I made notations on the transcription in the *Explanatory Notes* columns to include references to linguistic comments of interest paying clear attention to the word choice as well as the intonations, emphasis, and tone of the participants, “their echos and amplifications” (Smith et al., 2012, p. 88). I also identified conceptual comments of the participants and made notations in the *Explanatory Notes* column when the participants shifted away from a particular answer to an “overarching understanding of the matters that they had been discussing” (p. 88). By reflecting on these linguist and conceptual comments in the transcript I began to identify a correlation between the tone of the participant response and their word choice, the correlation between their use of humor and the topic being discussed, and their in-depth conceptual knowledge of PLC principles and concepts. I began to see patterns in not only the substance of their answers but also in their style of back and forth interpretative responses. I made notes of all of my interpretations on the transcript in Microsoft Word® always taking great care to differentiate between my interpretation and their explicit language.

**Step Three-Developing emergent themes.** Smith et al. (2012) rightly warn that with the completion of the explanatory note taking process the data set will grow substantially (p. 91) and this was certainly true in the case of this study. However, the Word® document continued to be organizationally successful and proved to be an effective tool to begin step three and the task of managing the data into emergent themes.
According to Smith et al. (2012), “In looking for emergent themes, the task of managing the data changes as the analyst simultaneously attempts to reduce the volume of detail (of transcript and initial notes) whilst maintaining complexity, in terms of mapping the interrelationships, connections and patterns between exploratory notes. This step is where the researcher takes a more central role in organizing and interpreting the data” (p. 91).

Careful reading and re-reading of the transcript and the reflective analytical process of underlining and writing in-depth explanatory notes had effectually provided the data scaffolding to begin the process of boiling down – a reduction – of the data and condensing it to its most intense and universal concepts and meaning. I looked for emergent themes by utilizing this scaffolding always with a back and forth to the original verbatim text. I considered each participant statement separately, systematically and carefully, reviewing the original text, the underlined text and the explanatory notes to boil down language and concepts into themes of generalized meaning (Miles and Hubberman, 1994, p. 246). After each participant response, I followed this process with the next question. The themes that emerged were synergetic combining both the linguistic and conceptual comments of the participants with my own bracketed interpretation. These themes were specific and grounded in the exact language of the participants as well as conceptual enough to begin to address the research question in this study. Whilst initial notes were loose, open and contingent, these emergent themes felt like they had captured and reflected an understanding of the data (Smith et al., 2012, p. 92).

**Step Four-Searching for connections across emergent themes.** Step four in the data analysis process described by Smith et al. (2012) suggests the researcher establish a chronologically ordered set of themes across the data for each participant and to chart or map how the themes fit together (p. 92). Effectively, in this step the researcher is looking for a means
of drawing together the emergent themes for the participant and producing a structure that points out all of the most interesting and important aspects of the participant’s account.

Developing this list required careful consideration of all of the themes that had emerged for each of the participants. While in step three I had been able to successfully begin the process of reducing the data, in this step the data grew as I analyzed each theme and attempted to establish its meaning based on the participant voices and always with an eye back to the original transcript to ensure authenticity with participant views (Miles and Hubberman, 1994). I also looked for lone themes or participant responses on topics that did not relate to the questions being asked or the focus of the study. I realized that analyzing the emergent themes for the participants required a willingness to begin to discard data. According to Smith et al. (2012) the criteria to discard data must “depend on the overall research question and its scope” (p. 96).

With a focus on the research question and purposes of this study and after careful analysis of participant text and explanatory notes, I developed a list of descriptive themes for each individual participant. Again utilizing the Word® document, I added another column in the table entitled Themes. In this column I included theme descriptions and supporting keywords for each question. I repeated this process for each question until a theme was developed for every question the participant answered. These themes were chronologically ordered based on the time and order of the interview as suggested by Smith et al. (2012) because they followed the transcript in order of the question and answer responses of the actual interview.

**Step Five-Moving to the next case.** After emergent themes were developed for one participant in step four, this process was repeated for each participant in step five. Smith et al. (2012) describe this process in step five as “moving to the next case” and systematically developing emergent themes for each participant (p. 100). This process also followed
chronologically based on the time and order of the interview. Smith et al. (2012) highlight the particular importance of treating each participant individually and bracketing the researcher’s views and perspective from the earlier case in order to allow new themes to emerge equitably on their own (p. 100). The researcher must rely on a rigorous system of analyzing each participant separately to ensure a full emergence of individual themes.

Following the prescriptive process in step four, I completed an analysis now of each participant as described in step five. At the end of this process, I compiled a list of all the different themes that emerged for each participant in this process. The twenty themes that emerged included:

- Roles of a School Leader
- Productive Supports of a School Leader
- Accomplishments of a School Leader
- Priorities of a School Leader
- Challenges of a School Leader
- School Leadership Influences on PLC
- School Leadership Qualities
- School Leadership Qualities in PLC
- General Influences on School Leadership
- PLC Influences on School Leadership
- PLC Critique
- Leadership Obstacles in PLC
- Leadership Supports in PLC
- Change in PLC
- Continuous Learning in PLC
- Shared Decision Making in PLC
- Role of Trust in PLC
- Role of Communication in PLC
- Role of Self-Confidence in School Leadership
- Leader Advice for a PLC

**Step Six—Looking for patterns across cases.** The final step in the data analysis process suggested by Smith et al. (2012) requires looking for patterns across the different participants and the clustering of themes. Through this clustering of themes higher order concepts were realized and super-ordinate themes were developed as potent descriptors and categories to understand the phenomenon of leadership being studied (p. 101).

I employed a number of different strategies to realize these patterns across the participant responses in this study. I began by reconfiguring and relabeling the themes that had emerged for each individual participant (Smith et al., 2012, p. 101). I went back and forth between the original text and these themes to reduce and combine them authentically under larger headings that addressed the more overarching conceptualization of the research question. For example, I combined the themes *Leadership Obstacles in PLC, Leader Advice for a PLC* and *School Leadership Influences on PLC* into the theme *Championing System Wide Reform*. I combined the themes *General Influences on School Leadership, Leadership Supports in PLC*, and *PLC Critique* into the theme *Improving Organizational Structures*.

During this analysis and reduction, I noticed a thematic thread of capacity building – personal, interpersonal, staff, and organizational – in the data and the participant’s expression of challenges in their professional work to sustain the capacity of a successful PLC. Using this
thread of capacity building as a new guide, I continued with the thematic reduction and developed an additional four super-ordinate themes bringing the total number of super-ordinate themes to six: increasing staff capacity, improving organizational structures, shaping a culture for learning, sharing decision making, modeling personal learning and growth, and championing system wide reform.

Once I developed these super-ordinate themes, I wanted to match them with the verbatim text of the original data. I wanted to ensure that these themes were supported by quoted responses from the participants (King and Horrocks, 2010). Because of the voluminous amount of data, I decided to prepare a visual guide for completing this cross-reference. I printed out different colored labels for each theme: increasing staff capacity was light pink, improving organizational structures was orange, shaping a culture for learning was yellow, sharing decision making was dark pink, modeling personal learning and growth was green, and championing system wide reform was blue. I then re-read all of the verbatim text and applied a colored sticker to each quote that I thought connected with the theme. The end product was a printed Microsoft Word® document with 6 columns of data for each participant and each question with a colored sticker designating its connection to the super-ordinate themes.

During this process, I struggled with the reality that the recursive and symbiotic nature of these themes makes their division potentially arbitrary. I finally came to realize that when these themes are explored individually and as an interrelated whole, they are sufficiently intricate to accurately represent the complex practice and behaviors of school leadership expressed by participants in this study. At the same time, the themes are broad enough to accurately expose the sophisticated theoretical visions of system wide school reform expressed so passionately by all the study’s participants (Moustakas, 1994, p. 95).
In addition to the potentially arbitrary division of the themes, the final ordering of the themes was also a challenge. The order presented is ultimately random and infers no superiority of relevance or significance to the participant responses. For the purposes of this study, these themes can be understood in any order, individually and as a synergic whole, and analyzed together these themes reveal the essence of leadership within the Barrington Public Schools PLC.

**Credibility and Transferability**

While the six step data analysis process developed by Smith et al. (2012) used in this study successfully supported the interactive phenomenological reduction practices that moved this study systematically deeper and deeper into an understanding of the data and made an interpretation of the larger meaning of the data possible (Creswell, 2009, p.183), a reliance on Moustakas (1994) and Creswell (1998; 2009) as well as others (Hycner, 1985; King and Horrocks, 2010; Miles and Huberman, 1994) is also necessary to ensure the credibility of the thematic schemata developed utilizing the Smith et al. (2012) analysis methodology and the conclusions of the study that followed.

Credibility in qualitative research is expressed by Creswell (1998; 2009) and others (Locke et al., 2010; Maxwell, 2005) as the trustworthiness and the authenticity of the findings from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant or the readers of an account (p. 191). Credibility in phenomenological research is applied as a general principle that the study conclusion inspires confidence because the argument in support of the conclusion has been persuasive (Polkinghorne as cited in Merriam, 2002, p.141). According to King and Horrocks (2010), the researcher’s argument, or in the case of this phenomenological research, the researcher’s conclusions are based on the evidence developed by a reliable data analysis process. Thus, it is primarily the data analysis process and the study conclusions that determine the
credibility of qualitative research.

For the purposes of this study, Moustakas (1994) gives direction to determining the credibility of both the data analysis process and the study conclusions. He suggests a reliance on the participants to judge both factors and refers to validity in a phenomenological study as “establishing the truth of things beginning with the researcher’s perception” (p. 57). He writes:

One must reflect, first on, on the meaning of the experience for oneself; then, one must turn outward to those being interviewed and establish ‘intersubject validity’ the testing out of this understanding with other persons through a back and forth social interaction.

(Moustakas, 1994, p. 57).

Inter-subject validity is demonstrated when a study’s conclusion can be supported by those who have participated in the study’s phenomenon. To accomplish this Moustakas (1994) suggests that each participant “carefully examine the unified description” of the study and provide “additions and corrections be made” (p. 111). This allows for an opportunity for a “correcting” of conscious experience as “checking with others regarding what they perceive, feel, and think” (p. 95). He writes, “In the process of this kind of careful checking we may revisit the phenomenon and discover something new that alters our knowledge of the thing” (p. 95).

Creswell (2009) also supports the process of member checking and suggests the researcher take back parts of the polished product, such as the themes, to the participants for them to determine whether they feel the themes are accurate (p. 191). Hycner (1985) summarizes member checking saying, “An excellent experiential validity check is to return to the research participant with the written summary and themes and engage in a dialogue with this person concerning what the research has found” (p. 291).

Following these suggested procedures, I compiled a descriptive list of the super-ordinate
themes and statements of conclusion and emailed them to each participant for their reflection, commentary and approval (See Appendix D). For example, in an email I wrote to a participant:

Please confirm your interview responses by answering yes or no. You may comment if you wish. Theme: Building Staff Capacity Do you still believe that building staff capacity is/was a priority of your school leadership in the BPS PLC? Do you believe building staff capacity includes – for example – use of outside experts for professional development, recognizing achievement to celebrate and motivate success, ensuring all staff are educated in PLC concepts. Do you believe in the exceptionality and professionalism of the Barrington Public School staff? Do you believe that collaboration builds staff capacity?

All five participants responded to their member checking email. Of the five participants who responded, four participants approved every theme and conclusion and one modified two conclusions by changing their original statement and adding more in-depth information. This modification process included back and forth interaction with the participant to explore and investigate any additional modifications and changes they wanted to make in their original interview statements. I included these changes in the Report on Research Findings as suggested by Creswell (2009).

In addition to utilizing member checking expressed by Moutstakas (1994) and Creswell (2009) and “respondent feedback” as expressed by King and Horrocks (2010), the conclusion and thematic analysis of this study also demonstrated reliability with its reliance on bracketing the prejjudgments and opinions of the researcher. Moutstakas (1994) and others (Hycner, 1985) argue that for a data analysis process and ensuing study conclusions to be reliable the researcher must bracket all prejjudgments so not to influence the participant interviews, the data analysis and
the study conclusion. By writing down my prejudgments, opinions and thoughts regarding school leadership in the Barrington Public Schools in a notebook before the development of the research question began, and continuously being aware of and casting aside my perspective throughout the research process, this bracketing in effect enhanced the reliability of this study.

In addition, other procedures were faithfully employed to support the reliability of this study. This study relied on criterion sampling of experienced participants with diverse experience and professional characteristics who were closest to the phenomenon (Creswell, 2009). The transcription was exact and was not changed or “tidied up” by the researcher ensuring the most authentic and accurate voice of the participants was reflected in the data collected (Kvale, 2007). The six step process of data analysis methodology developed by Smith et al. (2012) and supported by the process of imaginative variation expressed by Moustakas (1994) was faithfully followed and an authentic thematic schemata was constructed that met the principles of thematic analysis prescribed by these scholars and others (King and Horrocks, 2010).

King and Horrocks (2010) support the work of Moustakas (1994) and Smith et al. (2012) and suggest three thematic principles of qualitative credibility that should be followed and were faithfully employed in this study: the researcher made choices to include and discard themes based on purposeful analysis; repetition of themes across two or more participants was considered as a criteria for super-ordinate themes; and the themes while interconnected were ultimately distinct from one another and could be understood that way (p. 149). In addition, during the data analysis, the data was reduced authentically with careful consideration for the participant perspective. The subjects own terminology and phraseology was adhered to in order that the data “speak for itself” (Kruger and Stones, 1981, p. 129).
Ultimately the credibility of this study will come from the judgment of the participants, the author, and the audience of scholars and practitioners outside of the study. Miles and Huberman (1994) conclude that when judging the credibility of a study we must ask: Do the findings of this study make sense? Are the findings credible to the people we study and to our readers? (p. 278).

I believe the findings of this study will be significant to me personally as an educational experience to improve my professional practice in the Barrington Public Schools. This study offered me the opportunity to delve into a study of leadership through the experiences and in-depth perspectives of school leaders who have created, implemented and sustained real education reform in a successful PLC. In addition, this study might also have a positive impact on the school leaders who participated in this study by providing them with an opportunity to reflect on their leadership experiences and in doing so discover new meaning and understanding of their own leadership that perhaps they did not know before this study began.

Finally, I hope this study might also add to the scholarship of current educational leadership practice by informing the body of literature on school leadership within a PLC from the personal perspective of school leaders living the experience that implemented and sustained the successful Barrington Public Schools PLC.

**Protection of Human Species**

In accordance with the policies and procedures of the National Institutes of Health (“NIH Office,” 2012) and the Northeastern University Office of Human Subject Research Protection (“Northeastern.” 2012), this research study posed no risk to its participants and may be mutually beneficial to the participants, the researcher and the Barrington Public School district. This study provided the opportunity for shared reflection, review and analysis of the leadership in the
Barrington Public Schools PLC whereby bringing to light potential insights, enhancements and opportunity for teambuilding, collaboration and for the continued professional development of the school leaders and enhancements for the district PLC.

The participants were selected based on their present or past positions as school leaders in the Barrington Public School district, their experience in either the creation and/or sustainment of the Barrington PLC, and their expertise in the leadership structures and practices of a PLC. I sought to have a diverse group of participants in order for all voices to be heard in the study. The participants were of different gender, years of service in Barrington Public schools, types of leadership positions, length of time in leadership positions, and education credentials. Some were still employed at Barrington Public Schools and some were retiring from Barrington Public Schools. The sample size and the diverse characteristics of the participants ensured that representations of voices were heard in the study. I do not believe there was a viewpoint left out of the study.

Participation in the study was completely voluntary; participants had complete freedom to make the initial decision to participate. Also, ongoing participation in every phase of the data collection was also completely voluntary. Of the five participants that I asked to participate in the study, all agreed enthusiastically.

The purpose of this study was to discover and explore the essence of leadership in the Barrington Public Schools PLC; this study did not in any way by any measure or criteria quantify, evaluate or judge the success of the Barrington Public Schools PLC or the leadership therein. Participants in this study were all known to me professionally through my position as Librarian and K-12 Library Department Head in the Barrington Public Schools.

Many safeguards were in place and procedures were followed to ensure the protection of
the participants during the study proposal development and later with the data collection, data analysis and reporting procedures of this study.

The first safeguard was the development of the formal IRB process approval by Northeastern University College of Professional Studies. After the IRB application was approved, I met with each potential participant individually and requested their participation in the study according to the verbal participation script (Appendix A). Upon agreeing to be in the study, each participant was then given a printed document of the interview questions (Appendix B), and the Signed Informed Consent of the Participants document (Appendix C) to consider and sign before the scheduled interview. Finally, according to the procedure outlined by the Superintendent of Schools, I submitted a copy of the study proposal, the IRB approval and the Signed Informed Consent of the Participants document to the Superintendent who presented my request to the School Committee who approved the request. Once the participants were all fully informed and protected, Northeastern University and the Barrington Public School district had successfully approved the study, the data collection process began.

During the interviews all participants were not required to share any information of any kind and on any topic if they choose not to. During the interviews I did not use any means, such as verbally cajoling or negatively bullying, or use any prizes or punishments, to solicit information from the participants. Participants did not gain any financial benefit from this study. The participants did not receive any compensation for sharing any information that relates to their professional practice or personal opinions, beliefs, or viewpoints during the interview. It is anticipated that they did gain some professional benefit from personal reflection and discussion during the study. All information gained during the interviews remained confidential to the interviewee and the researcher.
The interview data was collected via Sony and Olympus digital audio recorder and was transcribed only by the researcher to ensure confidentiality of participants and participant responses. Once the audio file had been transcribed it was stored only on a computer and external hard drive in the researcher’s home and not at school where the participants were employed. In all follow up documentation (written emails from the researcher’s school account) all information was printed, then deleted and kept securely in the researcher’s home. During the data analysis and written documentation of the study, pseudonyms were used and no references were made to school leader positions, years of service, retirement status or any other characteristics from which they could be identified by either the public or people who know them professionally.

While participants were not required to provide information and did not receive any financial benefit or incur any punishment as a result of participation in the interview, any perceived risk they had as a participant in the study was also mitigated. Some participants might have been averse to sharing personal or professional information to a non-administrative person or researcher. To alleviate these discomforts, all information requested during the interviews was strictly voluntary and confidential with transcribing and written practices that followed, and all participants had an opportunity at the study’s conclusion to affirm, deny or change any responses that they had shared during the interviews (Appendix D). Finally at the conclusion of the study every participant was given the opportunity through an email correspondence (Appendix D) to read and exercise final approval over any part of the study.
Chapter Four: Report on Research Findings

The goal of this research was to explore the phenomenon of school leadership in the Barrington Public School’s PLC. By unmasking the personal perceptions of school leaders within the context of the Barrington Public School’s successful PLC, these findings examine the practices, priorities and collaborative qualities that characterize Barrington Public School leaders. The findings are divided into six super-ordinate themes: increasing staff capacity, improving organizational structures, shaping a culture for learning, sharing decision making, modeling personal learning and growth, and championing system wide reform.

The recursive and symbiotic nature of these themes makes their division potentially arbitrary, but when explored singly and as an interrelated whole, these themes are sufficiently intricate to accurately represent the complex practice of school leadership expressed by participants in this study. At the same time, the themes are broad enough to accurately expose the sophisticated underpinnings of system wide school reform expressed so passionately by all the study’s participants. In addition to the potentially arbitrary division of the themes, the order the themes presented infers no superiority of relevance or significance to these findings. Understood in any order, individually and as a synergic whole, these themes and their findings reveal the essence of leadership within the Barrington Public Schools PLC.

Profile of the Participants

**Jason Bishop (pseudonym):** Jason has served in public education for close to three decades in at least two different states as a classroom teacher, assistant principal, and principal of a large suburban high school and for many years as a central office administrator. Jason holds multiple degrees including a Ed.D. in Education and has an expertise in school finance.

**Michael James (pseudonym):** Michael has served in public education for close to two
decades in at least two different states as a classroom teacher, assistant principal, and principal of a large suburban high school. Michael is recognized as an expert in professional learning communities and has presented at conferences on PLC implementation. Michael holds multiple degrees including a M.Ed. in Administration.

**Katherine Anderson (pseudonym):** Katherine has served in public education for more than two decades as a classroom teacher, principal, literacy specialist, and central office administrator. Katherine is recognized as an expert in curriculum with a focus on elementary education. Katherine holds multiple degrees including a CAGS in Curriculum.

**Leonard Medina (pseudonym):** Leonard has served in public education for close to two decades in at least two different states as a classroom teacher, assistant principal, principal, and as a central office administrator. Leonard is recognized as an expert at both the middle and high school levels as well as in curriculum. Leonard holds multiple degrees including a M.Ed. in Administration.

**Anthony Rodriguez (pseudonym):** Anthony has served in public education for close to three decades in special education and as an assistant principal and principal. Anthony has an expertise in psychology, middle level education and is recognized as a PLC expert. Anthony holds multiple degrees including a M.Ed. in Administration.

**Increasing Staff Capacity**

In a traditional school, staff capacity is understood to be the ability of an individual classroom teacher to administer instruction. The capacity of such staff is measured primarily on their content and pedagogical knowledge. In a PLC, staff refers to a wide variety of education personnel, classroom teachers and all those who support learning such as guidance counselors, school librarians and other instruction and intervention specialists such as math and literacy
coaches. In a PLC, the capacity of these individuals is measured by their content and pedagogical knowledge and by their collaborative abilities and actions that ensure student learning. At its core, the concept of a PLC rests on the premise of improving student learning by improving the staff’s capacity for professional expertise, collaboration, and their responsibility for student learning.

All of the school leader participants in this study expressed the view that building staff capacity in the Barrington Public Schools PLC was a priority of their leadership and each suggested methods they used to build staff capacity. Some of their suggestions included the use of outside experts for professional development, the importance of recognizing achievement to celebrate and motivate success, and ensuring that all staff were well educated in PLC concepts. In addition, many of the school leaders focused on Rhode Island’s new teacher evaluation system as an accountability tool to provide staff feedback and warned against the negative effects of micromanaging staff. All the participants were in universal agreement about the exceptionality and professionalism of the Barrington Public School staff and highlighted the role of collaboration as a means to exponentially build staff capacity.

**Exceptional staff and leadership job satisfaction.** All of the participants in this study expressed a very high level of respect for the staff and shared their belief that staff professionalism translated directly into the personal job satisfaction of the school leaders. School leader participant in the study Jason Bishop remarked:

I have the highest respect and admiration for [the teachers]. … they are so talented and they love what they do. To me there’s nothing more important and nothing I enjoy more than seeing a teacher – a good teacher – interact with students. I think that’s precious because you’re talking about the future, you’re talking about getting students excited
about learning …and we have a lot of wonderful students here –but we have also some of the best staff members I’ve ever worked with…. I really feel blessed in that sense - this is the best job I’ve ever had.

Other participants also affirmed the professionalism and expertise of the staff. Michael James noted:

One of the things about Barrington that I’ve noticed…one of the things that was evident right away coming here is it’s an extremely professional environment. The teachers are respectful not only of one another but they really take their job and their profession seriously and that obviously benefits not only the school environment but it benefits every single kid in the school. … The teachers are solid and they’re professionals.

School Leader Katherine Anderson agreed “…They are wonderful, wonderful teachers.”

**Professional development.** While all the school leader participants were in widespread agreement about the high level of professionalism and expertise of the staff, each also identified ways they were cultivating continuous improvement of the staff. Specifically all of the participants expressed their belief that the staff’s ongoing professional development was central to increasing staff capacity and was a vital part of their work as a school leader. School leader Bishop characterized the school leader’s role designing and working in collaboration with the staff on professional development as his “best work professionally” and brainstorming ongoing improvement of professional development was on the minds of many of the participants.

**Bring in the experts.** According to two of the participants, the district’s professional development was significantly enhanced by the use of experts in many fields especially those with PLC expertise such as J. Richard Dewey, Ph.D. and Thomas W. Many, Ed.D. of Solution Tree, the premier educational consulting firm, as well as the professional learning from attending
PLC conferences and site visits to Adali Stevenson High School in Illinois. School Leader Bishop explained the impact of these and other experts on professional development in the district:

When you go out and you want to achieve a particular initiative … always bring the experts in - bring the best in…It was my first summer in Barrington prior to the first school year, I went to a workshop in Boston with the DuFours and I was very, very impressed.

School leader James agreed that professional development with experts has benefitted the Barrington Public School staff as well as the school leaders.

When asked about the role of outside experts for in-district professional development, school leader participant Leonard Medina expressed the view that effective professional development needed to be a combination of trained in house professionals, online resources such as PD 360 and the use of some outside experts. “To be effective,” school leader Medina observed, “professional development had to be sustainable and embedded.”

Leader Medina also shared his commitment to collaborating with teachers on their own professional development. Teacher generated professional development is important, he said, “because once people know they can do that [design their own professional development] it generates other people to think ‘what can I do to improve my learning or my department learning’ so I don’t want to discourage that either.”

**The power of praise.** All of the school leaders also nurtured staff capacity by recognizing staff achievements to celebrate and motivate success. School leader participant Anthony Rodriguez describes this leadership role as the “the ra-ra person” and expounds on the concept. “Everybody likes to receive praise. Everybody likes to know they are doing something
well. I think a lot of principals don’t think that’s important.” For school leader Rodriguez and all of the participants, praise was part of their overall commitment to building positive, productive relationships with the staff and the celebration aspect of a PLC, and they all relied on a variety of methods and strategies to meet this goal.

School leader Jason Bishop explains why he believes praise and sharing credit is vital for staff motivation:

A big part of being a leader is having your team and making sure you tell them they did a good job, thank them for what they did, it’s really, really important because they need to hear that. They will work a lot harder if they know you support them... and I always tell people, if you can find a better way to do it, do it. You can take all the credit – I could care less about that.

School leader Rodriguez said he sends cards – 1500 of them this year – to students, and to faculty on little things “just quick notes every Friday night.” According to Rodriguez, these notes have a great impact on teachers. In addition to notes of praise and sharing credit, school leader participant Katherine Anderson also nominates staff members for awards when they stand out. She describes her process:

When an award comes through email, I think of who fits it. And so [the teachers] know that there are opportunities to be honored, because teachers need to be honored they are just beaten down so much.

She explains that some of the teachers are hesitant to receive special attention:

I look for those opportunities – at first the teachers don’t want to stand out over other teachers, but now they are used to it …they need to be honored. They are wonderful, wonderful teachers and there will be an award for each one of them.
School leader Anderson said that while most teachers are not comfortable standing out, she believes they deserve the recognition and it motivates them as professionals. She exclaims, “… YES! [school leaders] need to do that... That motivates others who really care about teaching and learning to say look what is that person doing …every one of [the staff] has an award in the waiting somewhere and I just have to find it.”

**Accountability & teacher evaluation.** In the context of improving staff capacity, all of the school leaders commented on the high level of accountability being required of teachers. All mentioned the new teacher evaluation model that was recently mandated by the Rhode Island Department of Education. The new model has specific goals and objectives to measure teacher and student progress. To determine overall educator effectiveness, the Rhode Island Model considers three central components: Professional Practice, Professional Responsibilities, and Student Learning (Gist, 2012). The school leaders spoke about the new evaluation model as both an accountability tool for staff capacity and also as a challenge to school leaders in terms of time required to complete staff evaluations. Jason Bishop characterized the new accountability demands observing:

Good teachers make all the difference in the world. We have a lot of them here – there is no question about it but if we don’t improve - we are going to be in big trouble… the bottom line is that teachers now are going to be held accountable too. All these results, the teacher evaluation, it’s all going to take a few years to get there but it’s all going to come down …this is who you are and this is what you’ve done and this is what you’re doing about it and that’s the bottom line.

School leader Michael James agreed that the “Teacher evaluation piece is big now and will probably become bigger next year as we go into full implementation.”
While none of the school leaders shared a comment on whether they thought the evaluation process was an accurate measure of staff capacity, some expressed frustration with the time the process required of school leaders. School leader James commented about this frustration but credited the teachers with helping to “get it done” and “make it happen.” “The frustration this year was the evaluation process,” school leader James reported. “That really took on a life of its own but I don’t know if frustration is the right word though – it’s a lot of figuring it out how we are going to get it done and this year the teachers stepped up big time … and they worked with me to help get that done and we made it happen.”

School leader Anderson agreed explaining that she had spent a lot of time this year on the evaluation system but highlighted the positive by-product of the evaluation system was frequent visits in the classrooms with walk-throughs and observations which, in her opinion, was “a wonderful thing … I’m out there so I did love that part of it.”

All the school leaders agreed with Anderson and expressed that they believed the evaluation system was a positive means for school leaders to give staff feedback. School leader James observed, the evaluation system is “… not supposed to be a gotcha system – it’s supposed to be to help improve teaching and learning.”

According to school leader James, the evaluation system improves teaching and learning through a collection of data which is a central tenet of a PLC. School leader Anderson connected data in a PLC with building staff capacity by observing “There’s been an influence by the data we look at all the time through PLC and how we intervene in instruction due to that data. And of course the data translates to some of the [teacher] evaluation. So [the teacher evaluation] has forced the issue of using data to plan instruction.”

According to the school leaders, teacher evaluation data in the classroom is directly
related to student learning results. School leader Bishop remarked that the critical point for leadership is what is being done with the data and how it is impacting instruction. He calls this connection between data and learning “the make or break point for leadership.”

No micromanaging. All the school leaders expressed a lot of confidence in the staff’s ability to get the job done and warned against leadership that micromanages the classroom. None reported to be micromanagers and all said they did not believe that micromanagement was an effective leadership strategy for a professional staff in the Barrington PLC. Leader Bishop observed:

I depend upon [the staff] and I try not to be a micromanager. Micromanaging to me, one, it wastes time, two, it weakens me or anybody in my position who would be micromanaged because people begin to ask, ‘I work for this guy and does he think I can do the job or not do the job…’

Mentors. Many of the school leaders relied on mentors in their own professional careers and later served as mentors to build staff capacity. Their mentors were administrators who served as role models and helped them develop as leaders. School leader Bishop describes the relationship with his mentor,

I admired her because she was the first leader that I worked with that took on the establishment, took on folks who said we can’t change things. She had a vision and she was the type of person that made you work very hard but at the end of the day she’d tell you how much she respects you. She was a real help to me – there is no question about that.

Mentoring their own staff was identified by school leader participants as an important part of their own day-to-day activities and responsibilities. Mentoring was described by school
leaders in a variety of ways: acting as a mentor to staff, to parents, to other school leaders in the Barrington PLC, and to colleagues in professional organizations. School leader Rodriguez’s reflections typified these views, “I am a mentor on a regular basis – not just educationally but in dealing with parents on how to deal with kids, how to deal with situations on teams, and certainly educationally. I think the mentor piece is a huge part of the job.”

According to the school leader participants in the study, they mentored collaborative teams as well as one-on-one relationships with individual teachers. Evolving from a traditional learning environment to a PLC required sustaining these types of collaborations within the PLC team structure, and the school leaders reported that mentoring teams was an on-going part of building their own capacity as leaders as well as the capacity of the staff.

**Educate staff on PLC & support feedback.** According to the participants, one of the key components of building the collaborative capacities of the staff was educating the staff in the concepts of PLC. School Leader Medina explains:

> I think regarding PLC, is how well educated everyone is in the concept of it….. I think some people or groups still worked in isolation without clearly defined expectations across the board – [this] sometimes led to some confusion or inconsistencies.

To minimize this confusion or inconsistencies, Medina suggested schools needed to:

> Let people self-assess where they are and then afterwards - if you want to become better, if you want to accomplish and you want to improve, then there’s different ways we can look at it and you take it slow, very slow.”

School leader Jason Bishop agreed that educating the staff in PLC concepts as well as providing the staff feedback are very important parts of PLC leadership. Describing feedback scenarios in the Barrington Schools, he observed:
Administrators sat down in small groups and pushed people ‘what do you think’ and I could see it evolving… and sometimes you get pushed back but at the same time, if you believe as a leader that this is what you have to do, this is what’s meaningful, this is what’s really going to push this district to the next level, you really, really have to push hard.

**Improving Organizational Structures**

Successfully building and sustaining a collaborative culture in a PLC requires supportive structures and processes. These structures and processes are logistically more sophisticated and interdependent in a PLC than are found in a traditional school or district and are critical to its success. In effect, these logistics operationalize a PLC and ensure student achievement.

All of the participants in this study were experienced school leaders prior to the implementation and sustainment of the Barrington Public Schools PLC. They all reported relying on past experiences combined with their newly acquired knowledge of PLC principles to make substantive organizational improvements in the Barrington Public Schools PLC. To the school leader participants in this study, spending time on building these PLC structures and efficient processes were important parts of their role as a school leader; and in their opinion, these management functions were time well spent. To the leader participants, good management practices such as being visible, creating teams that use data and norms of behavior to guide interactions, as well as effective scheduling that embeds collaboration in the school day, allowed the leadership to put PLC practices into place and, in effect, made these managerial tasks ultimately functions of school reform.

**Managing the schoolhouse.** School leader Katherine Anderson explained the reality of the school leader’s position:
I like to think that my primary role is an instructional leader but the reality is it’s probably equal to the management in this big building …my belief is that you cannot be a good instructional leader if the management falls apart. So I do make sure things are well managed. And of course, then I focus a lot on instruction. It’s about half and half.

School leader Anthony Rodriguez agreed with leader Anderson’s views that management was a vital part of ensuring the success of learning in the school. Describing the role of school manager, he explained:

I think the manager’s role here is everything to make sure the building runs on a day to day basis from the custodians to electronic, technology…even furniture. So much of the job is managerial… including important concerns such as …student safety issues, emergencies, the police department, health….

He concluded, “We are not structured to have anybody be able to do the [management] because of time constraints you can’t pull teachers out of classrooms to deal with all the day to day situations.”

Relying on many years of experience, school leader Rodriguez emphasized that effective school leadership required prioritizing and multitasking, “You cannot do everything in this job…it can’t happen,” he said. A school leader needs to “prioritize well.” He and other school leaders conceded that there is a lot of multitasking in all of their leadership positions. Rodriguez concurred, “There is a lot of juggling what needs to get done.”

School leader Rodriguez warned, “You have to set your priorities - delegate and the rest of the stuff you need to let it go. You cannot do everything that you’re being asked to do in seven days working 24 hours a day. You need to control the job or the job will control you.”

Other school leaders affirmed the practical realities school leaders face when managing
large educational organizations. School leader Jason Bishop explained that Barrington Public Schools has 3,400 students, a $45 million budget and many issues that develop abruptly during the course of a regular school day. The critical and unexpected nature of many of these issues demands that school leaders prioritize and make important judgment calls.

School leader Michael James also prioritizes his day and accepts the managerial challenges of his position as a reality of school leadership. In addition to the issues raised by school leader Bishop, school leader James also recognized the multi-tasking nature of the position. He describes the challenges:

… you get pulled out for so many different things that are not planned for…it is the nature in being in any school –…There are times where I’ll try to shut my door or go into the conference room …but it doesn’t always work that way…it just doesn’t. It’s just part of the job.

In addition to prioritizing, some school leaders suggested delegating to relieve managerial duties if possible depending on the size of a leader’s support staff.

Despite the managerial demands of school leadership, school leader James does not let managerial tasks keep him out of the classroom for observation. As expressed by other school leader participants, James’s instructional leadership is balanced with his managerial duties and is a “very important” part of the job. He commented, no matter how full his day, he always made time to get “… into teacher’s classrooms and do the evaluation process – that is a priority that would take precedent….”

Increased paperwork and record keeping was also reported by all the school leaders as very time consuming and as was the case with school leader James’s evaluations, this paperwork was usually completed in the evenings.
Improving time management was on the minds of all the school leaders. They all utilized vacation and the summer months for extra work and new technology such as iPads were mentioned by the school leaders as potentially helping to alleviate the time demands of the evaluation system and other managerial tasks. School leader Anthony Rodriguez explained, “I am most productive during the summer months when the bulk of my time is dedicated to scheduling, hiring new personnel and planning for the next year. Most productive because there are fewer interruptions.”

All the school leaders were very positive and exhibited great flexibility and willingness to adjust to the interruptions and changing demands of their school day. School Leader Rodriguez summarized, “It’s never the same …you never know what’s coming around the corner and you don’t know each day the obstacles.” School leader Medina agreed good naturedly, “Every day is different.”

**Moving from isolation.** One of the priorities expressed by all the school leaders during the school day was to maintain a high level of visibility. According to the school leaders, visibility emphasized two important things: it allowed the school leaders an opportunity to improve their own knowledge of instructional practice in the classroom, and it helped them to develop closer relationships with students and staff in the school building and district. They also said that being outside their office and spending time with the staff was also a stress reliever for them.

School leader Katherine Anderson expressed the importance of being visible with the students and teachers, “I really want to be more visible. I don’t feel I’ve perfected that yet. I’ve tried but I want to be out there and be around the kids and the teachers a lot more. So I work very hard at changing that.”
Both school leaders had confidence in the benefits of visibility in a PLC because they reported that it helped them make better connections with the teachers, to “see things through their lens, what they see their classroom, what they see with their students…” and being on-site provided an immediate opportunity to deal with issues that arose. They said that responding to these issues helped build relationships in the Barrington Public School PLC. School Leader Bishop explains when teachers have an issue it’s of primary importance to a school leader even when a school leader is dealing with a multitude of issues. To maintain good relationships it’s important for a school leader to address teacher’s issues and problems successfully. He explains:

I want to try to help [teachers and staff] solve their problems, no question. You want to make them all feel like their issue and their problem is the most important thing...and If they see you de-stressing and they see you not losing your cool, then maybe [they will realize their issue] it’s not as bad.

Visibility helps school leader Anderson with immediate problem solving too. She remarked, when she is visible:

… I am able to do …immediate problem solving – you know you see something - even something like this teacher doesn’t even have a screen in her room – they don’t tell me and unless I’m out there I can’t even see things like that. Or two kids that are having an issue every single day and if I’m out there I can see that. Knowing whether the curriculum is being implemented appropriately – when I am out there I can see if the teacher is doing a workshop model or doing an intervention group. I would rather see it than hear about it so it helps with everything when you’re visible.

Visibility can be somewhat of a distraction in the classroom however, and school leader Anderson advises she is careful not to be an interruption to instruction. She reports she would
never do that to a teacher.

Being visible, accessible, taking time to meet with people, reaching out to people, listening to what’s going on are all leadership functions that support the district’s PLC work moving away from isolation towards interaction and collaboration reported the school leaders.

School leader Michael James explained that the Barrington Public School’s movement away from isolation towards collaboration had its roots in the University of Pittsburgh Institute for Learning (IFL) movement implemented years earlier. He pointed out that opening up classrooms to school leaders is now part of the PLC culture:

I think when I started to see the biggest change was the work we did with the University of Pittsburgh and the IFL movement …for the most part opening up classrooms was a major step leading into professional learning communities. The fact that we have seven professional development days is another telling piece that we’re invested in professional development - we’ve done a lot to push [the] program forward and continue to do so.

According to school leader participants, the buy-in is not yet complete but very substantial. School Leader James explains:

…I’ve seen in [Barrington Public Schools] even some of the most reluctant people – those that are reluctant to change - … it’s almost impossible not to buy in. It’s all about getting rid of teaching in isolation and opening the doors but not only that but being on a collaborative team so if you’re on a team with other members it’s difficult not be part of the process. Some people are more invested than others certainly but I’ve seen some pretty positive changes.

**Scheduling common planning time (CPT).** While the visibility of school leaders helps support a collaborative culture and buy-in by the staff, all of the school leaders strongly
identified the schedule as an important responsibility of a school leader and emphasized the benefits of managing the school schedule for their leadership. The school leader participants reported that while scheduling can seem to some observers like an administrative, managerial task it is actually an important tool to support collaboration and learning in a PLC. School leader Michael James calls scheduling one of his “top priorities that you have to own.” He explains:

There are many principals who don’t schedule a building and to me that shouldn’t happen – to me scheduling a building is one of the top priorities as a principal I think that you have to own. I just feel that it’s such an important factor that everything that runs your building for the entire year. So setting that master schedule and …to see who’s going to be teaching what and what types of teams you are creating is crucial.

School leader Katherine Anderson agrees and uses the schedule to “embed their [the teacher’s] collaboration time in their daily or weekly schedule… and it is a full hour which is a challenge.” She explains, “That was the first thing that I noticed that I had to change my mind set about – to think about all the work they [the teacher’s] had to do and match the schedule to that. So PLC changed my thinking about scheduling right away. Right off the bat.”

Using the schedule to support collaboration and student learning is also a priority of school leader Anthony Rodriguez. He asserts:

I have always believed that when a principal gives up scheduling they give up control of the building. … I firmly believe the principal needs to do scheduling in the building; I think that it really gives them the knowledge base to be able to be a leader throughout the year when different things come up. …if you don’t understand your schedule and find out where the most important pieces during the day are that you don’t want to interfere with you lose control of the building.
One of the scheduling priorities that all the school leaders identified was Common Planning Time (CPT) during the school day for teachers to meet and review student work. The participants expressed a lot of enthusiasm for the learning results supported by CPT and the interpersonal relationships built during CPT time. “I think we had a lot of those pieces in place to begin with and [CPT] just helped to create it for everyone.”

**Establishing norms.** According to the leader participants, another important PLC organizational process that the Barrington Public Schools adopted was the establishment of norms. In PLCs, norms are protocols and commitments developed by each collaborative team or departments to guide members working together. Norms help team members clarify expectations regarding how they will work together to achieve their shared goals. Norms are important to the PLC process because they support reflective dialogue and ongoing critical inquiry, and maintain a sharp focus on student learning and results. Some examples of norms at Barrington Public Schools are: “our first and greatest concern must be the educational welfare of all students attending the public schools, attend meetings well prepared to discuss issues on the agenda and be prepared to make decisions, striving for efficient decision making, strive to reach decisions by consensus. discuss with respect, disagree without acrimony.” (“Barrington,” 2013).

School leader James explained that establishing norms was a priority in the core and non-core curriculum areas. Creating norms for his building teams was also a priority for school leader Anthony Rodriguez. He said:

Most of our teams in the building function really, really well but through PLC we’ve developed norms for every team in the school. Those norms look different. We have school wide norms for faculty meetings and for parent conferences, but our team norms are very, very different. Some teams had issues and …came up with 26 norms. Those
norms are read at the beginning of every one of their team meetings. Other teams had fewer norms because they are functioning at a much higher level. But I think PLC really helped that. The importance of how are we going to behave as a faculty with each other. That was huge.

School leader James concludes, “Establishing norms, the Common Planning Time, we are getting better at using data which is also another piece of the whole PLC initiative but we’re still not there yet I don’t think completely but that’s why we are on the continuum we are on.” School leader Bishop agrees that more progress can be made: “The bottom line is educators – not just teachers, all of us, leaders especially – are being held to a new level of accountability and we have to be ready …. The bottom line is in the results…”

**Shaping A Culture for Learning**

The PLC culture is a paradigm shift from a traditional culture; the PLC culture requires educators to embrace *learning* rather than *teaching* and to work collaboratively to help all students achieve by focusing on data and results to guide their practice and foster continuous improvement. The influence of leadership on the culture of a successful PLC places students at the center of the decision making process, prioritizes authentic collaboration over collegiality, and relies on the use of data as evidence of learning.

Revealing an impassioned commitment to student-centered, data driven decision making, all of the school leaders in this study expressed a deeply heartfelt respect for students and shared a philosophical and moral commitment to empowering a school culture that first and foremost supported students and their learning. They unanimously embraced the use of data to guide instruction, measure student achievement, and to provide interventions. All conceded that developing a school and district culture was challenging and affirmed that collaboration was
critical as the primary means to ensure the best educational opportunities for all students in a PLC, and to sustain the leaders in their pursuit of this effort.

**Student-centered decision making.** Giving clarity and humanity to the discussion of student-centered learning in a PLC, school leader Katherine Anderson reflected on her personal connection and commitment to students, a commitment that all the leader participants shared:

What is the best thing other than seeing a child learn something you’ve been working on? Or from a principal’s perspective, when a problem is solved for them, how delightful their face looks – so happy – there is nothing better than that. Or a big thank you because the weight of the world is off their shoulders... You gave [a child] something they didn’t have in their life… He knows you liked him, he knows you helped him.

School Leader Anthony Rodriguez extrapolated on Anderson’s beliefs insisting that children must always be the focal point for decisions in a PLC and school leaders should rely on both data driven decision making *and* consider the unique characteristics of children and adolescents when making decisions. He explained the benefit of building a connection with students in order to sustain a culture that benefits learning both directly through improved instruction and indirectly through personal relationships:

… when you build a connection with kids, you are showing your faculty that you are supporting them and their creative nature, you are having fun with the kids and they see that and when kids feel more comfortable with you they are going to respect you, value you and work harder for you. And it gives a sense that we’re all in it together. To take [a school leader] out of all those roles would really create a huge void in what I think this job is together.

School leader Leonard Medina succinctly summarized and unequivocally agreed with the
student-centered culture in the Barrington PLC stating that school leaders and all staff know “…the number one priority of your job here is to support student learning and students – that’s the reason why we’re in education… [In Barrington Public Schools] every decision you make will be the best for students.”

While the student-centered culture was universally embraced by all the school leader participants in this study, school leader Jason Bishop also observed that putting students first was at times open to some interpretation in the school community and could be a source of criticism. He cited decisions as sources of consternation such as snow day cancellations and field trip outings and shared his commitment to doing what is best for students even when criticized:

You can be criticized for it [tough decisions], but if you think you’re going to be a leader in any forum – political, educational, managerial – and you’re not going to be criticized then you know what, you don’t belong there. Your job is to seek out the facts – seek out the truth – and do what’s right. In my case, I do what’s good for kids. …You’re going to pay a price sometimes – it’s part of being a leader. It’s part of being in charge of something because people are going to disagree with you. If you do it for the right reasons and know you’ve really thought this thing through and this is what I believe in my heart and believe in, you do it and you move ahead.

He concludes that in his opinion the decision making process – even if difficult – is an important learning and growing experience for a school leader:

You have to understand you make the decision based on the information you receive but you have to take time to talk to people and you have to make your mind up … You learn this with experience. You learn how to measure what was said and what was done and then it helps you make a decision as to what you think would be the best outcome. And
can you look yourself in the mirror and say I did what I thought was best.

According to the participants, the student centered culture in the Barrington Public Schools PLC is shared by teachers as well as school leaders. In their view, the teachers were most satisfied when they were in the classroom interacting with students. School leader Anderson observed, I think it’s the best thing ever… ninety-nine percent of the great teachers are motivated by the kids.”

**Data and intervention.** In a PLC, the collective responsibility of teachers and school leaders is to ensure that all students are learning at the highest levels. School leader participants in this study explained that data is used in the Barrington Public Schools PLC to monitor each student’s progress and determine what interventions are necessary for students who are in need of support. They commended the classroom teachers who are making the collection and analysis of student learning data a priority, as well as for the teachers’ work providing necessary interventions and supports for learning. School leader Katherine Anderson observed:

> When they [the teachers] are helping kids that’s when they really pitch in. And this year for the first time, I think it gelled, I think it took about five years but now they know where each of their children are in math, and reading, writing and science…They know if they’re not progressing that they need to provide an intervention and progress monitoring…It’s an ongoing process.

School leader Rodriguez explained how the district PLC culture evolved from teaching to learning and challenged some of the teachers in his building:

> One of the biggest changes that I think PLC has had on this school is we used to hear teachers say - I will quote one in particular ‘I’m a good teacher, I taught the best lesson that could have been taught…’ And we had a lot of teachers like that and so I think the
big picture of PLC was when kids are not learning what we wanted them to learn, what are we going to do to make sure that they get it. The ‘whatever it takes piece.’

School leader Rodriguez went on to say that the structures and supports of PLC – such as the Response to Intervention (RTI) process - substantively changed his thinking from teaching to learning and he believes the students benefited. Other school leaders also concurred that the Response to Intervention process was important to sustaining a culture of learning for all students.

But all the school leaders believed the amount of testing imposed on the students needed to be closely monitored and data teams were the most effective at making informed decisions about students, not simply relying on school leaders or individual classroom teachers to decide on support plans.

School leader Anthony Medina pointed out that in a PLC a lot of hard work is done by the teachers to ensure all students are moving forward. He said that all students move forward in a PLC because the teachers and school leaders:

...recognize when students are in need of support… We did that through RTI process this year, we did it with curriculum discussions with assessments and supports. We looked at the volume of assessments we were giving, which ones were important, which ones weren’t, and how we used the data.

School leader Jason Bishop agreed that the use of data as well as reflective inquiry was making the district better. School leader Bishop said that as a leadership team they asked:

what can we do with the data to make this a better school system, a better school, because …every student can learn, every student can achieve his or her best, that’s what it’s all about and when you break everything down and look at PLC it’s all about students – it’s
all about helping every single student to become the best they can be. And that’s when the hard work comes …

**Collaborative teams and norms.** The school leaders reported that using data and working together on teams with mutual support is central to the Barrington Public Schools PLC culture. They described various teams such as data teams, curriculum committees, school improvement teams, and others. They reported that these collaborative teams are created by the school leader and support student learning through reflective dialog, the de-privatization of teacher practice, and empowering a collective responsibility for student learning.

For example, Antony Rodriguez relies on the guidance department to support a collaborative monitoring of student needs. He explains:

My guidance meetings every Friday morning, they are the right arm of the Administration. I have three guidance counselors, social worker, student assistance counselor, psychologist and assistant principal for two hours every Friday. Game plan for the following week is laid out. …We all are connecting.

School leader Michael James describes the culture in Barrington Public Schools as academically rigorous with a strong social piece and credits collaborative teams for supporting relationships and building the collective capacity for ongoing learning. He reflects:

As I have grown with the district, I have become even more invested in the community and certainly realize the importance of the culture here as it is. It is a very strong academic culture, there is also a strong social piece to what’s going on here in the school and I think it’s the realization that every school has – no matter if it is high performing or not – there are certain issues that we absolutely have to deal with, and to let something that seems minor from an outsider looking in, if you dismiss that piece because it is
important to that individual teacher then you’re making some drastic mistakes. So [the school culture here is] taking in what people are truly concerned about … it’s accepting the challenge to look into all the issues – big or small… I think certainly you have relationships in school that help with that. To be able to bounce things off my colleagues, [you] realize that at the end of it all we have a great building…there are just so many great things that are happening here.

According to the school leader participants, using norms was one of the reasons that collaborative teams were successfully managed and ensured a high level of commitment to student learning by all team members. Established by individual teams, School leader Anthony Rodriguez describes the correlation between team norms and a successful learning culture:

I think sustaining and creating a culture of authentic collaboration, PLC driving us to do the norms was huge. Maintaining a culture through the norms we established what our thinking was going to be about the culture we want to be in this building. Then having those posted and for certain teams read at the beginning of every meeting was allowing us to sustain it.

**Shared Decision Making**

Rejecting the traditional view of school leadership as one heroic and charismatic individual with formal organizational power, PLCs embrace an alternative model - a framework for shared decision making that is more than the act of including additional people in the decision making process, it is the joint inquiry and joint action between teachers, building and district administrators and in many cases community members. Shared decision making should not be misunderstood to preclude or diminish the role of individual school and district leaders. On the contrary, school leaders remain critical to shared decision making and all student success
in a PLC.

All the participants in this study acknowledge enthusiastically the educational benefits of shared decision making in the Barrington Public Schools PLC. They confirm a personal and professional commitment to shared decision making and elucidate why they believe when multiple people have shared responsibility for learning every Barrington student succeeds. Focusing on the positive influences of trust and effective communication, all of the school leader participants credit much of the success of the Barrington Public Schools shared decision making with the professionalism of the staff and their willingness to participate as active team leaders in the decision making process as well as their hard work with the implementation of improved teaching and learning that has followed.

Structures of shared decision making. According to the leader participants in this study, one of their primary roles in facilitating shared decision making is creating, supporting and monitoring a number of teams. These teams are various – some are department teams, some are grade level teams, some are charged with specific tasks such as curriculum or response to student interventions, some are district wide, some building wide. The school leaders described some different teams and were positive in their comments about their success at improving student learning through collective inquiry and responsibility.

School leader James explained the Standards Setting Committee and the extensive representation of people on that committee. He said:

[The school] created that Standards Setting Committee and that really took a hard look at our practices … we went pretty wide with that as far as the people on that committee – it was teachers, it was department chairs, it was a number of people that had different ways to input decisions within the school... So that’s just an example of how that shared
decision making is a crucial piece of our school.

School Leader James also relies on a School Improvement Team that includes community members, students as well as faculty and administration:

I think it’s [School Improvement Team] vital for us because it gives constituencies…. you have students, parents, community members, faculty so it’s a great sounding board for us and it’s those types of pieces that I think we need to keep in place because it’s vital….

Another type of team used for shared decision making in the Barrington Public Schools PLC is data teams. Described by school leader Katherine Anderson, these data teams are the leaders in teaching and learning. “The weekly collaborative teams are where they get into data – looking at data – getting formatives, planning interventions, progress monitoring, curriculum planning, sharing lessons – that’s …everything we do every week.”

The data teams in the district have evolved slowly with the purpose of analyzing a variety of data such as statewide assessment scores. The school leader oversees the teams and requires team accountability.

School leader Anthony Rodriguez highlighted that curriculum teams were also vital. He explained that school leaders used to be responsible for curriculum and “that has changed with PLC.” He observes, “…as a PLC [the district] bought ‘we’ into the work. We, we, we and it’s so much better than it used to be because they [the teachers] know [the curriculum] better than I think any administrator could possibly know all those areas.”

Shared decision making is also used extensively for professional development, curriculum writing, hiring and even virtual opportunities in learning being developed by the district. School leader Leonard Medina explains how the teams function successfully:
Shared decision making … included as many people as possible in developing professional development. Shared decision making on curriculum … what we [Barrington Public Schools] are doing is based on not only central office people but talking to department and curriculum leaders as we start to look at a new direction and get their feedback on it and decide if it’s something that we are still interested in doing – even things that we’ve done with the virtual [learning] we are trying to get as many people involved with that…looking at the feasibility and practicality of it [and] trying to do the same thing in hiring people. Pretty much … there hasn’t really been anything that I’ve wanted to do top down.

**Strategies for shared decision making.** As expressed by school leader Rodriguez, the role of the school leader in a PLC shared decision making environment has evolved from the traditional role of school leader into the role of “choice maker.” School Leader Rodriguez describes this role:

> I like to be considered more of the “choice maker.” When I am dealing with faculty or the kids … I like to give choices about the future. Make it clear and make it be “we’re in this together and I will help you get through this together” and it’s been one of the reasons why I think I have been so successful with kids. … I think when we talk about the choice part, it’s really a partnership. We’re in it together, we’re explaining it. … That works.”

School leader Katherine Anderson agrees that the PLC school leader shouldn’t be authoritarian or even be the primary collaborator on a team because it won’t function properly and over time a school leader controlling the teams will erode a school leader’s trust. She explains, “[Y]ou have to make sure that they [the teachers] own it – that they want to…”

She describes how team leadership evolved over a three year period and why she decided
to rely on a teacher as the collaborative facilitator on the team instead of herself as the school leader, “…because the principal shouldn’t be in the collaborative team because they have to develop trust…”

Through monitoring the team’s work with feedback sheets, school leader Anderson explained that she knew the team needed direction and appointed a teacher to the position. She reflects on the success of the teacher leader and the team:

[The teacher facilitator] has been doing that for the past two years and my goodness when there’s somebody there to help … to get the things they need, to facilitate the next steps, to plan the agendas, it runs beautifully, - absolutely wonderfully..

Having a teacher as a team facilitator does not mean the school leader is not involved. On the contrary, as well as appointing the facilitator, monitoring progress, creating time in the school schedule and supporting the team with professional development and resources, the school leader also provides guidance, resolves conflicts, and requires accountability. When the team is not working, school leader Anderson holds the team accountable, she explained:

I’ve had situations where the team … was not getting anywhere... That was not going to happen. And that stopped. I will intervene if I have to. I write them a note that this isn’t consistent with the purpose of the collaborative team … that was not part of what a collaborative team needs to do…. it’s about the kids.

**Teamwork with administrators.** To support shared decision making, all school leader participants also reported relying heavily on each other for personal support and reflective problem solving. Expressing the views of all the school leaders, school leader James describes their team as “solid”, he said:

I think part of what made an effective team is one [where] we relied on each other. …
[We] really worked together to make the right decisions. “…so when you want to talk to somebody you can bounce ideas off of them. I think people feel like they’re supported and valued.”

In addition to working well with the teachers, teams and each other, the school leaders also recognized the support and teamwork with the union leadership. It’s a relationship they described as “close” and unique.

**Teachers willing to take on hard work.** The school leader participants in this study also identified staff willingness and enthusiasm as necessary conditions for successful collaborative teams and shared decision making.

School leader Rodriguez explains how staff capacity and staff willingness to lead works in concert with his vision and translates into shared decision making. “I need to rely on the best of the best … I think that goes with “I’m not a top down leader.” I accept that we have hired people because of their talent. I always have that vision looking where we want to head … [I] work with people to get them on that track …”

A lesson school leader Rodriguez said he learned from seeing former colleagues with “top down” leadership struggle; professional staffs have a natural tendency to baulk and be resistant to change if prescribed or dictated without their input. He explained, “I’ve learned that this faculty will baulk at something if they feel as though it’s being top down managerial type directive. …they resisted, they revolted even with…ideas they sort of thought were good.”

School leader James also relies on the staff’s willingness to collaborate and move the school forward toward improved student learning. “…quite frankly,” he said, “there are teacher leaders here that you can rely on. People that have stepped up in different roles. …To me it’s an amazing district with people that are really professional. …people willing to take on these
different roles.”

Shared decision making is also more than just involving a number of different people making decisions. According to school leader Medina, Barrington Public School’s shift to a PLC has empowered teachers as well as students and community members to influence positive change through collective inquiry. He explains:

In school more people go to their principals and run ideas by them and then the Principal will go to another more central office administrator and run that idea through them - in the past they were told what they were going to do, or things were left up to the Principal to be the decision maker and not always the staff. And I think the staff is now…moving things forward by their involvement in ways of supporting student learning.

When asked if teachers are empowered to make decisions, school leader Medina goes on to say, “Yes, because they are willing to take risks – to try something. He confirms:

As long as they [the teachers] are willing to run it by you first and you are able to listen to them and think something is feasible then they are willing to take chances – they are willing to challenge themselves. I see this all the time. They come up with ideas or are willing to share ideas with you.

**Trust & communication.** The school leader participants in this study report that facilitating a supportive and trusting environment in the Barrington Public Schools PLC is essential to shared decision making and is fostered by building an environment of open communication, mutual respect, and recognizing and celebrating the staff for their willingness to be challenged and take risks.

School leader Katherine Anderson describes the process of breaking down isolation and building trust to create a supportive PLC environment she describes as “a family…a family in a
Because we are all in this together … these collaborative teams get tight. They get very tight and when a person is having a bad day, or a long term situation those fellow teachers are there for them. It’s all about not being alone anymore in a very complex career. So no one needs to feel alone with a professional learning community. It’s a beautiful thing.

School leader Jason Bishop also agrees that Barrington Public Schools is a special community and the positive relationships in the community support staff and student learning:

[PLC] makes for better working relationship, it makes for a better community and that’s why this community is so special – it really is. You don’t find the willingness to work with each other – communicate – the way we do here. There will always be differences but … there is mutual respect here. There’s such a mutual respect because people understand what we are doing. It’s a community culture here…

School leader Michael James explains that the leadership optimizes mutual respect by encouraging open communication and feedback from the staff. He observes:

I think the [teachers and teams] are pretty good at letting me know [issues]…this is one of the great things, if you have strong teacher leaders that will confide in you … they’ll let me know what the sentiment of the school is, what the feeling is, if things aren’t really going the way they feel they need to be going.

He concludes, “…it’s a faculty that does support each other and that’s something that gets you through.”

School leader Anderson goes on to say, “I build trust with … parents …. They learned to trust me because I make good decisions for their children. I always try to bring the decisions
down to about children… I problem solve.”

And school leader Anderson supports trust with teachers as well as parents. In regard to building teacher trust, school leader Anderson believes honesty is a key factor:

I am not hiding anything from teachers. If a parent comes to me, I ask first if they’ve seen the teacher and I won’t entertain a situation where they haven’t unless there is a huge safety issue or something unusual. Teachers have to trust that the principal is not going to ‘throw them under the bus,’ they have to know that you will never do that, that you’ll respect their needs, that has to build over some time. I think that they just have to know that you’re never going to do that...

**Not always shared decision making.** While leading through shared commitments rather than authority has proven successful in the Barrington PLC, the participants report that there are times that school leaders need to make decisions that do not always have either the consensus or the input of the staff. Their willingness to make these decisions is described by the school leader participants as essential to what they view as their moral responsibility for putting student learning first. School leader Michael James explains:

We have had some pretty substantial changes since I’ve come on board and I think for the most part that has been with input and guidance from others here in making those … But there are certain times you can’t [be collaborative] depending on the situation…. there are certain things that you have to take the lead and just go forward with…

In certain situations, school leader James reports, “… it all comes down to you [the school leader] – no matter what … It’s my responsibility and I always remember that.”

School leader Katherine Anderson agrees explaining the balance that is required with shared decision making, “You don’t want to appease but you want to respect where each group
School leader Medina also believes that even in a PLC there are decisions that rest ultimately with the school leaders and those decisions can’t be ignore. He concludes:

[While] it hasn’t always been top down leadership all the time someone has to make that decision … The final decision – if you’re not afraid to make it. They might not always agree with you but they respect the part that the decisions been made. And the fact they [the students, the staff, the community] have someone to go to. Many times teachers feel that they can handle what needs to handled in the classroom …but they just want to know if there is ever a problem that there’s someone who will listen when they need it….

**Modeling Learning and Growth**

The existence of shared decision making in a PLC does not preclude or replace the necessity of effective school leaders. On the contrary, the hard work of realizing system wide reform and continuous improvement called for in a PLC requires more than bringing together a group of professionals with good intentions and collegial willingness. Successful school leaders in a PLC must also rely on their personal qualities and leadership strategies to best succeed in a collaborative learning environment.

Giving rare insight into the values, insights, and collaborative skills of successful school leaders, the participants in the study shared their views on the qualities and characteristics they identify and value in effective school leaders. In addition, the participants reflected on their own experiences and personal qualities that have influenced their leadership style. With a focus on building and sustaining trust, the school leader responses in this study characterized school leadership that is value dependent, proactive, positive and very rewarding for the participants.

“No super secrets here…”School leader participants in this study described their own
personal leadership qualities and identified what they believed were valuable qualities in other school leaders they observed, worked with, and qualities in those they have hired. School leader Jason Bishop summarized the overall view of all participants:

I know that this maybe sounds simple but when you break leadership down and you talk about what leadership is all about, it really boils down to some very simple concepts – it’s about character, it’s about credibility, it’s about being compassionate, it’s about being thoughtful, it’s about being smart, it’s about being educated. No super secrets here – there really aren’t.

**Respect.** All of the school leaders were in strong agreement with school leader Bishop and believed that the foremost quality in an effective leader in a PLC was treating all people with respect. For the school leader participants, this quality was crucial and non-negotiable. School leader Rodriguez describes this as “walking in someone else’s shoes” saying, “I always put myself in someone else’s shoes and I treat them the way I would like to be treated in that situation. And that is second nature to me – it’s not something that I have to work at.”

For school leader Bishop, treating others with respect means being approachable and being an effective communicator. He explains, Treating people “… with mutual respect - It is very important. … because to me it is a simple concept I’ve learned over the years, treat people the right way and they’ll treat you the right way. You might have a disagreement, that is fine, but I value people.”

According to school leader Bishop, valuing people and being respectful does not mean that tough decisions will not be made. He explains:

Some people think if you’re a nice guy then you’re a good leader well that’s not always … people will respect you as a leader if you treat them respectfully, courteously, even
though you have to make difficult decisions. By in large I think people really understand that. What I’ve learned …how many people have come up to me after I’ve made a difficult decision and say…you did the right thing and they feel like you did the best thing for the district.

School leader Katherine Anderson also added that being respectful of people should not be limited to a person’s professional life. School leader Anderson said she is respectful of everyone. She describes good leadership as being:

Very tolerant, understanding, and a really effective… listener …And respectful of everybody – respectful of their personal lives as well as their professional lives… its being fair, it’s being respectful it’s listening and acting on things that have a legitimate base.

She asserts that being respectful is the cornerstone of being trustworthy and being able to build relationships, all crucial in PLC leadership. “A leader needs to be trustworthy and able to build relationships,” Anderson emphasized, “because if you are not trusted, none of the [PLC reforms] can happen….”

School leader Michael James agrees that being “caring, compassionate and empathic are important qualities of effective school leaders but leaders also have to balance empathy for the individual with the goal of making the best decisions for students.” He explains this balance, “…there are times when you have to be firm.”

For the Barrington Public School leaders treating people with respect was the bottom line of school leadership. School leader Anthony Rodriguez explains that for Barrington Public School leaders, respect is a given, “… it’s just how you deal with people…. I think that most people in the world probably know how to function that way and sometimes they just need to be
reminded how to do it.”

School leader Bishop concludes, “You want to be defined as a good human being, in the final analysis, I think that’s really, really important and I think that many times I have found that the best leaders, the most effective leaders to me have been decent human beings.”

**Being positive and staying resilient.** Being positive was another essential quality for school leaders in a PLC identified by all the school leader participants in this study. School leader Katherine Anderson said in a PLC, “… you become a family, you’re always together every day and you need to be happy and try not to be negative. Each day I try my best to be a positive influence.”

According to school leader Bishop, being positive also helps fight resistance to change, fosters self-reflection, and continuous learning:

- Being a positive, upbeat leader makes a big difference…I’ve seen it so many times, it’s easy to get down, it’s easy when people are taking shots at you for you to step back and say, ‘oh boy, I don’t think I can do it,’ but you’ve got to push forward – I think it’s a big, big, big important quality of any leader – remain positive and try to find a way through it. You can’t get down on yourself if things don’t go the way you want them to go – it’s human nature – and you will meet resistance there is no question about that. You push back – that’s all – do what you have to do.

And if things don’t always go well, school leader Bishop says that is the time a school leader has to continue to be positive:

- To look at yourself and say, “could I do something better?” You want to learn from it, that’s the most important thing. It’s really, really important to stay focused on what you have to do and who you are and what you’re capable of…”
When hiring school leaders, school leader Medina looks for this kind of passionate commitment for others and for their professional work. He explains his hiring priorities:

I think the main thing that I look for in anyone is passion and commitment. How passionate are they about what they do, what do they take pride in, what is their level of commitment for work. Do they judge the day by how many hours are in it, or how long does it take to accomplish what you want to accomplish, or how much you care about students – so it’s not just content – but how much you care about people you teach.

Whether or not you take pride in your work and yourself and you respect … going to work and who you are going to work for.

School leader Medina also hopes to hire people who are good listeners. He asks himself in an interview, “Are they people that can sit and listen and be good listeners and know when to ask for help instead of try to just do it on their own and risk it.”

**Communicating.** Being a good listener was another quality identified by all the study participants as indispensable for effective school leaders. Being a good listener was described by school leader Bishop, “you can define a lot of characteristics about leaders but what I have found is that you have to be a good listener, you have to be approachable, you have to be reasonable, you have to be flexible and you have to be willing to negotiate.”

School leader James explained that listening to people always helps him make better decisions as a leader, “I try to listen to whatever the issues are and then fully investigate whatever the situation is before making a decision.”

School leader Medina concurs that listening, honesty, patience and a willingness to learn all are important qualities for a school leader when making a decision:

I think being a good listener is important and trying to be proactive on issues versus being
reactive on issues. If you’re a good listener and you have an idea of what’s going, then you react well versus waiting until things become a crisis and then responding.

School leader Medina also suggests, “Being accessible to people, I think that’s important characteristic. Being honest. Admitting you don’t know everything but you’re willing to learn or find out. Being patient are all important characteristics of good leadership.

For school leader Medina, there is an integrated relationship between listening, making good leadership decisions, and building trust. He explains:

I think trust is a matter of … supporting people, understanding people’s feelings, listening, being involved, visible, those are all the things that build trust. That is kind of like what your day to day life is like as an administrator. Not letting your emotions get away with you, listening to every side of a story and telling people that even if they’re not happy about it. You need to make informed decisions and to hear both sides of a story. …that you aren’t going to make changes automatically that you are willing to look at how the environment is laid out – observing and being patient. Instead of rushing in and making rush decisions or changes unless it’s a safety concern.

All the participants stated that using communication tools and following through on issues were the two most effective ways to build and sustain trust. School leader Michael James said:

[T]he biggest piece to building trust in any environment …is follow through on your part. If you’re going to say that we’re going to try something, we’re going to do something and there is no follow through then you’re not going to build that relationship – you’re not going to build trust in whomever it is that you’re working with. There’s got to be follow through, there’s got to be communication it’s got to be open communication
...Follow through is huge.

School leader James uses technology to facilitate communication and follow through:

...it is so important to communicate back whether it’s a quick email, whether it’s verbally to let them know that one, that you’ve read the email ...that you’re actually doing something about it and you may have done some great pieces of work to try to resolve the conflict or resolve whatever the issue was, and yet that final communicative piece is so crucial to completing the circle - that communication piece, you have to end it and you have to complete the cycle of communication.

School leader Katherine Anderson also spoke about the importance and challenges she faces with communication especially with the parent community. In her view, technology helps but school visits and personal contact are the best way to build relationships and trust. She said:

I think communication is a big – probably the biggest issue. It’s never the right way with every single person. Communication is always the biggest complaint... I’ve tried a million things. One thing we try to do is to have [parents] in frequently for different events. So they get to know their classroom, the building, and things going on, they see their children’s work a lot. So that works well.

School leader Anderson goes on to say, “I build trust with ...parents .... They learned to trust me because I make good decisions for their children. I always bring the decisions down to about children... I problem solve.”

School leader Michael James agreed that personal contact is always the best form of communication:

I think one-on-one is always the best. Again there’s time factors involved with that but if it is something that’s important to that person and it needs that one-on- one verbal contact
I think you need to do that - that’s number one.

School leader Bishop observed that keeping teachers, parents and all people informed is an important role of a school leader if they want to build trusting relationships. He also reported that in his view, sharing information also kept lines of communication open and built trust even when the situation was potentially adversarial, “…those who might disagree with you, will - gradually give you respect because you took the time to talk to them…”

School leader Medina also expressed a strong commitment to keeping all constituencies informed as a means to build strong relationships while, at the same time, he explained that a school leader has to be sensitive to confidentiality considerations as well. He said:

Communication is important…it is what keeps you together with a faculty and a staff. To the building and the staff it’s important to keep them abreast of things so if something is not going well, or if there is a concern or they have a concern and you are there for them …keep everybody in the loop –that’s important... [Also] you have to be sensitive to some issues that you know you can’t share with other people so I’m usually upfront and just tell them that I can’t share with you – the specifics - but I can tell you what is going on generally. They may not like that all the time but it’s better than hearing nothing.”

School leader Bishop concluded that building trust with communication is “important – very important” because:

You have to develop trust because you have to know the guy’s sitting in front of me – he just said something, he’s not going to walk out the door and change his mind. … [If] you build up relationships over the years …you can trust. It makes for better working relationship, it makes for a better community and that’s why this community is so special – it really is. You don’t find the willingness to work with each other – communicate –the
way we do here.

All of the school leaders agreed that their relationships in the Barrington Public Schools PLC were special and supported them and their leadership. School leader Anderson describes the Barrington Public School’s district leadership team and the professional development planning and resources that support school leaders: “[The district administrative team] all worked together, we had our own professional learning community of principals.

**Confronting issues.** While all the school leaders were advocates of increased communication in the district, they all concurred that communication is not *always* positive and being able to successfully confront and move beyond conflicts and challenges is an important part of a leadership style. School leader Medina explained the realities of leadership.

“…Someone has to make the final decision – you can’t be afraid to make it. They might not always agree with you but they respect the part that the decisions have been made.”

School leader Jason Bishop relies on his extensive leadership experience to confront and resolve challenging issues. He explains:

It’s more experience than instinct, …That’s important because confronting people, confronting parents, confronting coaches, contracts, is a big part of the job and I think that’s where you really see growth as a leader is when you confront these issues and maybe you come out on the losing side – but that doesn’t mean you didn’t do your job.

Another benefit to confronting issues, according to school leader Bishop, is that it increases a leader’s reputation. Saying that he believes most people don’t like to deal with difficult situations, as a leader it’s imperative. He reasons:

[Difficult situations] it’s critical because you’re setting a tone for your school and if people perceive you as a weak person who won’t confront a real difficult issue, I would
say that it’s going to be difficult to be perceived as an effective leader.

For school leader James and all the participants, successfully dealing with conflict was part of a school leader’s role even in a PLC. School leader Medina summarizes:

You hope every decision is the right one, and it’s never going to be. Most decisions you make will never make one hundred percent of the people happy – you have to be confident of that … You know that is why you try to make well informed decisions. You just do the best job you can…that is all…. Learn the most you can learn, learn from your mistakes, learn from others, listen to people. You have to go in with the attitude that you have to do the best job that you can and always be honest, demonstrate good attributes that you would like people to pick up on and follow, be willing to make decisions, …And when you make a decision you have to live by it.

School leader Bishop agreed saying as long as you are “caring and compassionate” making difficult decisions will enhance your credibility as a leader. Sharing a difficult decision he had to make as a leader, Bishop reflected:

It was painful, a very good example of paying the price for a leader. But did it make me a better leader? Yes. Did it enhance my reputation, yes it did. That’s how it goes because now they know he said something - he means it….. But I was caring and compassionate and I talked to people in my office and I lost some sleep over it I have to admit, but I think that’s what’s doing the right thing – it’s all about credibility …and it’s lacking in so many people who are in leadership positions and in not just in education but in many management positions. It’s unfortunate and I think by in large most people do the right thing, but I just still see it in so many people take the easy way out …I tell people all the time, don’t do the easy thing, do the right thing. It’s very, very important.
Every school leader also reported that they were resilient in the face of making these difficult decisions, school leader James explains that learning to be a good leader is ongoing saying “Certainly there are frustrations but …you are going to jump into it the next day or that evening…”

**Lifelong learning and continued growth.** Growing and improving as a school leader was a goal that all the participants strived to achieve. They all expressed a belief that the role of the school leader is complex, is constantly changing, and required flexibility and a commitment to lifelong learning. Continuous learning was identified by many of the participants as one of their most important priorities and means to improve their leadership. School leader Medina explains:

…[T]here are just so many initiatives and so many things going on that your biggest challenge is trying to stay on top of everything and making sure that you’re staying current …The ever changing part is to become more knowledgeable about everything. I think that is always important.

School leader Bishop agreed, “You’re dealing with all the things you deal with in this job, there are so, so many issues that arise and can come at a moment’s notice. You just never know what’s going to come at you.”

To support his continuous learning, school leader Medina and the other school leader participants said they read journals, researched online and collaborated with each other and with experts. Medina said:

I learn a lot from going to the state meetings, listening to what’s going on, collaborating with other people who are in the same job that I am in. They share ideas with me. I listen to teachers when they go on conferences they come back and tell me what they have
learned. And then I can use their knowledge at committee or department meetings to bring that forth and develop collaboration among them because they are willing to share ideas with each other so allowing them the opportunities for professional development or journals to read helps foster a continuous learning environment.

School leader Medina also relies on self-reflection. He observed:

[You] self-reflect everything all the time….it [gives] you a chance to think about the day, what you do right, what you do wrong, what would you change. Learn the most you can learn, learn from your mistakes, learn from others, and listen to people.

School leader Bishop also learns a lot from self-reflection and from formal education. He explains, “I am always trying to learn. It’s amazing that you never stop learning in this job.” School leader Bishop also learns a lot from looking at data and working with teachers.

School leader Anderson has a degree in curriculum and relied on experts at conferences to stay up to date on education reform initiatives. School leader Anderson reflected about one conference she attended, “their thinking was so incredible…it was so powerful that it influenced how I thought about curriculum after that and how I approached instruction after that…”

School leader James summed up the study participant’s universal priority to learn and grow, to make themselves better leaders in order to continuously improve teaching and learning in their schools and in the district. James said:

IY]ou can’t sit back and rest on your laurels - you need to continue to challenge not only yourself but the school and see what ways we can do things better. …you have to be willing to not only accept the new challenges, but know that there are better ways to do things and you have to learn those ways.
Championing System Wide Reform

Understanding how school leaders facilitate change and, as importantly, address resistance to change, is an important function of school leadership in a PLC where a skillful balance of fostering collaborative, shared decision making and requiring accountable learning results is required.

Bringing to light the challenges of leading system wide reform, the participants in this study embraced their role as change agents and identified successful strategies used to implement the Barrington Public School’s PLC. Relying on their in-depth knowledge of PLC principles as well as their experienced, proven approaches to change and an understanding of its resistance forces, the school leader participants offered an insightful, personal and practical roadmap to school improvement and substantive PLC reforms.

**Strong advocates for change.** All of the school leaders embraced their role as change agents in the Barrington Public Schools PLC and their comments revealed that they knew they were change agents and were aware and purposeful about moving their schools and district forward toward PLC practices. These reforms weren’t dictated to them but evolved and sustained from them.

School leader Michael James explains his impetus for bringing PLC reforms to Barrington Public Schools:

I was fortunate to be able to be on the ground floor as we started to build this whole PLC community in Barrington even beyond the high school, as a district. I was on the first team to go down to the national conference and listen to the DuFours…to really get in on the beginning level... But what really made all the difference in the world – was the second or the third national conference that we went to, I do like to listen to the experts…
School leader James understood that the PLC reforms were not initiatives, but system wide school improvement reform. His involvement led him to become a presenter at a PLC conference and share his knowledge with other school leaders in the district and around the country.

School leader Anthony Rodriguez also understood the resistance realities that are present when changing educational systems, so he prepared his faculty and worked closely with the union leadership prior to the implementation of Barrington Public Schools PLC. He describes the implementation as “easy” and shared the first PLC presentation he gave to his faculty:

[In] this school it was easy… I got to people and I gave them the choice. I said to the teachers in the faculty meeting ‘If you continue to do what you’ve always done we’re going to get what we’ve always gotten. If we continue to do what we’ve done, our test scores are going to be about what they are. There are schools around the country…’ – and I gave the example of an inner city school in Texas – that had adopted the philosophy of PLCs and they got to I think 98% of their kids meeting the standard within a two year period. I had everyone in the room actually stand up and they had to choose one side of the library: do you want to continue with what you’ve done or do you want to go down this new journey of professional learning communities which will be a little bit different for us but may take us to the next level. They all felt that they did… And we went slowly as we usually do, but people jumped on board in this building. So now having said that we were already poised to move toward this and… I was surrounded by people who know where we were going.

School leader Rodriguez also emphasizes that the change to PLC for himself as a leader was easy as well. “I was operating under a PLC in my own mind long before the district got to
PLCs “because PLC affirmed what he already knew about change. Change doesn’t happen overnight,” he said, “it’s a process, not an event.” He goes on to say:

I always look at if I can plant the seed, identify the people in the building who have the best shot at making it work well, then it will grow and spread. People will gravitate toward the success that they see and that has happened over and over again in this building.

School leader Michael James was also personally motivated to accept the challenges of change. James reflected “I feel like I’m always learning. …as a school leader I am continuously looking for that.”

School leader James also pointed out that the district culture was conditioned to change; the stage had long been set for staff, leadership, students, and the community to accept and adjust to change and implement new PLC reforms. He explained:

There’s always been this feeling that regardless of whatever it was – Learning Walks with IFL [Institute for Learning] which I think was a precursor to PLC – that people were willing to take on these different roles and whether it was Learning walks or DL [Disciplinary Literacy] and all of those pieces – and we did that for about five years prior to the whole PLC. I think I started to see the biggest change during that time, …I thought that was very telling as a district to see how the teachers reacted to that and the buy-in – not for everyone – but for the most part - opening up their classrooms that was a major step and that now leading into professional learning communities. The fact that we have seven professional development days …is another telling piece that we’re invested in professional development we’ve done a lot to push initiatives or programs forward and continue to do so.
School leader Anderson also agreed that there is little resistance to change in the district and like school leader James credits carefully designed professional development that educates the staff about the reforms and fosters staff buy-in and collective responsibility. “I did not have a lot of resistance,” she points out, “because I have carefully designed the professional development each year to lead up to it. So I didn’t just jump into all of this. The first year, just for my faculty meetings I built up what a PLC is all about.”

School leader Bishop also expressed the importance of professional development saying, “I think you’ve got to be very consistent sending the message [of PLC] out through professional development. …”

**Have a consistent theme.** All the school leaders also agreed that the PLC reforms were successful because most of the initiatives were included under one theme. Focusing on a theme proved “really meaningful” according to school leader Bishop:

I really think you have to do what we did in Barrington – focus on a theme – focus on something that is really, really meaningful. In addition, you want to make it [professional development] meaningful; it has to be connected to what you are doing. [We are] all talking the same language …all talking about using the different components of education – whether it’s assessment, whether it’s curriculum … teacher evaluation, it’s all pointing in the same direction and that’s where the leadership factor comes in. Leaders – our job is to coordinate this to make sure people understand this, they appreciate this, and they understand– it’s what we’re all about.

School leader Rodriguez agreed that a theme brought coherence and, in turn, understanding and buy-in to system wide school reform in the Barrington Public School district. Before PLC he said:
We used to have so many different initiatives that seemed to be isolated and people didn’t understand why we’re doing that thing and then we have to do this and then we have to do this and… [A principal] came up with the idea of … a patio table that was stuck at central office in the conference room and he had the umbrella and the umbrella was open and at the very peak on top of the umbrella in big letters was professional learning community. On each of the spokes going out holding the umbrella up was a different initiative that the district has been involved in or is involved in. Every one of them connected with the principals of PLC and it was an ‘ah ha’ moment – it was this is all what we’re about – differentiated instruction, teacher evaluation, PLC, RTI, all these things that seem to be so isolated came together…And I thought that was wonderful.

**Include people in the process of change.** All the school leaders agreed that having the buy-in of the faculty was the “number one” support for implementing PLC reforms. This buy-in was dependent upon including people in the process, educating them on the PLC principles, and implementing the reforms slowly. School leader James warned that while it might be quicker to make changes without full input from the staff, disregarding their input or not including them in the process, such actions would derail any chance of success.

According to all the school leaders, a trusting relationship with the staff made buy-in to reforms possible. James explains:

There’s got to be follow through there’s got to be communication it’s got to be open communication it can’t be you’re saying one thing and doing a back door deal because you know there’s another way to make this happen in a quicker fashion. If you’re going to bring people on board with change then it’s got to be their input is going to be significant and valued and utilized. If you’re not doing that then it becomes very evident
…that you’re looking for one thing, you’re asking for input and then you go on in a different direction you don’t use any of that input then you’re going to destroy whatever trust you’re trying to build.

School leader Bishop concurred but warned that not all people would be at the same level of commitment and buy-in with PLC at the same time:

Include them [the staff] in the process, number one. Let them know we are going to work on this together. Make it very clear from the very beginning, this is what we believe in, this is what’s going to push this district forward. …Are they all going to be in at the same level at the same time? No, there is going to be some people here and some up there – but it’s that feeling that this is what we believe in, this is the culture of our school, this is the theme, these are the things we really believe in, we are going to push this forward. …I must say for the most part in this district …you see some resistance, but not the high level resistance. I think people really believe in PLCs really, really do make a difference and they can have an impact on students.

According to the participants, one way to include people successfully in the change process is to have the staff included in the initial implementation phase by attending conferences with school leaders. School leader Michael James said including staff at national conferences and site visits was a very successful strategy for implementation buy-in. Conferences and site visits for the staff facilitated by school leadership also helped to support buy-in through the development of a better understanding of what PLC reforms would mean for the district. School leader James offers his reflections:

I think one of the best pieces of advice I could give is to really have a true understanding of what it means to be a professional learning community because there are so many
acronyms in this business, I think what happens is and we see this in interviews, is people come in and say they are a PLC or we do PLC and they really don’t have an idea of what it really is that it’s this umbrella this overarching … way we do business that impacts literally everything we do so whether it’s differentiated instruction, whether it’s the way we use data, whether it’s common planning time, all of those pieces are under that PLC umbrella and unless you see that it’s this overarching way that we do business then you’re kind of missing the point on what it is to be a PLC.

To school leaders considering the implementation of PLC he suggests making sure the whole school community has a deep understanding of PLC principles and to put protocols in place to operationalize those principles successfully:

The first piece of advice is to truly understand – do your reading, do your research – on what it means to be a PLC and what is a PLC and how would it work in your district.

Then the second thing to put it into action is to start to develop protocols in your district or in your school that make it happen. For example, the Common Planning Time …if we didn’t do that we wouldn’t have been effective, we wouldn’t have been successful.

School leader Katherine Anderson also identified patience and buy-in as important to the successful implementation of PLC. She describes her experience saying “I built it up slowly…and I wouldn’t change most of what I did because it was a gradual, respectful way of getting it in place without too much stress.”

School leader Anderson also advises school leaders to “trust the teachers they know what they are doing”:

Trust the teachers they know what they are doing. But give them the tools to do it. And go slowly, don’t push things on them, let them understand the value of it, why it will help
the children in their class, why it will eventually help them to hopefully make things
easier because they are a team and let them do it. And trust that they will - and they will.

No micromanaging

School leader James suggests It’s impossible not to “buy-in to a PLC:

I’ve seen in even some of the most reluctant people that are reluctant to change … it’s
almost impossible not to buy in. It’s all about getting rid of the whole teaching in
isolation and opening the doors but not only that but being on a collaborative team so if
you’re on a team with other members it’s difficult not be part of the process.

School leader Bishop concurs that it is unlikely to have one hundred percent buy-in from
the staff but that did not dissuade school leadership from implementing PLC reforms in the

Barrington Public Schools:

I think with [PLC], it’s got to become part of the culture and you’ve got to be able to
weave it through the entire system and it’s inevitable you’re going to meet resistance; it’s
the nature of the beast – anything new, anything different. If [the leadership] is not
getting resistance at some point in time, they’re probably not doing a real good job
because resistance is part of the process. If anybody tells you otherwise, I would disagree
vehemently. There is always going to be push back, there is no question.

**Be patient and take small steps.** To alleviate some of the push back and in order to
support change, the school leaders suggested proper planning. School leader Rodriguez said, “I
plan my time well. …it goes back to proper planning prevents poor performance which I really
believe in and it seems to work well for me.”

School Leader Bishop also suggested transparency and sharing information to disarm
“critics and cynics” and like all the school leaders he expressed a need for patience when
implementing change.

I think one of the mistakes we make as leaders sometimes is that we want those instant results, we want that instant gratification, we want things to change overnight and if I’ve learning anything… you have to take small steps, and you take another small step, and you take another small step, but if you stay at it and you’re consistent with the message and you help the teachers along the way, I think you’re going to see results – long term results – and that’s what you are looking for. You just don’t want to just see one test or one exam turned around.

He advises, “it’s a lot of work and it does not happen overnight but it’s that consistent message of leadership and expectation that you want to push forward to people so that they understand, we are not going to turn around and take the easy way out we want to move forward and once it’s in place, things begin to click.”

While he was willing to be patient during the implementation phase of school reform, school leader Bishop said when patience has been exhausted and professional development has been offered, ultimately it is the school leader’s role to obligate change. He explained:

[T]he obstacles, you’ve got to meet them – there’s no question. And resistance, it’s all part of the process. You push forward. And you can step back and you can go to a teacher and say, ‘what do you disagree with let’s talk about it,’ but at some point in time you’ve got to say, this is what we believe in and they have to understand that they have to get on board.

According to the school leaders, having supports in the Barrington Public Schools PLC helped teachers get on board. For example school leader James said, “We are fortunate in this district to have support from the central office. Our central administrative team is very, very
strong… We have central office supports and other administrators in the district.”

School leader Anderson also credits the central office, “The district really does a nice job…guiding where we need to go and providing resources for teachers to get there. So in terms of instruction, that has been the best I’ve ever seen.”

All school leaders also credit the school committee leadership with their vision and support. The school committee’s financial support for PLC reforms was appreciated by all the school leaders especially in what they described as the present challenging economic environment.

While there were many supports identified by the school leaders, the crucial factor of success expressed by all the participants was the professional staff. “…Quite frankly,” school leader James summarized, “there are teacher leaders here that you can rely on. People that have stepped up in different roles. To me it’s an amazing district with people that are really professional.”

School leader James concludes that there is more to learn and more work to do and he looks forward to the opportunity to do it. He concludes:

In regard to PLC reforms in Barrington Public Schools “…we’re still not there yet I don’t think completely but that’s why we are on the continuum we are on. We’re …still building towards that – I don’t think you ever get there is the bottom line to becoming a true PLC you are always striving towards that goal.
Chapter Five: Discussion of Research Findings

The goal of this research study was to explore the phenomenon of school leadership in the Barrington Public School’s successful PLC. By unmasking the perceptions of school leaders within the context of the Barrington Public School’s PLC, these finding reveal a thematic thread of capacity building – personal, interpersonal, staff, and organizational – and support the study conclusion that the essence of school leadership in the Barrington Public Schools is supportive and shared leadership that relies primarily on the integrated influences of organizational structures (teams), a culture of student centered decision making, a professional staff, and the collaborative qualities of school leaders that build trust.

Discussion of the Findings in Relationship to the Theoretical Framework

Professional capacity – building and celebrating a professional staff. The collegial model relies on the influences of a motivated, professional staff to support the hard work of implementing and sustaining a PLC. The findings of this study confirm that building staff capacity is a priority of all of the school leaders in the Barrington Public Schools PLC and all suggest a variety of methods to continuously develop the expertise and motivations of a professional staff. The primary methods mentioned by the participants include professional development, ensuring that all the staff are well educated in PLC concepts, mentoring, and the importance of recognizing achievement to celebrate and motivate success. There was universal agreement from all the participants in their exuberant praise for the exceptionality and professionalism of the Barrington Public School staff and the role of collaboration as a means to exponentially build staff capacity.

The participants of this study expressed a very high level of respect for the Barrington Public School staff and shared a belief that the exceptional staff translated directly into student
achievement in the district as well as their own personal job satisfaction as school leaders. They were enthusiastic in their praise for the teachers and emotionally connected to the teachers’ success as well as the students’ success.

This recognition and praise for the professionalism and expertise of the staff did not translate into complacency of the school leaders; all shared a commitment to foster continuous improvement and professional growth for themselves and their staff. Professional development was identified as the primary means to facilitate continuous improvement. While all the participants supported ongoing, sustainable and embedded professional development to build staff capacity, not all supported the use of outside professional development experts. Some suggested a combination of trained in house professionals, online resources such as PD 360 and the use of some outside experts.

This study also found that while the school leaders were sensitive to the high level of accountability being required of the professional staff as a result of the new teacher evaluation model recently mandated by the Rhode Island Department of Education, they did not comment whether the evaluation process was an accurate measure of staff capacity. Some expressed frustration with the time the process required of school leaders, but all believed the new evaluation process was a positive opportunity for school leaders to give staff feedback and, in turn, improve staff practice.

Finally, this study confirmed that micromanaging was not considered an effective means to build staff capacity. All the school leaders expressed considerable confidence in the staff’s ability to get the job done and warned against leadership that micromanages the classroom. None reported to be micromanagers and all said they did not believe that micromanagement was an effective leadership strategy for a professional staff in the Barrington PLC.
Interpersonal capacity – a reliance on collaboration. The findings of this study confirm that the Barrington Public School leaders believe collaboration is the number one influence of PLC on their leadership. According to the school leader participants, they created, strongly supported, and relied on authentic collaborative structures and shared decision making within the Barrington PLC to guide their own leadership and to improve student learning. These collaborative structures facilitated shared decision making and supported student learning through reflective dialogue, the deprivitazation of teacher practice, and by building relationships that fostered collective responsibility for student learning.

All of the school leader participants reported that teams were the primary collaborative structures utilized in the Barrington Public Schools PLC. These teams were described by the participants as various and included department teams, grade level teams, teams charged with specific tasks such as the Standard Setting Committee, Response to Student Interventions or School Improvement, curriculum teams, data teams, district wide teams, and building teams. The school leaders’ comments were very positive about the success of these teams at improving student learning through shared decision making, the collective expertise of the professional staff as well as the personal and professional relationships collectively developed by the members of these teams.

The participants in this study emphasized that one of their most important roles as a school leader was to create, support and monitor collaborative teams. Teams were supported by the school leaders with professional development, resources and by building time during the school day for the collaborative teams to meet and do their work. Scheduling Common Planning Time was highlighted as an example of this collaborative time embedded in the school day. All the school leaders expressed enthusiasm for the learning results supported by collaborative teams
as well as the positive “family” culture, collective responsibility, and moral commitment to
student learning that was developed during this team time as well.

This study also confirmed that the collaborative work of Barrington Public School teams
would meet the standard of authentic collaboration; collaboration that is purposeful, directed by
team members and guided and monitored by school leaders. All the school leader participants
credited the adoption of norms, the protocols and commitments developed by collaborative
teams to successfully guide team members when working together.

Organizational capacity – ensuring a culture of learning. The findings of this study
also reveal an undeviating focus of school leaders on student centered decision making in the
Barrington Public Schools. All of the participants expressed an impassioned commitment to
students and a faithful implementation of data driven interventions to support the achievement of
every student. The participants affirmed that a culture of student centered decision making with a
reliance on data and interventions supports every student and their learning.

School leader participants emphasized the role of collaboration in order to sustain a
culture that ensures learning both directly through improved instruction and indirectly through
relationships. Giving clarity and humanity to the discussion of student-centered learning,
participants expressed how PLC practice changed the school’s focus - from teaching to learning -
and how the teachers changed their focus to student results as well.

The school leaders’ moral commitment to students was reflected in the participant
responses in this study. This study confirmed that the leaders’ commitment to students was
unwavering even when some decisions they made were not popular and criticized.

To support the PLC culture that ensures all students are learning at the highest levels and
to support those students who are not, the findings of this study confirmed that school leaders
relied heavily on the use of data and commended their professional staffs for making the collection and analysis of student data a priority. All school leaders also emphasized that the use of data in the intervention process was important to sustaining a culture of learning for all students. They all believed the amount of testing imposed on the students needed to be closely monitored and data teams were the most effective at making informed decisions about students, not simply relying on school leaders or individual classroom teachers to decide on support plans.

Discussion of the Findings in Relationship to the Literature

Interpersonal capacity – embracing collaboration and shared decision making.

Rejecting the traditional view of school leadership as one heroic and charismatic individual with formal organizational power, the findings of this study concur with the literature and confirm the collective educational benefits of shared decision making in the Barrington Public Schools PLC. All of the school leaders articulated their belief that the PLC principles of teamwork and collaboration were the most effective means to support improvement in student learning. The leaders did not lament authoritarian control and all viewed their leadership as collaborative.

According to the school leaders in this study, shared decision making is more than the act of including additional people in the decision making process, it is the joint inquiry and joint action between teachers, building and district administrators and in many cases community members. All of the school leaders identified the use of collaborative teams as the primary organizational structures charged with shared decision making. Teams reportedly shared decisions for curriculum, professional development, hiring and even virtual opportunities in learning being developed by the district.

The participants in this study all agreed that PLC leadership shouldn’t be authoritarian
and school leaders shouldn’t even be the primary collaborator on a team because the school and collaborative teams won’t function properly, and over time if a school leader is controlling, the teams will erode as will a school leader’s professional trust. According to the participants, school leaders should not control teams but support their work by monitoring team progress, appointing a facilitator, creating time in the school schedule to meet, providing professional development and resources, providing guidance, resolving conflicts and requiring accountable results.

The findings of this study also highlight the school leader’s reliance on each other as important collaborative partners as well.

**Personal capacity – empowering staff & building trust.** The findings of this study expanded on the research by highlighting staff willingness as a necessary condition of collaboration and shared decision making. All of the school leader participants in this study credited much of the success of the Barrington Public Schools collaboration with the professionalism of the staff, the staff willingness to participate as active team leaders in the decision making process, as well as their hard work with the implementation of improved teaching and learning that followed.

The findings of this study also identify the roles of trust and communication as central to successful PLC collaboration and shared decision making. All of the school leaders explained that they developed trust in the Barrington Public Schools PLC by listening, being flexible, approachable, being positive, communicating effectively and following through on issues and decisions.

While all of the school leaders expressed an enthusiasm to be active collaborative partners with teachers and others in decision making, they also emphasized that for them shared decision making was never about “passing the buck…” They all recognized their role in making
difficult decisions and took ultimate responsibility as a school leader.

**Discussion of the Findings in Relationship to the Research Design**

The phenomenological research design in his study successfully transformed the lived experiences of five school leaders into the essence of the leadership phenomenon in the successful Barrington Public Schools PLC. With its reliance on intimate personal perspective, the findings of this study provided rare insight into the values, collaborative skills and strategies, and priorities of the successful Barrington Public School leaders. Specifically, the school leader participants in this study characterized their school leadership as supportive, proactive, positive, visionary, shared, interconnected and very rewarding.

**Personal capacity – qualities of leadership.** The participants in this study identified and placed a higher value on certain qualities and strategies of leadership they believed were more successful in a collaborative environment. The primary quality identified by all the participants as crucial and non-negotiable to successful collaborative leadership was treating people with respect and building trust. The ability to build trust – with the students, staff, the parents, the community and other leaders -was identified by all the participants as an essential quality for a school leader in order to support collaboration and make good decisions for students in a PLC. School leaders described their reliance on transparency, feedback, follow through, listening, sharing decisions as central to building trust. They warned against micromanaging and characterized other successful collaborative leadership qualities such as being positive, resilient, willing to confront issues, patient and compassionate.

**Interpersonal capacity – effective communication and learning.** The study findings also revealed that there is an integrated relationship between collaborative leadership qualities and making good leadership decisions. All of the school leaders stated that using communication
tools and following through on issues were the two most effective ways to support collaborative leadership qualities. School leaders in the study identified some of the challenges they face with communication. In their view, technology helps with communication but school visits and personal contact are the best way to build relationships and trust. The findings confirmed that being honest with students as well as teachers and parents is also critical to communicating effectively with all constituencies.

While all the school leaders were advocates of increased communication in the district, they all concurred that communication is not always positive and being able to successfully confront and move beyond conflicts and challenges is an important part of leadership.

Striving to grow, learn and professionally improve as a school leader were also characteristics of effective school leaders identified by the participants in the study findings. They all expressed a belief that the role of the school leader is complex, is constantly changing, and requires flexibility and a commitment to lifelong learning. Continuous learning was identified by all of the participants as one of their most important priorities and means to improve their leadership. To support continuous learning, participants said they read journals, researched online, relied on self-reflection, and collaborated with each other and with experts.

**Organizational capacity – championing PLC whole system reform.** The phenomenological methodology in this study also supported an inductive data analysis process that developed meaning by building patterns and themes of understanding. Utilizing the interview data, the analysis process in this study revealed a thematic pattern of school leaders who are champions of change and ongoing system wide improvement.

The study findings confirmed that to be successful change agents in the Barrington Public Schools PLC, school leader participants relied on their in-depth knowledge of PLC principles as
well as their experienced, proven approaches to change and an understanding of its resistance forces.

The findings of this study revealed that PLC programs and practices were strategically implemented by the Barrington leaders. At the time of the initial implementation of the PLC reforms, the school leaders understood the realities of change in educational organizations and prepared their faculty with targeted, in-depth professional development, and worked closely with the union leadership prior to the implementation of Barrington Public School’s PLC. They all recognized change as a process and not an event.

All of the school leaders also agreed that overall there is not much resistance to change in the Barrington Public Schools and credits carefully designed professional development that educated the staff about reforms and fostered staff buy-in as the primary reasons for this low level of resistance.

All the school leaders also stated that having the buy-in of the faculty was the most important support for implementing PLC reforms. This buy-in was dependent on including people in the process, educating them on the PLC principles, and implementing the reforms slowly. In the initial implementation phase of the PLC, buy-in was supported with staff attending conferences and site visits with school leaders, as well as being patient, and giving the staff time to let them understand the value of the reforms for their students. The school leaders recognized that while it might be quicker to make changes without full input from the staff, disregarding their input or not including them in the process would derail any chance of success.

The study findings also highlight that all the school leaders believed that the established collaborative culture and a wellspring of leadership trust were also critical to making the reforms possible. Finally, the school leader participants in this study all valued the PLC reforms not as
separate initiatives but as system wide school improvement.

   School leaders reported that to alleviate the inevitable push back from change, they relied on proper planning, a consistent message of reform, transparency, patience, and professional development. However, they all agreed that when patience has been exhausted and professional development has been offered, ultimately it was their role to obligate change for those who were unwilling to change their professional practice and support the PLC reforms.

   Finally, the findings of this study highlighted the importance of supports when change is being implemented. In the case of the PLC initiatives being implemented in Barrington Public Schools, participants credited the central office and the school committee for their vision and support. The school committee’s financial support for PLC reforms was also recognized and appreciated by all the school leaders, especially in what they described was the present challenging economic environment.

   **Limitations**

   It was the intention of this study to investigate, to explore, and to develop a deeper understanding and awareness of the phenomenon of school leadership within the context of the successful Barrington Public Schools PLC. The purpose of this study was not to prescribe a blueprint for school leadership or to measure the effectiveness of school leaders or school reform in the Barrington Public Schools PLC. By every measure, Barrington Public Schools PLC and its school leadership are effective and successful. Rather, the purpose of this study was descriptive and exploratory within the context of the Barrington Public Schools PLC and as such had some limitations.

   Within the context of the Barrington Public Schools PLC, this study has some limitations of purpose. It did not pre-suppose any findings and was not intended to produce causal theories
or directly change leadership practice. The intention of this study was only investigative and reflective for the purposes of description and to understand the essence of school leadership in the Barrington Public Schools PLC. This is not to suggest however that the study findings are without significance for the Barrington Public School district; the study conclusions provide a useful framework for Barrington Public Schools to develop a deeper understanding of its leadership practices in order to support its development forward especially during this time of leadership transition and renewal.

Because of the context of the study is strictly within the Barrington Public Schools PLC, this study is also limited in transferability to other school districts. It is important to note however that while the study findings may not be transferable, they will certainly be significant to other practicing school leaders as well as education scholars who will be interested in the findings and the perceptions of the study participants who have thoughtfully and insightfully shared their leadership and successful journey to develop, implement and sustain the Barrington Public Schools PLC.

In addition to the limitations of purpose and context, this study might also have some limitations in methodology because of the number and criterion of its participants. This study may have benefitted from a larger number of participants and to have included those with less experience and as such might have a less entrenched perspective of the Barrington Public Schools PLC. Leaders with less experience might have been less conditioned by the normative and structural influences of the organization. The participant sample in this study was naturally limited because of the very low turnover in the Barrington Public Schools leadership positions; there are relatively few school leaders who have been in leadership positions in the Barrington Public Schools PLC. This study attempted to address this limitation by including five
participants all with a range of experience and all with diverse characteristics of gender, education, leadership level, and years of service and phases of involvement in the PLC implementation and sustainment.

Finally, the conclusions of this study may have been limited by the inexperience and professional position of the researcher. While my presuppositions, bias and prejudgments were bracketed throughout this study, my position as an employee in the Barrington Public Schools may have influenced the interview responses of the school leaders. Although the thematic findings, derived from the data analysis reduction process, do not seem to suggest any one or more of the school leader participants limited or changed their responses in light of the researcher’s position in the Barrington Public School, there is always a possibility that they limited or changed their interview responses and as a result influenced the study’s data. This study may also in some unknown way be limited by my inexperience and lack of expertise as a novice researcher.

**Implications for Educational Practice**

**Scholarly significance.** This study added to the current scholarship of educational leadership in a PLC by informing this body of literature with first hand, personal perceptions of school leaders who have lived the experience. Utilizing the phenomenological methodology, this study gave reflective, intimate voice to a diverse group of school leaders who are very well educated in the educational philosophies and concepts of PLCs, and who have operationalized and sustained PLC theories into action through their leadership in the successful Barrington Public Schools PLC. The phenomenological methodology used in this study supported this exploration of personal perspective that was highly individualized and open ended and included a strategy of inquiry that was especially true to their interpretations of the school leaders’
experience. By giving voice to the school leader participants with direct quotations and a confirmation of the findings by the participants, this study added an authentic, personal, reflective, and descriptive perspective to the scholarship of leadership in a successful PLC.

This study also confirmed the literature that identifies the importance of authentic collaboration and shared decision making in successful PLC leadership. Specifically, this study reaffirms the role of trust and effective communication as critical to build a culture of collective responsibility for student learning. This study supported the work of Hord (2004), DuFour et al. (2005) and Fullan (2010) who identify successful leaders as supportive and their leadership as moral, and who emphasize that effective school leaders are key to large scale reform.

**Practitioner significance.** The findings of this study also confirmed the “loose-tight” leadership model that is characterized in the literature as leadership that is both bottom up support and top down pressure to effectively improve schools and districts, and expanded on this concept from a practitioner perspective by giving a voice to the leaders who have actually lived the experience of “loose-tight” leadership.

The participants in the study give guidance to practitioners on how this paradox of leadership is achieved. Describing their “loose” leadership, the participants of this study confirm that effective PLC leadership relies heavily on the professional work of collaborative teams that are motivated and committed to meeting the learning needs of their students. Specifically, the participants explained how their “loose” leadership gives the faculty time in their schedules and discretionary decisions to work on collaborative, data teams, to make decisions about the curriculum, common assessments, pace of implementation, and interventions put in place for students who need support. Describing their “tight” leadership, the participants in this study confirmed their undeviating requirement for accountable student achievement results.
The findings of this study are also significant for new Barrington Public School leaders as well as all leaders aspiring towards best practice in PLC implementation and sustainment. With its reliance on the intimate personal perspective of school leaders who have successfully implemented and sustained PLC initiatives, the findings of this study provide a full description of the implementation process employed in the Barrington Public Schools PLC with rich, detailed, insights by the successful school leaders regarding what they believe are the leadership qualities best suited to support a collaborative leadership environment and implement school wide reform.

Specifically, the essential qualities of successful school leaders identified by the participants in this study were treating people with respect, being positive, self-reflective, a continuous learner, good listener, flexible, honest, patient, and ability to communicate effectively, follow through, give your best effort and be willing to make difficult decisions. According to the findings of this study, the participants concluded that these qualities interacting together build trust and result in making good leadership decisions.

The study findings also confirmed that all of the school leader participants remained positive about the decision to implement and sustain the Barrington Public Schools PLC and all agreed that understanding the forces of change is beneficial for leaders aspiring towards a PLC. Specifically, the findings of this study confirmed that all of the participants in the study identified their role as a change agent and relied on their in-depth knowledge of PLC principles as well as their experienced, proven approaches to change and an understanding of its resistance forces to implement the programs and practices of the PLC. For practitioner’s aspiring to implement PLC reforms, school leader participants suggest they should carefully plan, design professional development to foster staff buy-in and collective responsibility for the PLC
initiatives, be patient and take the time to help the staff understand its benefits to their students, and provide supports from the central office. However, when patience has been exhausted and professional development has been offered ultimately it is the school leader’s role to obligate change that is in the best interests of the students and their learning.
Conclusion

Scholars and practitioners characterize PLCs as “journeys” because of their fluid, dynamic, and evolving nature (Appleton, 2012; DuFour, 2006). This is certainly true in the experience of the Barrington Public Schools PLC; a journey that began in 2005 and today frames the structures, cultures and leadership practices of this high performing and successful district recognized for its outstanding student achievement, professional staff, and visionary and effective leaders (“Rhode Island,” 2012). The Barrington Public Schools PLC has been a journey of educational improvements and refinements and is summarized by one school leader participant in this study as a “continuum” of reform. He concludes, “In regard to PLC reforms in Barrington Public Schools “…we’re still not there yet I don’t think completely but that’s why we are on the continuum we are on. We’re …still building towards that …goal.”

Much like the Barrington Public Schools PLC journey, this study evolved over the course of years and has its roots in scholarly theory but with a practitioner’s perspective. Its purpose was to offer insight and a deeper understanding of the successful leadership practices in the Barrington Public School district in order to support the transition of leadership brought on by the retirement of many of its leaders. This collective loss of almost two hundred years of leadership experience heightened an awareness of the positive and undeniable influence of school leadership on the Barrington Public Schools PLC, and brought to light many unanswered questions about the individual and collective capacities of its successful leaders. Exploring the answers to these questions proved to be a critical problem of practice addressed in this study as the district moves forward and works to ensure the continued achievement of every student.

With the insight and expertise of five school leader participants who have implemented and sustained the successful PLC journey over time, this phenomenological study achieved its
goal of discovering the essence of school leadership in the Barrington Public Schools PLC. Its findings offer scholarly and practitioner significance by informing the body of literature on school leadership with first hand, personal perceptions of those who have lived the PLC leadership experience. The study findings also offer aspiring reformers and practitioners direction with the PLC implementation process, identify qualities of collaborative leadership, and explore how best to balance the paradox of leadership expressed in the “loose-tight” leadership model.

As the Barrington Public Schools PLC journey continues towards extraordinary and the landscape of school reform evolves, research to understand leadership is always relevant and vital. Suggested areas of future research to support this study include the development of teacher leaders in a data driven culture and the influence of social media on leadership communication. Both topics support an understanding of the growing practice of collaborative and shared leadership in a highly functioning PLC and provide new and important directions for continuous PLC leadership improvement and school reform.
References


Bottoms, G., O'Neill, K., & Fry, B. (2012). *Good principals are the key to successful school: Six strategies to prepare more good principals* (Rep.). Retrieved 2012, from Southern Regional Education Board website.


Appendices

Appendix A: Verbal Participation Recruitment Script and Signed Informed Consent

Recruitment Script

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Department of Education

Researcher: Suzanne Costa Candidate Ed.D. Northeastern University

Principal Investigator and Advisor: Kelly Conn, Ph.D. Assistant Academic Specialist, Doctoral Programs, College of Professional Studies, Northeastern University

Title of Project: School Leadership in a Successful Professional Learning Community

My name is Suzanne Costa and I am a doctoral student in the College of Professional Studies at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts. The reason for this meeting with you today is to request your participation in my dissertation research study.

The subject of the study is school leadership in the successful Barrington Public Schools Professional Learning Community. The purpose of this study is to explore and discover the essence of school leadership in the Barrington Public Schools Professional Learning Community from the perspective of school leaders in order to develop a deeper and richer understanding of the practices, motivations, influences and effects of school leadership within the structure and processes of its Professional Learning Community (PLC). In addition, this study will seek to inform the practice of school leaders in other professional learning communities by discovering meaning and a unique awareness of the essence of leadership in a successful PLC.

This study will not in any way by any measure or criteria quantify, evaluate or judge the success of the Barrington Public Schools Professional Learning Community or the leadership therein.

As an experienced and successful school leader in the Barrington Public Schools Professional Learning Community, your thoughts, views and perspectives would be unique to
this study. If you would consider participating, I would be happy to discuss all of the requirements and processes with you fully.

I thank you very much for considering participating in this study.

Suzanne Costa

Signed Informed Consent for Participants

Northeastern University
College of Professional Studies
Department of Education

Researcher: Suzanne Costa Candidate Ed.D. Northeastern University
Principal Investigator and Advisor: Kelly Conn, Ph.D. Assistant Academic Specialist, Doctoral Programs, College of Professional Studies, Northeastern University

Title of Project: School Leadership in a Successful Professional Learning Community

Introduction

You are being invited to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Participation Criteria

You are being asked to participate in this study because of the following:

- Your experience serving as a school leader in the Barrington Public School Professional Learning Community;

- Your unique experience as a school leader in the Barrington Public School during multiple phases of the Professional Learning Community initiative including its creation, implementation and sustainment;

- Your expertise in PLC as well as other school wide reform initiatives;

- Your extensive professional development training in PLC including workshops, conferences and site visits;

- Your demonstrated skills as a robust and interactive communicator sharing thoughts, ideas, beliefs, reflections as well as your extremely proficient verbal and written
communication skills;

- Your established relationship of trust and professional respect with colleagues;

- Your willingness and availability to further educational research and reform.

**Purpose of this Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore and discover the essence of school leadership in the Barrington Public Schools Professional Learning Community. From the perspective of school leaders in the successful Barrington Public Schools Professional Learning Community, this phenomenological study will seek to develop a deeper and richer understanding of the practices, motivations, influences and effects of school leadership within the structure and processes of its Professional Learning Community (PLC). In addition, this study will seek to inform the practice of school leaders in other professional learning communities by discovering meaning and a unique awareness of the essence of leadership in a successful PLC.

This study will not in any way by any measure or criteria quantify, evaluate or judge the success of the Barrington Public Schools Professional Learning Community or the leadership therein.

**As a Participant – What You Will Do**

If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

- Participate in one interview lasting approximately 2 hours or two shorter interviews lasting approximately 1 hour each. These interviews will include in-depth, semi-structured questions to be administered by the researcher to each participant in a private setting such as the school leader’s office or school conference room. There will be an opportunity for free flow of ideas, thoughts, reflections, beliefs. There will also be an interchange of responses between the researcher and participant during the interview(s). With your permission – the interview will be audiotaped.

- If necessary for purposes of clarification and at the request of either the researcher or the participant, you will also be asked to participate in short, follow up verbal conversations with the researcher for purposes of clarification of earlier shared information during the interview(s). These conversations are not required or scheduled but will allow for additional clarification and a free flow of ongoing interaction if requested by either the researcher or participant.

- In addition, if necessary for the purposes of clarification and at the request of either the researcher or the participant, you will also be asked to participate in short, follow up written documentation (probably emails) with the researcher for purposes of clarification of earlier shared information during the interview(s). This documentation isn’t required or scheduled but allows for a free flow of ongoing interaction if requested by either the researcher or participant.
researcher or participant.

**Completely Voluntary Participation with No Risk, Discomfort or Cost**

Your decision to participate in this research study is completely voluntary as is your continued participation. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. Even if you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights benefits or services that you would otherwise have. You may choose not to answer any interview question and may leave the interview location at any time. There is no risk, discomfort or cost for you as a participant. Because there is no potential for risk or discomfort to the participant, no special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment of treatment solely because of your participation in this research.

**Benefit to the Participant**

There is no remuneration for participation in this study or direct benefit to you for your participation in this study. However, by reflecting on and sharing your practices of successful school leadership in this study you will significantly add to the body of education literature on the leadership practices in a successful professional learning community. Your participation in this study will help other education scholars and leaders better understand and discover meaning about leadership practices in the Barrington Public Schools PLC and perhaps their own professional learning communities as well.

**Confidentiality**

Your responses in this study will remain strictly confidential. The following process of data collection, transcription, reporting, storage and disposal will be followed:

- With your permission, your interview questions will be audiotaped, however, your responses will be transcribed through a coding process that does not match your responses to your identity.

- The audiotapes will be stored with this Informed Consent Agreement at a secure location and destroyed when the research report (dissertation) is completed and approved.

- The written findings in the research report (dissertation) will be based on transcribed data and will not identify or attribute your responses in anyway.

- As required by Northeastern University, the Informed Consent Agreement will be saved for 3 years.

In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. Only those people who are authorized by organizations such as Northeastern University will be permitted to see this information.
Contact

If you have any questions about this study please contact the researcher Suzanne Costa at costa.su@husky.neu.edu or costas@bpsmail.org and/or the Principal Investigator and Advisor Kelly J. Conn, Ph.D., Assistant Academic Specialist Doctoral Programs, Northeastern University, 360 Huntington Ave 42BV, Boston, MA 02115, 857-205-9585, k.conn@neu.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, you may also contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University Boston, MA 02115, 617-373-7570, irb@neu.edu.

Signature of Approval

Signing below indicates you have heard the explanation of the study verbally by the researcher, read and/or verbally heard this agreement read to you by the researcher and you agree to take part in this study.

I ______________ agree to take part in this research.

Name of participant

________________________  _______________________
Signature of Participant       Date

________________________________  _______________________
Printed Name of Person Above      Date

________________________  _______________________
Signature of Person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent  Date
Appendix B: Interview Questions

Interview Questions

For Barrington Public School Leaders

Research Participants

1. **Overview**: Successful school leaders wear many different hats and have many different roles. Thinking about how you spend your day, how would you describe your roles as a school leader? Could you please provide some examples of your primary activities during your school day?
   a. Follow up: Could you describe examples how you prioritize these activities?
   b. Follow up: Could you describe examples of when you are most productive? Could you describe examples of when you are most challenged?

2. **Influences of PLC**: You have been a successful school leader in Barrington prior to the implementation of the PLC and during its sustainment, how would you describe the influences of a PLC on your leadership? Could you please give some examples of how the BIG IDEAS of PLC (all students learn; creating and sustaining a culture of authentic collaboration; and focusing on results) influence and effects your leadership?
   a. Follow up: Could you please describe examples of how your leadership influences the culture in your PLC?
   b. Follow up: Could you please describe examples of how your leadership influences the collaboration in your PLC?
   c. Follow up: Could you please describe examples of how your leadership focuses on results in your PLC?

3. **Defining Your Leadership**: Reflecting on your successful leadership in the Barrington Public Schools, could you please describe some of the defining experiences/moments of your
leadership?

a. Follow up: Could you describe if/how PLC structures, processes and practices have influenced these experiences?

4. **Obstacles and Supports**: There are many obstacles and supports to all school leadership. Could you please describe some of the obstacles to and some of the supports for your leadership within the Barrington PLC?

a. Follow up: Could you describe how a PLC influences these obstacles?

b. Follow up: Could you describe how a PLC influences these supports?

5. **Learning Community**: A “learning community’s” focus on continuous learning can mean a lot of different things to school leaders and school organizations. Could you please describe examples of continuous learning in the Barrington PLC?

6. **Decision-Making**: Shared or participatory decision making is a goal of professional learning communities. Could you please describe examples of how shared or participatory decision making is reflected in your leadership?

a. Follow up: Could you please describe examples of if/how shared decision making works in your school?

7. **Trust**: There is a lot of school leadership research on the relationship between trust and collaboration. Could you please describe examples of the role trust plays in your leadership?

a. Follow up: Could you describe examples of how you build and/or maintain trust with parents, teachers, and students within a PLC?

b. Follow up: Could you describe examples of how trust influences collaboration in your building between parents, teachers, and students?

8. **Communication**: Effective communication is a central tenet of successful school
leadership. Could you describe examples of how you communicate with various groups including parents, teachers, students and the community?

a. Follow up: Can you describe examples of communicating successfully?

b. Follow up: Can you describe examples of communicating unsuccessfully?

9. **Reflection**: Reflecting on your experiences as a successful school leader in a PLC, could you describe an example of one thing about your school leadership experience that you would change and could you please explain your reasons for changing it? This change could be anything including an experience, how you responded in a situation, a relationship with a teacher, parent, a personal style, a professional decision.

10. What **advice** would you give to a school leader who is:

    a. Developing a PLC?

    b. Implementing a PLC?

    c. Sustaining a PLC?
Appendix C: Transcription & Data Analysis Protocol

Participant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part Of audio tape</th>
<th>Question asked By the researcher (include time on the tape)</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Explanatory Comments</th>
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Appendix D: Member Check Email

Dear ________:

Thank you very much for taking the time last June to be interviewed for my dissertation study exploring leadership in the Barrington Public Schools Professional Learning Community.

Analyzed using a Phenomenological methodology, your interview was transcribed by me, read and re-read and combined with the interviewed thoughts, beliefs, views and feelings of 5 school leader participants who are either serving or who have at one time served as a school leader in the Barrington Public Schools Professional Learning Community.

This is the last stage in the data analysis process.

At your convenience, would you please confirm the information below you expressed at the June interview.

Would you please answer YES or NO indicating if you still believe the following to be true based on your thoughts, beliefs, views and feelings.

If the answer is no, please describe why.

Thank you very much,

Suzanne Costa

Thematic Questions – please confirm you June interview responses by answering yes or no. If no, please explain why.

1. **Staff Capacity**: YES or NO

   Do you believe that building staff capacity is/was a priority of your school leadership in the BPS PLC? Do you believe building staff capacity includes – for example – use of outside experts for professional development, recognizing achievement to celebrate and motivate success, ensuring all staff are educated in PLC concepts. Do you believe in the exceptionality and professionalism of the Barrington Public School staff? Do you believe that collaboration builds staff capacity?

2. **Organizational Management**: YES or NO

   Do you believe you relied on past experience as well as knowledge of PLC principles to create structures and processes that support improved individual and collective capacity of your staff and school/district? Do you believe proper management of the school/district is a reality of leadership? Do you believe good management practices
include – for example – being visible, creating teams, effective scheduling, creating Common Planning Time, establishing norms. Do you believe managerial tasks ultimately support a PLC?

3. **Shaping a Culture for Learning: YES or NO**

Do you have a commitment to student-centered decision making and an authentic implementation of data driven interventions? Do you have respect for students and a philosophical and moral commitment to empower a school culture that first and foremost supports students and their learning? Do you have first-hand knowledge of successful interventions and embrace the use of data to measure student achievement and guide instruction? Do you concede developing a school culture is challenging and affirm that collaboration is important to ensure the best educational opportunities for all students? Does collaboration sustain you in your pursuit of what is best for students?

4. **Sharing Distributive Leadership: YES or NO**

Do you acknowledge the educational benefits of distributive leadership in the BPS PLC? Do you confirm a personal and professional commitment to shared decision making and believe that when multiple people have shared responsibility for leadership and learning, every Barrington student succeeds? Do you recognize the positive influences of school leader’s trust and effective communication on shared decision making? Do you credit the professionalism of the staff, their willingness to participate as active team leaders, as well as their hard work with the implementation of improved teaching and learning in the shared decision making environment in the BPS PLC?

5. **Modeling Learning & Growth: YES or NO**

Do you agree that the remodeled partnerships of shared decision making in the BPS PLC does not preclude or replace the necessity of effective school leaders? Do you agree that the following qualities and characteristics are valued in effective school leaders - respect, being positive and staying resilient, communicating, trust, a need to confront issues, lifelong learning and continued growth? Would you characterize school leadership in the BPS PLC as focused on building and sustaining trust, value dependent, proactive, positive and very rewarding for school leaders?

6. **Championing System Wide Reform: YES or NO**

Do you agree that there are challenges to leading system wide reform such as implementing and sustaining PLC initiatives? Do you embrace your role as a change agent? Do you rely on your experience with proven educational change strategies, your understanding of the resistance forces to change, and your knowledge of PLC principles to lead school improvement in your school/district? Are you aware and purposeful about moving your school/district forward?