VETERAN ELEMENTARY TEACHERS COLLABORATING IN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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Abstract

The outcome of this inquiry assists in understanding how veteran teachers view participating in a Professional Learning Community (PLC) and how their strengths could be utilized in this context within an elementary school setting.

Findings revealed that a PLC was useful for providing a foundation for collaboration and adult learning among veteran teachers at this school. The teachers said that as they participated, they became reinvigorated, increased their knowledge of instructional practices, and experienced positive student outcomes; they also noted an improved school culture. While PLCs have become common in secondary schools, one of the study’s greatest challenges was to implement and sustain a PLC despite the common planning-time dilemma that exists at this and many other elementary schools.

Keywords: professional learning communities, learning organizations, veteran teachers, teacher autonomy, collaboration, educational reform, Guided Reading, social development theory, andragogy.
This dissertation is lovingly dedicated to:

My husband, Charles “Chuck” Bailey Jr.

My children, Erin Kathleen Bailey and Connor Patrick Bailey

My parents, Wilfred “Fred” and Kathleen Demers

With deepest appreciation for your constant support, encouragement, and love as you helped me fulfill this doctoral journey.
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Chapter 5: Conclusions

Teacher Participation in a PLC

Impact

Classroom practices enhanced

High expectations promoted

Student-centered learning

Veteran teachers’ perceptual changes

Trust and empowerment

Cultural shift

Sustaining a PLC

The role of school leadership

School support of a PLC

Time and scheduling

Reflection

Teachers re-invigorated

Implementing new programs

Leadership role

Recommendations

Conclusion

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Background

Reformers have sought to improve education for America’s public school students for hundreds of years using a variety of methods. These methods are often referred to as educational reforms, and it is this tradition of continually seeking to better education that motivated this research proposal. A controversial line from the education report *A Nation at Risk* that has shocked and propelled stakeholders over the past several decades refers to “a rising tide of mediocrity” in education in this country (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). More recently Elmore (2007) found that a recurring problem in education is that “teaching and learning in U.S. schools and classrooms is, in its most common form, emotionally flat and intellectually undemanding and unengaging” (p.12).

Although educational leaders, politicians, researchers, and policy makers have argued, proposed, and implemented numerous attempted solutions over time, it is teachers who have been most directly affected by these reforms. One of the most recent and observable changes has been a shift from traditionally autonomous teaching approaches to practices that are more collaborative in nature. Study findings reveal that working collaboratively is worthwhile for veteran teachers, impacting them personally as well as professionally.

Problems of Practice

Even though collaborative strategies are recommended as ‘best instructional practices’ by experts in the field of education, veteran teachers have long been described as unwilling to change or alter their traditional autonomous practices. Many researchers, including Buffum and Hinman (2006), have suggested that it is reasonable that many veteran teachers have become both complacent and distrustful due to their experiences with the various reform movements over the decades of their careers. The constant introduction of supposedly revolutionary reforms and
subsequent failure of these reforms to have significant positive impact has lead veteran teachers to be doubtful of innovation.

For school leaders who are focused on improving student outcomes, research has more recently suggested the importance of establishing a culture in which teachers work collaboratively to adopt research-based teaching practices (DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker, 2008). As demonstrated in this study, a well-respected vehicle for developing this collaborative educator practice can be fostered through the creation of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) within a school setting. According to DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many (2006), leading researchers in this field, a PLC is defined as:

Educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. PLCs operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for educators (p.14).

This study investigates the impact of adopting this well-regarded practice with veteran teachers in an urban elementary setting in order to highlight the positive outcomes for students and make recommendations for supporting and enhancing these collaborative practices.

**Significance of the Problem**

Shifting or adjusting instructional practices with veteran educators is often challenging due to teachers’ experiences with the ebb and flow of various reform movements over the course of their careers. Throughout this country, teachers often “see themselves as pawns, subject to the whims of local, state and federal mandates” (Buffum and Hinman, 2006, p. 16). As a result, Buffum and Hinman (2006) have suggested that it is understandable that many veteran teachers have become both complacent and cynical. They have endured a multitude of educational reforms and numerous superintendents and principals with various “visions;” these varying initiatives, coupled with inadequate funding, large class sizes, few support staff, arduous state
testing, little planning time, poor conditions of facilities, lack of technology, and outdated textbooks and materials, have conspired to promote teacher pessimism. Buffum and Hinman (2006) warned educational leaders that “no longer can a teaching staff be asked to implement the reform *du jour*” (p. 16).

Given this history, these authors suggested that if the warranted educational improvement is to occur, it is teachers who “must both take and be given the responsibility to determine the path that will lead to the academic success of their students” (Buffum and Hinman, 2006, p. 16). Many researchers have discussed the importance of a paradigm shift toward teacher collaboration, a practice that should be sustained no matter what other reforms are introduced or as leaderships come and go (Barth, 1990; Buffum & Hinman, 2006; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; DuFour, 2004; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many, 2006; DuFour, DuFour & Eaker, 2008; Eaker, DuFour & DuFour, 2002; Fullan, 1985, 1995, 2001, 2008; Giles & Hargreaves, 2006; Hinman, 2006-2007; Hipp, Huffman, Pankake & Olivier, 2008; Hord, 1997; Kosová, 2010; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace & Thomas, 2006; Watts & Castle, 1992; and Wells, 2008). Coinciding with findings in this study, teachers who have been involved in the development of a PLC report they have the opportunity and “responsibility to determine the path that will lead to the academic success of their students” (Buffum and Hinman, 2006, p. 16).

The West Colonial School, the site of this study, educates a predominantly middle-class, Caucasian population of 285 students. When compared to their peers in other elementary schools in this urban setting, the majority of students’ families report to have a higher socioeconomic status. These demographics have often led to an expectation that students in this school should be attaining higher levels of performance. However, on state tests, students in this school have scored lower in comparison to students of similar demographics from neighboring communities. Over the past decade, instructional practices in this school have been sufficient to
allow the school to meet or come close to meeting its Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System’s (MCAS) Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) requirement. These efforts, however, have not provided the instructional interventions necessary to meet the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s (DESE) more recent measures of individual student academic growth. In addition, the tradition of strong student performance and favorable perceptions of the West Colonial School did not challenge teachers to change their autonomous instructional practices. Prior to this study, teachers had not been offered opportunities for reflective dialogue and collaboration that a PLC offers.

Literature has demonstrated the success of PLCs in secondary school settings where there is an inherent amount of common planning time to support collaboration. Watts and Castle (1992) discussed that the lack of time is “one of the most difficult problems faced by schools and districts engaged in restructuring” (p. 2). These authors believed school leaders across the state and country must get creative with schedules and common planning for teachers if their efforts to support sustainable change are to succeed. Up until this time, researchers have not clearly identified ways to support teachers in an elementary setting who are attempting to make use of this transformative practice. This study responds to that gap in the literature as it uncovers teachers’ perceptions and explores their needs as they experienced the PLC collaborative practices in an elementary setting.

At the time of this study, West Colonial School was home to an all-female staff; seventeen out of eighteen would be considered veteran teachers, having taught at least fifteen years. Kardos, Johnson, Peske, Kauffman, & Liu, (2001) describe veteran teachers as fairly efficient and minimally involved in the school who view their work as a job, as opposed to a profession. Experienced teachers like those at West Colonial School are often found to be a part of a “veteran-oriented culture” where teachers develop habits over time refuse to change them (Kardos, et al., 2001). “Typically, veteran-oriented cultures, which ranged from friendly to cold,
accommodated many experienced teachers who operated independently and with little effect on each other’s teaching” (p.261). While some of these teachers are looked upon as “expert” and “effective,” the authors suggest that many do not feel the need or responsibility to interact with or in support of other teachers (Kardos et al., 2001, p.261). This practice often results in a limited number of teacher-suggested innovations in a school. The study at West Colonial Elementary School rested on the belief that a school environment should not be a place for teachers to become complacent in their instructional practices but a motivating culture where veteran teachers can share their experiences and expertise and learn from their colleagues. Based on what experts suggest, it’s reasonable to think that if new approaches or innovations, such as those associated with a PLC, are not adopted at West Colonial School, student performance will remain unchanged and below expectations. Accordingly, this project investigates how a group of veteran teachers perceived their participation and the effectiveness of a PLC in improving teaching and learning.

This research project documented veteran teachers’ perceptions of the founding of a PLC at West Colonial School as they experienced organized and effective collaborative practices for the first time. Buffum and Hinman (2006) posited that when veteran teachers collaborate with each other about why some students struggle academically, it revitalizes the purpose of their careers. This PLC allowed the practitioners at the West Colonial School to examine the real-life educational problems at the school that were closest to them; these experienced teachers collaborated to make change, improve instructional practices, and increase student achievement.

This qualitative study was conceived as a phenomenology in order to allow the researcher to understand the perspectives of the participants who shared their experiences while participating in the PLC. The researcher documented the perceptions of the subjects’ participation in a Professional Learning Community composed primarily of veteran elementary school teachers as they collaborated to implement Daily 5 Guided Reading practices.
**Positionality Statement**

The researcher in this study was also the principal at the West Colonial School. It was essential that study participants understood the dual roles; it was explained explicitly that their participation in the study would not be evaluative in nature. As the principal and evaluator of teachers, the researcher understood she had power and influence over the teachers due to the nature of the position; likewise, the teachers in the study had more years of teaching experience. The school leader acknowledged this dichotomy and stated that her role as researcher would be used solely to understand how school leaders could best support veteran teachers as they participated in a PLC. The researcher’s goals mirrored the principal’s viewpoint in anticipation that teachers would improve their own instructional practices, increase their awareness of different types of practices, and improve student outcomes as they worked together in a collaborative setting.

**Intellectual and Practical Goals**

The primary intellectual goal of this research project was to understand how veteran teachers viewed participating in a PLC. Additionally, these understandings could be utilized to suggest collaborative practices to improve student performance in similar contexts. An equally important and practical goal of this study was to gain insight into how school principals may support veteran teachers as they participate in change initiatives – such as the initiation and development of a PLC in an elementary school.

**Research Questions**

In order to accomplish this study’s goals, the research project pursued the following empirical research questions: 1) How do veteran elementary teachers describe how their participation in a PLC informs their practice? and 2) How do veteran teachers describe participation in PLCs in an elementary school? The outcome of this inquiry assisted the researcher in understanding how veteran teachers viewed participating in a Professional Learning
Community (PLC) and how these understandings could be utilized in improving collaborative practices in similar contexts.

Contents and Organization

This study report begins with the presentation of a theoretical framework. Andragogy, Social Development Theory, and a theory based on individuals' long-term responses to educational reform form its theoretical framework. A literature review follows which includes discussions of research related to educational reform, veteran teachers, professional learning communities, and Guided Reading. These bodies of literature were investigated to provide a thorough understanding of the problem and a background and context for this research project. A research design influenced by the theoretical framework and extant literature is then presented. This qualitative study through a phenomenological approach uncovered teachers' experiences while participating in a PLC. Procedures designed for the protection of study participants will be outlined. This is followed by a detailed outline of the study’s findings and a chapter devoted to a discussion of study’s outcomes and recommendations for practice and future research.

Theoretical Framework

Andragogy, Social Development Theory, and conclusions based on educational reform and teachers' responses to change were instrumental in conceptualizing and organizing this investigation into the implementation of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) with veteran teachers. Each lens helped frame the approach, the understanding of the problem, the type of research questions asked, and the kind of interventions developed to support a collaborative educator environment participating in a culture of learning with the goal of ultimately improving student achievement.

Andragogy. There is no one theory or model of adult learning. Scholars and practitioners have studied and written about adult learning since the 1920s, when adult education became a professional field of practice (Merriam, 2001). Merriam (2001) found that until the
mid-twentieth century, insights about the way adults learned were extrapolated from research with children or research that placed adults under the same conditions as children (p. 4).

Andragogy emerged as a new focus to develop a knowledge base that was unique to adult learning. It was defined by Malcolm Knowles (1980) as the “art and science of helping adults learn” (p. 43). Knowles (1980) described the adult learner as one who

1. has an independent self-concept and who can direct his or her own learning,
2. has accumulated a reservoir of life experiences that is a rich resource for learning,
3. has learning needs closely related to changing social roles,
4. is problem-centered and interested in immediate application of knowledge, and
5. is motivated to learn by internal rather than external factors. (p. 47)

Andragogy emphasizes that adults are self-directed learners and expect to take responsibility for their decisions. This study utilized this definition of the theory to examine the establishment of a PLC and how it meets or does not meet the needs of the adult learners in this elementary school.

Lorge’s (1944, 1947) research revealed adult learning to be related to prior education and skills, not to age alone. In these studies, adults up to age 70 did as well as younger adults on learning tasks when time limits were removed (Merriam, 2001). In this view, a PLC should be established that will structure learning opportunities that focus on veteran teachers’ prior knowledge and ability to learn rather than speed or rate of learning. When establishing a PLC, considerations apart from typical adult learning come into play as a result of the specific conditions of the teaching profession. Kosová (2010) claims that there is a difference between the way adults learn and the way teachers learn as a result of specific conditions of the teaching profession, such as teachers’ experiences of “isolation from colleagues, the shortage of formative feedback, the non-existence of team work and low self-confidence” (p. 173). The andragogy lens would suggest that a PLC for veteran teachers be infused with practices to address these
conditions. Next, Social Development Theory discusses the merit of social engagement for adult learners.

**Social development theory.** Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) was a Russian psychologist who established the Social Development Theory. This theory, largely unknown to the west until published in 1962, contains several themes, such as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO), and social interaction; however, here are two specific concepts that will be helpful to consider for this study. The first is that social interaction plays a major role in the development of cognition. Learning is enhanced when it is done in one’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and with the assistance of the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO). The ZPD refers to the difference between what a learner can do independently and with assistance. The assistance comes from a teacher, mentor, or coach, also known as the MKO; this person has a greater understanding or capacity than the learner with respect to a particular task, procedure, or concept.

This theory implies that when people interact with others, they more naturally absorb and strengthen knowledge than they might when learning on their own. This would suggest that teachers will better be able to acquire effective instructional practices when they are able to interact or reflect upon social experiences and other interactive learning with their colleagues. By acknowledging that teachers bring their unique backgrounds, levels of expertise, and numbers of years of experience, the study aims to employ Vygotsky’s notion of Proximal Development, assuming the teachers served as one another’s MKOs. In this view, a teacher skilled in implementing workshop groups in the classroom, for example, can share knowledge with colleagues through job-embedded dialogue and professional development opportunities. Eun (2008) suggests that the establishment of a PLC should not only be considered an opportunity to gain new knowledge and skills but also to collaborate with peers and solve common problems through research and dialogue. The premise that the development of a PLC must include the
establishment of a clear vision and deliberate goals is intrinsic to this theory, and, as Eun (2008) states, “only concrete social interactions that are embedded in purposeful activities directed at achieving specific goals will drive development” (p. 143). In other words, without specific parameters and goals in place, the PLC will often fail to achieve the hoped-for positive results.

Further refining this view, this study aimed to identify the ZPD among staff members in the PLC. The ZPD is defined as the “space created between a more competent participant and a less competent participant (e.g., expert and novice, teacher and student, tutor and tutee) for the purpose of guiding the latter to the most proximal developmental level with the assistance of the former” (Eun, 2008, p. 142). Specifically, this is the space between where a learner is, developmentally, and where that learner could be with the help of a “More Knowledgeable Other.” The MKO is often a peer who helps a learner structure, or “scaffold,” the learning process. Scaffolding occurs when teachers utilize specialized supportive teaching strategies when introducing a new concept. Using the concepts of Vygotsky’s social learning and the MKO, teachers involved in the PLC have built-in opportunities to plan their learning goals and to work collaboratively to build skills and gain more knowledge than they could on their own.

The next section will provide contextual understanding of educational change, policy, and research efforts in improving student achievement.

**Educational reform and change.** The third theoretical approach, loosely described as *educational reform* and *change*, is based on various theories of educational reform and leadership and includes the work of authors such as Senge, Hord, Fullan, Hargreaves and Fink, and Stoll, McMahon and Thomas. Within this context, professional learning communities represent one of the more innovative approaches to change and sustainability in schools. Through this lens, teachers in this study were viewed distinctly as adult learners experiencing learning in a social setting while developing those collaborative practices associated with a PLC.
Teachers' practices developed from self-interested, autonomous learning practices to those that support interaction, collaboration, and learning with colleagues.

Educational reform has a long and well-documented history. Elmore (2007) describes the early 1910s to the 1940s as the “Progressive Period,” a time in which noted intellectuals, John Dewey in particular, developed ideas about how schools might be different, and these ideas found their way into classrooms and schools (p. 15). Dewey and other reformers wanted to move from teacher-centered, fact-centered, recitation-based pedagogy to a student-centered schooling system in the context of the real world (Elmore, 2007).

According to Fullan (2009), the 1950s and 1960s could be considered the “adoption era” because the federal government’s goal was to inundate school districts with reforms in anticipation of improved student outcomes. These curriculum reformers “envisioned teachers becoming coaches and co-investigators with students into the basic phenomena of the physical, biological, and social sciences” (Elmore, 2007, p.22). The government allocated large amounts of money for curriculum reforms, such as PSSC Physics, BSCC Biology, and MACOS Social Sciences, and organizational reforms, such as open plan schools, flexible scheduling, and team teaching (Fullan, 2009). In the early 1970s, researchers documented the failure of these reforms and schools backed off on reform, since “putting ideas into practice was a far more complex process than people realized” (Fullan, 2009, p. 103). While there were a few exemplars of positive change, Elmore (2009) agreed with Fullan (2009) in attributing the failure to the fact that “reformers assumed that a ‘good’ product would travel into U.S. classrooms on the basis of its merit, without regard for the complex institutional and individual factors that might constrain its ability to do so.”

In the 1960s and 1970s, “equity-based reforms” centered on students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including those with physical and intellectual concerns, and those for whom English as a second language (Elmore, 2007). Many of today’s well established programs
including Head Start, Job Corps, subsidized school lunches, and Title One began during this era. According to Gelbrich (1999), teachers were encouraged to move away from the text books and offer a more student-centered curriculum that included flexible scheduling, student choices, individualized instruction and non-graded schools. The federal government passed PL 94-142 in 1975; this law required a free and appropriate education to all handicapped children and individualized educational plans to meet their needs. In the same year, Title IX of the Education Amendments Act required equal access to programs, predominantly sports programs, regardless of gender (Gelbrich, 1999). Since these curriculum reform movements did not have the intended positive student outcomes, as evidenced by lower test scores, enrollment decline, and an overall lack of confidence in teachers, there was “a strong back to the basics curriculum movement emphasizing reading, writing, and arithmetic computation along with teacher accountability” (Gelbrich, 1999).

The 1980s and 1990s were characterized by school accountability, standardization, and the federal government’s mounting involvement with educational issues. This was a direct result of A Nation at Risk, an influential report written in 1983 which portrayed American schools as inadequate and failing (Olsen and Sexton, 2009). The report stated, “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war” (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 1). This report prompted federal and state politicians to hold schools more accountable as they developed educational policies. The standards-based reform movements gained momentum in the 1990s during the presidencies of G.H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton (Kean, 2003).

President G.W. Bush’s administration developed National Educational Goals, known as Goals 2000, which turned into a national K-12 education policy prompting policy makers to provide incentives to states for creating their own accountability systems. They also passed the
No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), which incorporated many of the ideals presented in the 1980s and 1990s. Kean (2003) discusses that the NCLB strategies included increased accountability for states, school districts, and schools. The law also emphasized the importance of reading for young children and gave parents and students greater options if they were attending low-performing schools.

Under President Barrack Obama, leaders examined the shortcomings of NCLB and created an additional competitive approach entitled Race to the Top as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act signed into law in 2009 (Martin and Lazáro, 2011). Individual states were encouraged to meet the specific rigorous criteria presented by the law to compete for federal grant money.

All of the reforms discussed have generally been one of three types: structural, process, or content (Kean, 2003). Kean (2003) describes structural reforms as changes in the configuration of education, such as longer school days, smaller class sizes, magnet schools, charter schools, or a middle school versus a junior high school. The author defines process reform as “the way in which teachers teach and students learn” (Kean, 2003, p. 4), examples of which include team teaching and reading recovery. Content reform affects the subject matter that teachers teach, including phonics versus whole language approaches to reading, new math, and standards-based education (Kean, 2003). Some restructuring agendas have combined the types of reforms. The educational debates have continued while the federal government continues to question its role in the state’s educational mandates. Meanwhile, teachers across the United States have continued to alter their instructional practices in response to these external influences (Williams & Nur-Awaleh, 2010).

Over the last several decades, researchers and practitioners have studied how to re-conceptualize schools and take new approaches to improve teaching and learning. Researchers such as Darling-Hammond (1996), DuFour and Eaker (1998), Hord (1997), Senge (1990), and
Stoll, et al. (2003) have suggested definitions and images of what schools should look like.
Darling-Hammond (1996) asserts that policies, regulations, and reform efforts will not transform schools; she suggests that, instead, teachers collaborating—in a PLC, for example—is what will transform schools. The author states: schools are now expected to not only offer education, but to ensure learning. Teachers are expected not only to ‘cover the curriculum’ but to create a bridge between the needs of each learner and the attainment of challenging learning goals. (p. 5)

Wells (2008) suggests that continual large-scale educational reform efforts have been viewed as unproductive because there has been little change in student performance and school culture. Fullan (2001) posits that the efforts to introduce PLCs will be different because they look at changing the culture of the school at a deeper level, altering deep-rooted traditional practices.

According to Wells (2008), what makes PLCs a most meaningful effort in current educational reform practices is that it is “an effort to create schools that respond to student learning with an emphasis on success for every student, through the intentional, collegial learning of staff” (p. 26). Hord (1997) frames PLCs as the professional staff learning together to direct their efforts toward improved student learning (Hipp, et al., 2008, p. 175).

**Conclusion**

These concepts of Andragogy, Social Development Theory, and the evolution of educational reform and change form a framework that focuses on adults as learners and on social engagement as a learning tool within a landscape of educational change. As a result of these integrated theories, this study rests on the belief that in order to improve student outcomes, schools must become a place not only where the students learn but where the teachers do as well.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

I have already established the framework of andragogy, Social Development Theory, and educational reform and change and how it points to the necessity of moving toward instructional improvement utilizing the interaction of adults in a collaborative, supportive school environment. Schools ought to be a place where not only the students learn but the faculty does as well. Based on this understanding, this literature review pursued the following interrogation: 1) How are PLCs introduced and developed in schools? Specifically, how may this be adapted to an elementary school? 2) How may experienced teachers become engaged in collaborative practices? What are effective strategies to do this? What motivates veteran teachers to increase their performance? 3) How can the school leadership support a PLC? How can PLCs inform or shape professional development? 4) What is Guided Reading? What supports it? What are the obstacles?

A literature review relevant to establishing a Professional Learning Community (PLC) in an urban elementary school consisted of multiple strands of inquiry. It began with an investigation of the characteristics, strengths, and needs of veteran teachers. Next, it included a discussion of the characteristics and theoretical foundation for PLCs. Lastly, it examined the literature regarding Guided Reading as an instructional practice.

Veteran Teachers

This literature review discussed the characteristics, strengths, and needs of veteran teachers. For the purposes of this study, these individuals are considered to be teachers who have at least 15 years of experience teaching. This strand of inquiry is significant, as the staff of the research study site consisted of predominantly veteran teachers. This discussion investigated possible ways to assist and support veteran teachers in changing, adjusting, and learning new instructional practices while participating in a PLC.
**Characteristics.** The OECD’s report *Teachers Matter* (2005) indicated that there is an aging of the teaching workforce internationally. According to this report, on average, 25% of primary/elementary teachers and 30% of secondary teachers are over 50 years old, and in some countries over 40% of teachers are in this age bracket, (OECD, 2005, p. 4). In many countries there has been a challenge to retain veteran educators, especially in underprivileged locations, and there are also serious problems with high staff turnover and attrition (OECD, 2005, p. 9). This report was significant as it discussed the importance of retaining quality teachers over time, and it also highlighted the importance of professional development. While teaching is a demanding profession, the report concluded that teachers should be given the professional development and support to sustain their careers. Elmore (2007) asserted that existing educational norms about teachers’ experience and knowledge work against improvement. “The belief that experience alone increases expertise in teaching, … works against the possibility that new knowledge can dramatically improve teaching practice” (p. 126). Day and Gu (2009) agreed with Elmore in that experience doesn’t necessarily equate to proficiency. “…although veteran teachers may have experienced many years of teaching and become proficient in routines in their classrooms and schools, they will not necessarily have become expert teachers” (Day & Gu, 2009, p. 446).

There is a lack of cohesion or agreement about exactly how to characterize and work with an experienced educator workforce. Veteran teachers are experienced educators who have served in the profession for a lengthy period of time. There is a gap in the literature as to what constitutes the length of experience which qualifies a teacher to be identified as a “veteran” (Day & Gu, 2009, p. 445). Some researchers, such as Rich & Almozlino (1999), considered teachers veterans after only seven years of experience; Day and Gu (2009) suggested a veteran teacher is one with 24 years experience, while others (Cohen, 1988) studied teachers who had worked 35 years or more. Veteran teachers are often placed on a figurative pedestal and viewed as the key
players of a successful school. Conversely, they can be criticized as standing in the way of innovation and progress; their years of experience is said to lead to burn-out and lack of passion.

**Challenges.** Researchers Day and Gu sought to understand the work and lives of veteran teachers in their 2009 study. Throughout their careers, veteran teachers are faced with professional, situational, and private demands that may challenge their values, beliefs, practices, and, for some, their willingness to remain in the job; for others, their ability to continue to do their best in the classroom is compromised as their dedication becomes worn (Day & Gu, 2009, p. 442). Additionally, Day and Gu asserted that policy and social reforms, changing leaders and students, as well as the aging process and unanticipated private conditions are all factors that affect veteran teachers’ experiences. “The persistence of such combinations of challenges, which are part of the experience of most of those who work for prolonged periods of their lives in one occupation, may have begun to take its toll on the motivation, commitment and resilience which are essential to the willingness and capacity of teachers to maintain teaching at its best” (Day & Gu, 2009, p. 442).

Day and Gu (2009) also emphasized that as teachers age, they are in danger of losing passion for their job. Hargreaves (2007) asserted that large-scale educational reforms often leave senior teachers “seeking refuge by romancing the past.” These experienced educators often do not feel valued as their traditional practices are viewed as being stumbling blocks for student achievement. This lack of respect leaves veteran educators jaded and cynical with regard to innovation. “Unlearning old practices in which we feel effective and exchanging them for new ones in which our initial competence is low is neither comfortable nor pleasant” (Hargreaves, 2007, p. 230). Hargreaves (2007) agreed with Kardos, Johnson, Peske, Kauffman and Liu (2001) that veteran teachers are more comfortable holding onto the past, and a new teacher who may present new ideas and innovations may be ignored by this veteran culture. Veteran teachers are said to possess a “set ways of doing things, memories about the past, shared understandings
about what is possible, and practiced strategies about how to make things happen or how to resist change” (Kardos, Johnson, Peske, Kauffman, and Liu, 2001, p. 256). Evans (1996) cited Schein (1992) in observing that

during an organization’s birth and early growth, its culture begins as a distinctive competence, a source of identity, the “glue” that holds things together. When an organization reaches maturing – the stage that characterizes most schools – its culture generally becomes a constraint on innovation and a defense against new influences. (p. 46)

Veteran teachers are often accustomed to teaching in isolation. Wells (2008) asserted that as teachers begin to work together to learn best practices, they will begin to develop strategies for student success and their own isolation is broken down. “To be sure, high quality instruction depends upon the competence and attitudes of each individual teacher. But in addition, teachers’ individual knowledge, skills and dispositions must be put to use in an organized, collective enterprise” (King and Newmann, 2001, p. 89). The literature supported the collaboration of veteran teachers with their colleagues to design solutions and suggest a course of action to address educational challenges. Veteran teachers possess many strengths that can contribute to accomplishing this goal; this will be discussed in greater depth in the following section.

**Strengths.** In Cohen’s (2009) study, she found that veteran teachers bring important influences and support to a school setting; her research highlighted a positive view of veteran teachers. Cohen’s results revealed that both teachers studied possessed a “hardiness and a narcissism that inures them against daily psychic assaults” (p. 489). Additionally, she viewed these individuals as “happy teachers” who appreciated intrinsic (vs. extrinsic) rewards and who could rise above daily struggles, poor pay, and complex working conditions; they preferred the intangible sense of “doing good” (Boles & Troen, 2000; Latham, 1998; Ma & MacMillan, 1999).
Other researchers have found that many urban veteran teachers possess similar positive characteristics (Bain & Jacobs, 1990; Brophy, 1982; Brophy & Good, 1986; Delpit, 1995; Freiberg, Prokosch, Treister, Stein, & Opuni, 1989; Garcia, 1988; Haberman, 1987; Irvine, 1990; and Pasch et al., 1993), including an acknowledgment that it is “not easy” to improve student outcomes, a refusal to give up on their students, an innate flexibility, concern with aligning instruction to standards and assessment, and a willingness to change their practices to ensure that students are learning concepts and skills as outlined in state and district standards (Stotko, Ingram, & Beaty-O’Ferrall, 2007). Cohen (2009) described this type of veteran teachers as collegial with faculty and administration, confident with the professional development provided to them, and compassionate and patient.

Consistent with Vygotsky’s theory of the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO), scholars have asserted that veteran teachers should be utilized as mentors because “at least in theory, [veteran educators] should be at the peak of their expertise and teaching wisdom. … [and] should be providing a model for their less experienced colleagues” (Day & Gu, 2009, 455). Veteran teachers fulfill an important need in schools when they serve as mentors to new and younger teachers. Fluckiger, McGlamery, and Edick (2006) agreed that when veteran teachers act as mentors they may have the capacity to promote teacher retention by providing “needed support and collegiality by helping new teachers gain perspective and encouragement, implement strategies to get started, avoid isolation and manage workload,” p. 9.

Veteran teachers can share their wisdom and practical knowledge with colleagues by offering a range of support from guidance about classroom management techniques to effective instructional strategies. Iancu-Haddad & Oplatka (2009) asserted that veteran teachers utilize “their organizational influence” and years of experience to assist their protégés. In addition, mentoring also gives veteran teachers an opportunity to gain new instructional practices or
innovations that are demonstrated by novice teachers from their teaching training programs (Iancu-Haddad & Oplatka, 2009).

This study aimed to employ Vygotsky’s notion of the Zone of Proximal Development, where each teacher could be considered another’s More Knowledgeable Other (MKO). The ZPD is based on the view that “a space is created between a more competent participant and a less competent participant for the purpose of guiding the latter to the most proximal developmental level with the assistance of the former” (Eun, 2008, p. 142). In this view, a teacher skilled in Guided Reading for example, can share knowledge with colleagues, or mentor, through job-embedded dialogue and professional development opportunities. Eun (2008) said that as teachers engage in the MKO process, both participants will learn and grow from the experience. Using the concepts of Vygotsky’s social learning and the MKO, teachers involved in a PLC could have built-in opportunities to plan their learning goals, and work collaboratively to build skills and gain more knowledge than what they could gather on their own. Additionally, there are many other practical ways to support veteran teachers that will be described in the next section.

Support. Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) suggested that veteran teachers need additional support and professional development in order to change the traditional practices and belief systems that have dominated their careers. “The benefit of experience may interact with educational opportunities. Veteran teachers in settings that emphasize continual learning and collaboration continue to improve their performance” (Darling-Hammond, 2000, p. 6).

Cohen (2009) found that veteran teachers remain “invested and enthusiastic about their work when they feel supported and encouraged” (p. 473). Rosenholtz (1984) agreed and continued that when teachers feel approval from their peers, there is a greater chance that they will continue with their career. “Experienced teachers in collegial settings are more likely to perceive themselves as influential and skilled than experienced teachers in isolated settings”
According to Natale (1993), support can be offered in a variety of ways, including mentoring programs, team-teaching, career staging, and merit pay.

Researchers, including Iancu-Haddad and Oplatka (2009) and Tauer (1998), have found that veteran teachers also benefit from the mentoring experience through self-reflection and mutual cooperation. Tauer’s (1998) study revealed that several of the veteran teacher participants said that mentoring assisted in their personal and professional development. “Three of the (experienced teacher) participants in the successful relationships… did experience change in their thinking or in their attitudes about their teaching or themselves” (Tauer, 1998, p. 12). Iancu-Haddad and Oplatka (2009) suggested that veteran teachers may perceive the role of mentor as confirmation of his/her experienced rank and abilities. “As an experienced teacher the mentor should have the ability to foster the novice teacher’s learning and attend to his/her needs, while maintaining the curriculum and ensuring effective and meaningful student learning,” (Iancu-Haddad & Oplatka, 2009, p. 47).

Other than mentoring to fulfill a need, veteran teachers have many other desires. They need to be “respected as professionals; they need clean, attractive work environments; they need to sense themselves as empowered and empowering, without being overburdened by grunt-work” (Cohen, 2009, p. 489). Even though prioritizing the needs of these veteran teachers sounds counter-intuitive, Cohen (2009) asserted that “the trickle-down theory [that happy adults make happy children] makes so much sense in schools” (p. 489). There are school environments that are more conducive than others to meeting the needs of veteran teachers as part of a collaborative culture. This will be discussed in greater depth in the following section.

### Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

**Overview and characteristics of PLCs.** A second body of literature included in this review outlined the three main ideas about PLCs, the five characteristics of PLCs, and the phases of implementation. While a complete history of PLCs is beyond the scope of this project, a brief
sketch will help to contextualize this innovation. The literature discussed multiple definitions of a PLC; the commonalities in explanations include the faculty’s commitment to student learning, working in collaboration, and continuous reflection on student data. Wells (2008) agreed that within a PLC, teachers are actively collaborating, sharing their expertise, honing their own skills, and learning from each other. One researcher explained:

PLCs are an effort to create schools that respond to student learning with an emphasis on success for every student, through the intentional, collegial learning of staff. School districts are responding to current legislation and public expectation that they improve achievement levels of all students. Professional learning communities are a means to that end (Wells, 2008, p. 26).

PLCs have materialized over time from an assortment of sources. The features of inquiry, reflection, accountability, learning communities, and self-evaluation are all present in the concept of PLCs and are evident in the work of educational writers over the last century. For example, Dewey (1944) viewed teachers as gaining knowledge through inquiry. Additionally, Dewey, who was known for his philosophy of “learning by doing,” put his progressive model into practice by ensuring that his students were taught to work together to master skills instead of following a set curriculum (Bernard & Mondale, 2001, p. 209).

Building on these ideas, Stenhouse’s (1975) research focused on a teacher’s relationships with students as the central focus for student learning. In fact, teachers’ roles as active researchers in the curriculum development process and as initiators of dialogue with their students led to additional educational reforms in the 80s. By the late 80s, researchers were advocating for self-review as a way to improve the effectiveness of schools (McMahon, Bolam, Abbott & Holly, 1984).

In 1990, Peter Senge’s discussed in his book The Fifth Discipline how employees perform for leaders’ approval, rather than learning on their own to solve problems, and how this
practice leads to mediocre work performance. In reference to this phenomenon, Hord (2004) said:

Rather than reflecting trust in those across the organization to use their creativity in order to find localized solutions to problems – solutions that are consistent with the purpose and values of the overall organization – solutions are mandated that are poorly suited to the real problem at hand (p. 6).

As a result, Senge supported a different organizational structure to better meet an ever-changing and complex society. This paradigm shift focused on learning rather than mandated methods. The organization was designed to be one “where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together” (Senge, 1990, p. 3). Eventually, Senge’s learning organization paradigm was explored by educators and labeled a learning community (Hord, 2004).

Today, the term Professional Learning Community rises from the work of many researchers in the field of education. “The focus is not just on individual teachers’ professional learning but of professional learning within a community context – a community of learners, and the notion of collective learning” (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, Thomas, 2006, p. 225). Hord’s (1997) research at Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) enabled her to study the outcomes of a school that operated as a PLC. The results revealed a new paradigm supporting a collaborative school culture where a school faculty plans, learns, works, and takes action collectively. Educators from around the world are familiar with the PLC model, and this concept is currently being promoted as one of the top educational reform efforts to improvement student outcomes.

Numerous researchers and practitioners (Barth, 1990; Buffum and Hinman, 2006; Corcoran, 1995; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond & Richardson,
2009; DuFour, 2004; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many, 2006; DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker, 2002, 2008; Eun, 2008; Fullan, 1985, 1995, 2001, 2008; Giles and Hargreaves, 2006; King and Newmann, 2001; Kosová, 2010; Robinson, 2010; Senge, 1990; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace and Thomas, 2006; and Wells, 2008) have agreed that when colleagues have the opportunity to collaborate, there is a greater chance of success for common goals among team members. In fact, the lead PLC practitioners – DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2006) – posit that the very essence of a school learning community is the members’ commitment to focusing on the learning of each student as well as each other. In this view, members search for viable ways to achieve goals, and their efforts are assessed on results. Furthermore researchers, such as Barth (1990), Fullan (2008), Hord (1997), and Senge (1990), have said that PLCs, when fully supported, can produce exceptional results in instructional outcomes. “The most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is developing the ability of school personnel to function as professional learning communities” (Dufour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008, p.1). With its long historical background and strength of support behind it, three main ideas have risen that will be discussed in the next section.

**Main ideas.** This review of PLC literature delves into what Dufour (2004) referred to as three of the big ideas that epitomize the main focus of PLCs: ensuring students learn, a culture of collaboration, and a focus on results. “The very essence of a learning community is a focus on and a commitment to the learning of each student” (DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R., and Many, T., 2006). These authors posited that when a school functions as a PLC, the faculty takes responsibility and expects high levels of learning for all students.

This first big idea, *ensuring that students learn*, has gained attention in recent years as educators have shifted from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning. DuFour (2004) claimed that although school mission statements often promise “learning for all;” they are often clichés rather than reflective of existing practice. However, when PLC members within a school commit
to this, they pledge the success of each student and move forward as a group to answer the following questions:

“What do we want each student to learn? How will we know when each student has learned it? How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning?” (DuFour, 2004, p. 8). In relation to these questions, DuFour (2004) posited that when a school faculty fully addresses these inquiries, it transforms a traditional school into a PLC, and students reap the benefits. The final question, which focuses on the struggling student, is most impactful, as “teachers become aware of the incongruity between their commitment to ensure learning for all students and their lack of a coordinated strategy to respond when some students do not learn” (DuFour, 2004, p. 8). Furthermore, PLC members’ response to struggling students is timely, based on intervention rather than remediation, and directive (DuFour, 2004).

A PLC is composed of collaborative teams in which faculty rely on each other for support and are accountable to each other as they aim to achieve common goals (DuFour, et. al, 2006). This represents the second big idea, a culture of collaboration. Within the PLC, structures are put into place for faculty to engage in professional dialogue that extends beyond topics about social climate or operational procedures and focuses on instruction. “The powerful collaboration that characterizes professional learning communities is a systematic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practice” (DuFour, 2004, p. 9). As team members engage in a continuous cycle of inquiry, profound learning opportunities occur for them, and this process leads to notable gains in student achievement. Teachers are forthcoming about their goals, teaching practices, materials, pacing, questions, concerns, and results. “These discussions give every teacher someone to turn to and talk to and they are explicitly structured to improve the classroom practice of teachers – individually and collectively” (DuFour, 2004, p. 10). DuFour (2004) asserted that a devoted group of staff members, when given the proper
supports, will stop making common excuses, such as, “we just can’t find the time;” instead, they “will find a way” to collaborate and build the collaborative culture of a PLC.

The last big idea, a focus on results, occurs when “members of a PLC realize that all of their efforts must be assessed on the basis of results rather than intentions” (DuFour, et.al, 2006, p. 10). Working together on behalf of the students becomes routine for the staff; once the baseline student performance is identified, the team establishes a goal to improve on that current level of performance while providing evidence of the goal’s progress. Researchers such as DuFour (2004, 2006) and Senge (1994) have agreed that data is necessary to measure progress and needed to provide evidence to the team on a continual basis.

According to DuFour (2004), “Schools and teachers typically suffer from the DRIP syndrome – Data Rich/Information Poor. The results-oriented professional learning community not only welcomes data, but also turns data into useful and relevant information for staff” (p. 10). It is important and necessary that teachers utilize the data to evaluate how their students perform on particular skills in comparison with other students; this data needs to be practical and relevant to PLC members. As PLC members share a common goal of utilizing data, they collectively feel accountable for student outcomes within their collaborative setting, as will be described next.

**Five key characteristics.** PLC practices attempt to put an end to excuses about low student performance and seek to change the insulated practices of teachers. “Educators must stop working in isolation and hoarding their ideas, materials, and strategies and begin to work together to meet the needs of all students,” (DuFour, 2004, p. 11). As members of such collaborative efforts as PLCs, educators focus on results and stop blaming extraneous factors such as student discipline and staff morale for low performance data; all of their effort is focused on student learning. Hord (2004) and Louis, Kruse, & Bryk, (1995) have said that PLCs have five key characteristics: a) shared values and vision, b) collective responsibility, c) reflective professional inquiry, d) collaboration, and e) the promotion of group, as well as individual,
learning. According to Hord (2004) and Louis et al. (1995), these characteristics appear to be operating simultaneously in successful PLCs and are more fully described in the following section. Having *shared values and vision* guides members of a PLC toward their goals. “When a school or district functions as a PLC, educators embrace high levels of learning for all students as both the reason the organization exists and the fundamental responsibility of those who work within it” (DuFour, DuFour & Eaker, 2008, p. 15). Louis and his colleagues (1995) affirm that a shared value base provides a structure for colleagues to engage in moral decision making.

The next characteristic, *collective responsibility*, recognizes that PLCs hold all members accountable. It puts peer pressure on those who may not do their fair share and reduces teacher isolation. Researchers such as Louis, et al. (1995), and King and Newmann (2001) have agreed that within true PLCs, members readily take collective responsibility for student learning.

The third characteristic, *reflective professional inquiry*, is “reflective dialogue” according to Louis, et al. (1995). These are professional conversations that teachers conduct about educational concerns while also examining their own practices. They seek new knowledge (Hord, 2004) through relationships with each other (Fullan, 2001) while applying new concepts to action-based solutions that will help students succeed (Hord, 1997).

*Collaboration*, another of DuFour’s characteristics, means that when designing instruction, PLC participants have conversations with several people, and their exchanges go deeper than superficial interactions or requests for assistance (Louis et al., 1995). “In a PLC, collaboration is a systematic process in which teachers work together, interdependently to analyze and impact professional practice in order to improve results for their students, their team, and their school” (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2006, p. 16). Collaboration is an essential component of PLCs. “Feelings of interdependence are central to such collaboration: a goal of better teaching practices would be considered unachievable without collaboration, linking
collaborative activity and achievement of shared purpose” (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, and Thomas, 2006, p. 227).

Lastly, group, as well as individual, learning is promoted. In a PLC context, Louis and his colleagues (1995) asserted that teachers are learners with each other. “PLCs operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for educators” (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006).

Stoll, et al. (2006) agreed with these five characteristics and suggest three others that they consider vital to a successful PLC. These are mutual trust, respect, and support among faculty; inclusive membership; and openness, networks, and partnerships.

**Phases of implementation.** PLCs go through many phases of implementation as the practices become embedded in a school environment. Fullan (1985) discussed the internal and external factors that are influential at three distinct levels as a school faculty moves through the change process. During initiation phase, the group adopts the innovation and decides whether or not to proceed with the change; next is implementation, when faculty puts the innovation into practice; and finally, during institutionalization, the innovation becomes the norm. Some of the literature on the change process and educational reform says that it’s rare for schools to actually reach institutionalization, and Stoll, et al. (2006) argued that the term “institutionalization” does not stress continuous growth that is essential for change; rather they used the word *sustainability*, which more accurately embodies the literature and reveals how change happens.

Research on the success of PLCs is most fully situated in secondary school settings where there is an inherent amount of common planning time. Although collaborative practices benefit all school settings, there is little research addressing the utilization of PLC in elementary schools. This study attempts to respond to this gap in the research.
Guided Reading

The third area of literature – Guided Reading – was examined and summarized as it situates the context and focus of the PLC. West Colonial School’s district is mandating that all teachers utilize this reading strategy in their classrooms. This review outlines the definition and steps of Guided Reading, support for it, and the obstacles of implementation.

Steps. Fountas & Pinnell (1996) developed four steps to the Guided Reading approach. First, they suggested that teachers should *group students and select leveled books*. The students are grouped homogeneously by their instructional reading level; a book, selected by the teacher, matches that instructional reading. Each student receives his or her own copy during the lesson. Secondly, the teacher *introduces the book*. Students look at the cover by reading the title and author and discussing the topic. It may be necessary for the teacher to build background and vocabulary for students to comprehend the story. During the third step, the teacher *asks the students to read silently*. As the students read the book in meaningful sections, the teacher observes, takes notes, and provides support with word recognition, understanding unfamiliar sentence structures, and comprehension when needed. As the teacher monitors for comprehension, he or she may ask students questions, encourage predictions, or utilize other strategies. During the last step, the teacher will *discuss* the text with students. Students are encouraged to revisit the text and find evidence to support their claims, clarify, and problem solve. After the discussion, students can reread independently or with a partner to build fluency.

Schirmer and Schaffer (2010) found that Fountas & Pinnell’s four steps of Guided Reading were originally utilized as a model to support students in kindergarten through fourth grade who were independent or fluent readers and did not include the systematic instruction that struggling readers needed. These researchers suggested that “By also teaching new vocabulary words before reading and having students read material in segments (rather than a whole book at one sitting), teachers can provide explicit instruction on word recognition, complex syntax,
figurative language, new vocabulary, and text structure as needed before, during, and after reading” (Schirmer & Schaffer, 2010, p. 54).

Within the Guided Reading format, teachers establish homogenous groups to ensure that all students are reading at their instructional level. When applying a Guided Reading program, it is critical to distinguish between independent, instructional, and frustration level materials: When there is a match between current reading level and the readability of the material, instruction can be aimed at the students' *zone of proximal development* (Vygotsky, 1978) the distance between current developmental level, as indicated by independent problem solving, and potential developmental level that is possible with guidance from an adult or in collaboration with a more capable peer, in other words, the material is just difficult enough to offer opportunities to learn and apply new strategies with support from the teacher” (Schirmer & Schaffer, 2010, p. 54).

Schirmer & Schaffer (2010) describe the following levels:

- **Independent materials** are those that the student can read with basically no support; these materials are aimed at the student's current developmental level.
- **Instructional materials** are those that the student can read only with support.
- **Frustration materials** are those that the student cannot read regardless of the support provided. Frustration materials represent the reader's *zone of distal development*, the distance between his or her current developmental level and furthest potential developmental level. Even with significant support from the teacher, the student is unable to read materials within the zone of distal development. Materials at the reader's frustration level make appropriate read-alouds by the teacher (p. 54 & 55).

**In practice.** Researchers such as Ford & Opitz (2008), Pinnell and Fountas (2007), and Schirmer and Schaffer (2010) discussed the benefits and value of utilizing the practice of Guided
Reading. They suggested that as teachers utilize this practice they are able to differentiate their instruction and garner positive results with struggling students in reading. Leading proponents of this approach Fountas and Pinnell (1996) suggest that this classroom practice provides a good beginning to a child’s formal education and may reduce the likelihood of intervention. Guided Reading is valued because it offers small group support and explicit teaching to assist children in increasing their reading skills. Hornsby’s (2000) definition of Guided Reading is how the practice is typically perceived:

Guided Reading provides an opportunity for [teachers to support] small groups of children within the same developmental reading stages to apply strategies they already know to texts they do not know. The texts are carefully matched to the children so that they can apply their strategies to overcome the challenges in the text and read it independently with success. (p. 26)

Furthermore, Ford & Opitz (2008) discussed the term “guided” is more closely aligned to coaching as opposed to modeling for students. “It’s less about the teacher showing a child how to use a strategy and more about providing support as the child uses the strategy” (Ford & Opitz, 2008, p. 314). Fountas & Pinnell (1996) purported that because the texts are matched with students’ instructional levels, they are more willing to both like the story and grasp any new strategies taught. “The purpose of Guided Reading is to enable children to use and develop strategies ’on the run’” (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, p. 2). Guided Reading encourages students to self-monitor during their reading, to figure out problematic words and sentence structures. “The ultimate goal in Guided Reading is to help children learn how to use independent reading strategies successfully” (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, p. 2). These researchers asserted that teachers make many complex decisions throughout the Guided Reading process involving ongoing observations and assessments that assist the teacher in coaching exchanges as well as in making group and text selections. Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole (1999) suggested that teachers'
coaching during reading groups is one of the most noteworthy features differentiating highly effective schools from moderately or less effective schools. In response to the excessive and ineffective use of whole group instruction, Guided Reading was designed to return to the small group instruction that accommodates students at their own instructional reading levels (Ford & Opitz, 2008, p. 318). Ford & Opitz (2008) claimed that teachers found students to be reading at their instructional levels only a little more than half of the time, which was surprising, given that the teachers themselves had selected the text.

Supporting teachers. In their research, Ford & Opitz (2008) found that teachers needed professional development that is sustained and tailored to meet individual or group needs in order to implement any Guided Reading practice. These researchers discussed helping teachers identify the various grouping techniques. For example, the variation of the number of groups that teachers may see each day and how often each group is seen is different; therefore, the professional development would need to be customized. Ford & Opitz (2008) also suggested that the classroom management and organization of Guided Reading groupings requires support once the practice is implemented. Student membership should be constantly re-evaluated and groups reformed as needed. Teachers already working to implement a vision of Guided Reading with more dynamic grouping arrangements may need to have support in successfully doing this, while teachers who have not embraced this aspect may need help in seeing how to make static arrangements more flexible (Ford & Opitz, 2008, p. 316). These authors cautioned against a tendency to provide professional development focused only on matching leveled texts to students as the relationship between the text, the reader, and context is very complex.

Challenges. Leveling texts to readers can be problematic for teachers who implement the practice of Guided Reading: “teachers end up with frustrating situations in trying to manage many discrete levels of readers and texts in their classrooms. Those conducting staff development need to shift some of its attention away from leveling and toward other grouping
issues” (Ford & Opitz, 2008, p. 317). An obstacle discussed by Ford and Opitz (2008) is access to the different kinds of texts, as teachers need to balance between narrative stories and informational texts. “Different texts are written with different text structures, and exposing students to these puts them in a better position to comprehend a variety of texts in and out of school” (Ford & Opitz, 2008, p. 318). Another challenge that must be addressed when implementing Guided Reading is what to do with the students who are not with the teacher during the Guided Reading group instruction. Students that are not participating in the instructional group must be provided with organized and effective independent learning activities. “We suggest that teachers receive professional development that includes not only how to directly support students during Guided Reading groups, but also how to simultaneously indirectly support the remaining students working away from the teacher” (Ford & Opitz, 2008, p. 321). Kane (1995) agreed that addressing this obstacle of classroom management may be the key to successfully implementing Guided Reading.
Chapter 3: Research Design

The theoretical framework of andragogy, social development theory, and a viewpoint on educational reform suggested that a project designed to support instructional improvement in an elementary school should build its foundation upon the interaction of adults in a collaborative and supportive school environment. These theories posited that in addition to students learning, adults can also benefit from actively learning within a school. As a result, this study will document the development of a Professional Learning Community composed primarily of veteran elementary school teachers as they collaborate to implement Guided Reading practices.

Given the review of relevant literature as well as this researcher’s practice-based knowledge, this study’s empirical investigation rested on the following propositions: a) PLCs improve practices (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many, 2006; DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker, 2002, 2008; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, Thomas, 2006; & Wells, 2008); b) collaborative practices improve student learning (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many, 2006; DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker, 2002, 2008; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, Thomas, 2006; & Wells, 2008); c) veteran teachers have the knowledge and capacity to help improve student outcomes in a collaborative school setting (Cohen, 2009; Bain & Jacobs, 1990; Brophy, 1982; Brophy & Good, 1986; Delpit, 1995; Freiberg, Prokosch, Treister, Stein, & Opuni, 1989; Garcia, 1988; Haberman, 1987; Irvine, 1990; and Pasch et al., 1993; Stotko, Ingram, & Beaty-O’Ferrall, 2007; Day & Gu, 2009; & Iancu-Haddad & Oplatka, 2009; d) years of educational reform with changes of administration and district-led initiatives have tired educators and made skeptics of veteran teachers (Buffum & Hinman, 2006); e) current trends in education are moving towards teacher-led educational change (Craig, 2010; Fullan, 2009; Kean, 2003; Lee & Yin, 2011; Martin & Lázaro, 2012; Olsen & Sexton, 2008; Rucinski, Franco, Nocetti, Queirolo & Daniel, 2009; van Veen, Sleegers, & van de Ven, 2005; Williams & Nur-Awaleh, 2010; Yu & Lau, 2006; &
Zeichner & Ndimande, 2008); and f) veteran teachers resist change and prefer to work in isolation (Hargreaves, 2007).

**Research Questions**

Given these propositions, this research project pursued the following empirical research questions: 1) How do veteran elementary teachers describe how their participation in a PLC informs their practice? and 2) How do veteran teachers describe participation in PLCs in an elementary school?

The outcome of this inquiry assisted this researcher in understanding how veteran teachers view participating in a PLC and how their strengths could be utilized in this context.

**Methodology**

It has been adequately demonstrated that PLCs, veteran teachers, and Guided Reading have individually been well-researched and brought to the educational landscape. These past research studies have been quantitative as well as qualitative in nature. The research highlights a large number of case studies utilizing various methods to analyze data; in several cases an iterative process was used to validate qualitative findings regarding sustainability of PLC efforts in schools. Overall, there exists a limited amount of qualitative research in the area of PLCs and Guided Reading. Researchers have used surveys and interviews to examine teachers’ viewpoints of working collaboratively in a school setting. However, their studies have been limited and have not specifically described veteran teachers’ viewpoints about their participation in a PLC. In addition, even less literature exists addressing the combined topic of Guided Reading and professional learning communities specifically in elementary schools. Although many studies discuss the implications of working with a veteran staff, research has not been clear about how to combat the tradition of autonomous teaching practices in order to utilize these educators’ strengths in a PLC or collaborative school setting. Responding to these gaps in the literature, it
is likely that this study is the first of its kind addressing the combined topics of veteran elementary teachers and PLCs in a qualitative approach.

The strength of qualitative research in this line of inquiry is its ability to provide rich contextual descriptions of teachers interactions during the development of a PLC in a real-world setting (Maxwell, 2005). This qualitative study attempted to uncover the perceptions and experiences of veteran teachers as they collaborated to implement Guided Reading practices. “In the entire qualitative research process, the researcher keeps a focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issue, not the meaning that the researchers bring to the research or writers express in the literature” (Creswell, 2009, p. 175). A phenomenological methodology was chosen because it allowed a researcher to identify “the essences of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants” (Creswell, 2009, p. 13). Moustakas (1994) states that while a phenomenon is the “very appearance of something” in a phenomenological study, the researcher’s goal is to make meaning and understand the participants’ experiences (p. 49). This transcendental phenomenological approach will allow the researcher to gain insight and meaning from the participants as they experience PLCs – “just as [they] see them and as they appear to [them] in consciousness” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 49). The researcher strived to make meaning from the essences of the experiences that were shared. A phenomenological approach was employed to answer this study’s research questions because “phenomenology seeks to examine phenomena from the perspective of firsthand accounts and through the lifeworld of people” (Lala & Kinsella, 2011, p. 197).

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), known as the “father of phenomenology,” was a pioneer in the field and influential in beginning the phenomenological movement (Lala & Kinsella, 2011). He believed in “a rigorous philosophical method that examined phenomena as lived and directly experienced” (Lala & Kinsella, 2011, p. 197). The study acquired meanings and patterns as the participants collaborated in a PLC by listening intently as well as clarifying our knowledge about
everyday situations and real world events and experiences. One outcome of this study was to describe the facts and perspectives – or phenomenon – as translated by the participants. I conducted multiple interviews in an attempt to uncover participants’ impressions and insights about working together with their colleagues. I chose a phenomenological strategy because of its fit with this study’s purpose as well as the theoretical framework. While in the PLC, the veteran teachers were encouraged to become self-directed learners as the theoretical lens of andragogy highlights; these teachers made decisions in direct response to their collaborative efforts. Additionally, from the educational reform viewpoint, schools will be transformed when teachers participate in these deep-rooted change initiatives and are accountable for their efforts, thereby becoming instrumental in improving student learning. The educational reform lens is also beneficial to school administrators because it allows them insight into how to support teachers throughout this process. Therefore, the goal of this study was to utilize a phenomenological approach to better understand the essence, or significance, of the experiences of veteran teachers participating in the context of a PLC.

Site and participants. West Colonial Elementary School was chosen as the site for this study. This school is located in Southeastern Massachusetts, an urban setting, with a population of more than 95,000 people (www.census.gov). The school district has a student population of 12,538, of which 71.2% of those students are considered impoverished and qualify for free and reduced lunch. The student population is diverse, with nearly 50% of families of students identifying themselves as a race other than White, instead identifying as African American, Hispanic, Multi-Race, and others. According to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, the urban district is considered “underperforming” and is presently under corrective action by the state.

By contrast, the West Colonial School’s population is considered more advantaged, with only 37% of its population qualifying for free and reduced lunch. This school’s population is
less diverse; of its 285 students in grades K-5, 71% of families of students identify themselves as White, 10% as African American, and 8.5% as Hispanic. As the principal in this building, I was interested in promoting practices that support veteran teachers. I also hoped to learn from the perceptions of veteran teachers how they could be supported to improve instructional practices, thus improving educational outcomes for students.

In this qualitative study, I determined the context and identified the participants, which according to Maxwell (2005) are the most important decisions when gathering qualitative information to answer research questions. The appropriate number of participants for a phenomenological study is 10 or less according to Creswell (1998). This inquiry employed purposeful sampling and found seven potential participants. “In qualitative data collection, purposeful sampling is used so that individuals are selected because they have experienced the central phenomenon” (Creswell, 2009, p. 217). In this case, participants were chosen because of their fit with the purpose. Seven primary grade teachers from kindergarten through second grade, a special education tutor, and a sheltered English Immersion teacher were identified as potential research participants because they were veteran teachers or had at least 15 years of experience in an educational setting. Of these, those teachers who participated in the study’s PLC were recruited to take part in interviews. Each teacher participating in the PLC received an invitation asking them to consider participating in this study.

Data collection. During the study, I conducted in-depth interviews with five participants who volunteered to participate to glean their perspectives and insights about their PLC participation. According to Creswell (2009), these interviews can take place in person, by telephone, or in small focus groups. Maxwell (2005) suggested using open-ended questions to elicit responses that participants will be able to relate to in practice and genuinely understand the intent. In designing interview protocols, Maxwell (2005) reminds researchers, “Your research questions identify the things that you want to understand; your interview questions generate the
data that you need to understand these things” (p. 69). Therefore, I attempted to structure interviews with open-ended questions to elicit participants’ impressions about their participation in the PLCs.

The interviews took place in a private location at the school that was mutually agreed upon by the researcher and participants. The researcher’s interview questions sought information related to the following areas: what veteran educators find motivating and challenging while participating in a PLC, the impact of various structures and strategies within the collaborative experience, effective communication, how teachers’ strengths can be utilized to influence the growth and sustainability of a PLC, how the principal can support the development and sustainability of a PLC, and how a PLC focused on implementing Guided Reading influences teachers use of this strategy. We reviewed protection of subjects and confidentiality, and participants were reminded of the voluntary nature of their participation. Participants were instructed to flag any questions that were unclear. I made audio recordings of each interview.

Additionally, data was collected written records of my insights before and after the interviews took place. This included incidental conversations, documents, and artifacts related to the PLC. Maxwell (2005) stated the memos should include the researcher’s thoughts and reflections regarding the study. Memos, he wrote, should be kept as “a way to help you understand your topic, setting, or study, not just as a way of recording or presenting an understanding you’ve already reached” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 12).

**Data analysis.** Data was collected utilizing a qualitative method called a semi-structured in-depth interviewing. Moustakas (1994) discusses asking participants in the study about what they’ve experienced and the contexts or situations in which they’ve experienced it. This phenomenological study interviewed participants about their collaborative experiences in a PLC in an elementary setting. The one-on-one interviews lasted approximately one and half hours
each in a quiet, private location which was mutually agreed upon by the researcher and the participants. All interviews were audio-recorded.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and notes were taken to gather and classify participants’ significant statements, or what Moustakas (1994) refers to as an “essence description.” “During the reading or listening, (the researcher) should write notes and memos on what you see or hear in your data, and develop tentative ideas about categories and relationships” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 96). Coding was utilized as the primary method to organize data in this qualitative research. “A code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 3). A qualitative computer software program, MAXQDA, helped code, organize, and sort information that was useful in writing the study report. “Coding is a method that enables you to organize and group similarly coded data into categories or ‘families’ because they share some characteristic – the beginning of a pattern (Saldaña, 2009, p. 8).

Coding is the transitional step completed between data collection and data analysis (Saldaña, 2009). According to Saldaña (2009), the researcher will make sense of the words and phrases to “decipher its core meaning” (decoding) and label it (encoding). “The purpose of coding is to not only describe but, more importantly, to acquire new understanding of a phenomenon of interest” (Sanders, 1997, p. 7). This study moved from various phases of coding to interpret the data in a meaningful way.

**Phase 1: Open coding.** According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), data analysis should start with the themes that materialize from participants’ quotations or passages that strike the researcher, a process sometimes referred to as “open coding.” “During open coding, the researcher must identify and tentatively name the conceptual categories into which the phenomena observed will be grouped” (Sanders, 1997, p. 7). These codes were added to the
researcher’s codebook for the next phase of data analysis. Several researchers, including Creswell (2009) and Saldaña (2009), promote the use of multiple coding steps within the first phase. The researcher utilized direct quotes or literal language, or In Vivo Codes, to value the participants’ insights and reflections about their participation in a PLC. During this phase, aspects of Values Coding “that reflect a participants’ values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspectives or worldview” were applied (Saldaña, 2009, p. 89). According to Saldaña (2009), this type of coding is essential in this qualitative study as it explores participants’ cultural ideals, as well as their own collaborative roles within the PLC.

**Phase 2: Emic coding.** Emic codes were applied to capture the participants’ point of view. “Emic accounts describe thoughts and actions primarily in terms of the actors’ self-understanding – terms that are often culturally and historically bound” (Morris, Leung, Ames, & Lickel, 1999, p. 782). Based on the participants’ statements, the researcher in this study inferred their beliefs and topics within the PLC setting. Predetermined codes that matched the researchers’ thinking were avoided in order to capture the essence of participants’ thoughts and perspectives.

**Phase 3: Etic coding.** The researcher employed etic coding to the data to make connections to the theories and literature review. These pre-determined codes “represent the researcher’s concepts rather than denoting participants’ own concepts” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 98). This study looked for viewpoints from veteran teachers that are connected to autonomous practices, veteran teachers, collaboration, change process, professional dialogue, student outcomes, and adult learning.

**Phase 4: Thematic coding.** In order for the researcher to analyze connections of the qualitative data, Saldaña (2009) advocates for the codes to be “clustered” so that the similarities and “categories” can be discovered. Several researchers, including Saldaña (2009) and Creswell (2009), have said that coding is a repetitive process. Each time the researcher codes, “it further
manages, filters, highlights, and focuses the salient features of the qualitative data record for generating categories, themes, and concepts, grasping meaning, and/or building theory” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 8). Pattern coding was utilized to “organize and group similarly coded data into categories or ‘families’ because they share the same characteristic – the beginning of a pattern” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 8). Interview transcripts were re-coded, and the quotations were arranged according to the patterns and themes. According to Saldaña (2009), this phase of analysis allowed the researcher to break down the large amounts of data into “more meaningful” units while confirming that the propositions in this study were supported by the data.

**Phase 5: Interpretation.** According to Creswell (2009), the final phase of data analysis is “making an interpretation or meaning of the data.” During this phase, I acknowledged lessons learned which could be “personal interpretation, couched in the understanding that the inquirer bring to the study from her or his own culture, history, and experiences” (Creswell, 2009, p. 189). Additionally, this study attempted to make meaning from the viewpoint of participants as well as a comparison of the findings with information acquired from the literature review or theories. “These interpretations involve stating lessons learned, comparing the findings with past literature and theory, raising questions, and/or advancing an agenda for reform” (Creswell, 2009, p. 201).

**Trustworthiness**

To ensure rigor in this study, I employed several strategies of qualitative inquiry to determine reliability and validity. Guba (1981) outlined several constructs, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, under the concept of ‘trustworthiness,’ or validity. Shenton (2004) states credibility, also known as internal validity, guarantees that the study actually measures or tests for what was intended; transferability, or external validity, is concerned that the findings can be applied to other situations; dependability, or reliability,
reflects that when the study is repeated, it will garner similar results; and confirmability ensures that the findings are the results of the participants’ and not the researcher’s outlook.

**Credibility.** During this qualitative inquiry, I was concerned about ensuring the data that collected and interpreted was representative of the participants’ viewpoints and the phenomena being studied. Since I am also the principal at the school, it was natural to spend “prolonged engagement” in the school setting in order to “gain an adequate understanding of an organization and to establish a relationship of trust between the parties” (Shenton, 2004, p. 65). Creswell (2009) agrees when the researcher spends quality time in the field, “an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon” takes place, and details about the study can be conveyed in a thoughtful manner “that lends credibility to the narrative account” (p. 192).

Peer debriefing and peer scrutiny of the research project are other validity strategies that I employed. Additionally, an external auditor will review the project. “Through discussion, the vision of the investigator may be widened as others bring to bear their experiences and perceptions” (Shenton, 2004, p. 67). Over the duration of the project, I had numerous opportunities to meet and obtain constructive feedback from SPC members, and doctoral students at Northeastern University acted as peer readers to review the study; I also debriefed with dissertation advisors who are more knowledgeable than I in the research thesis process. The dissertation protocol required a third reader to review the study; the assigned person acted as the external auditor for the project. Distinct from the peer debriefers, Creswell (2009) described the external auditor as someone who is “not familiar with the researcher or the project and can provide an objective assessment of the project throughout the process of research or at the conclusion of the study” (p. 192). The external auditor for this study asked thought-provoking questions about the study as well as challenge the findings or any assumptions held by the researcher.
Member checking was an integral part of the study that determined accuracy. Creswell (2009) said that it is essential for the researcher to take “the final report or specific descriptions or themes back to participants” for verification (p. 191). I will share with each participant the specific claims that resulted from the analysis and appear in the report. Participants were also invited “to comment on the findings,” as Creswell (2009) recommended (p. 191).

A triangulation of the data was conducted during this study. Guba (1981) defined triangulation as “collecting data from a variety of perspectives, using a variety of methods, and drawing upon a variety of sources so that an inquirer’s predilections are tested as strenuously as possible” (p. 87). Another form of triangulation utilized was described by Shenton (2004) as when “individual viewpoints and experiences can be verified against others and, ultimately, a rich picture of the attitudes, needs or behavior of those under scrutiny may be constructed based on the contributions of a range of people” (p. 66). To add to the validity of this phenomenological study, the data was triangulated as each interview was cross-referenced to others before a final description of the phenomenon was concluded by the researcher.

**Transferability.** Transferability, or external validity, is ensuring that the study can be generalizable in different contexts. The researcher understood that not all situations will fit with the study, but, as Shenton (2004) pointed out, “a working hypothesis that may be transferred from one context to another depending upon the degree of ‘fit’ between the contexts” (p. 81). By utilizing “rich, thick description,” I was able to provide more realistic, detailed perspectives and, as a result, offered an aspect of common knowledge or “shared experiences” (Creswell, 2009, p. 191-192). Guba (1981) confirmed that “thick descriptions” demonstrate a vital parallel between two situations; when this occurs, it becomes reasonable to generalize the findings to both contexts.

**Dependability.** To address dependability, or reliability, I utilized strategies to show that if the study were repeated in the same situation, the outcome may be similar. To guard against
unrepeatability, Shenton (2004) stated that the researcher should provide a detailed process of the study so that other investigators can replicate the project and achieve the same findings. During this qualitative study, the external auditor conducted a “dependability audit” to thoroughly scrutinize the procedures and processes that were utilized during this inquiry (Guba, 1981). To accomplish this, I provided a detailed description of: “a) the research design and its implementation, describing what was planned and executed on a strategic level; b) the operational detail of data gathering, addressing the minutiae of what was done in the field; and c) reflective appraisal of the project, evaluating the effectiveness of the process of inquiry undertaken.” (pp. 71-72).

**Confirmability.** Steps were taken in this qualitative study to ensure confirmability, or real objectivity, that the findings were the results of the participants and not the dispositions of the researcher. Shenton (2004) wrote that it is imperative for the researcher to acknowledge and to be transparent about his or her “beliefs underpinning decisions made and methods adopted” within the research report (p. 72). During this study, this researcher needed to “practice reflexivity to intentionally reveal to her audience the underlying epistemological assumptions which cause her to formulate a set of questions in a particular way, and finally to present her findings in a particular way” (Guba, 1981, p. 87). As recommended by Guba (1981), the external auditor conducted a “confirmability audit” by examining the emic and etic codes with the researcher to ensure that the interpretation was valid.

**The researcher’s role.** Since I was involved in supporting the PLC as principal of West Colonial School, I identified possible factors that may influence my objectivity. It is important that researchers in this position “explicitly identify reflexively their biases, values, and personal background, such as gender, history, culture, and socioeconomic status that may shape their interpretations formed during the study” (Creswell, 2009, p. 177). I solicited participants; organized and conducted the interviews; and analyzed the data. I recognized that because I work
in a supervisory role to all of the participants involved in the study, I needed to be deliberate about separating the roles of supervisor and researcher.

Moustakas (1994) explains that Husserl referred to the setting aside of our biases as the *Epoche*, “a Greek word meaning to stay away from or abstain” (p. 85). In the Epoche, the researcher must realize his or her own biases and protect against jumping to conclusions based on previous assumptions. In this study, this was accomplished by “bracketing” my preconceptions and impressions. To assist in understanding “bracketing,” Hamill and Sinclair (2010) stated that “In mathematics, brackets are used to separate one part of an equation from another, allow you to focus on that part in isolation from the others” (p. 17). In phenomenological research, brackets shelve the researcher’s assumptions and foreknowledge, and, according to Hamill and Sinclair (2010), the researcher will then be certain not to “influence the participants’ understanding of the phenomenon” (p. 17).

For the purposes of this study, I “bracketed” biases that pertained to my role as supervisor of the participants versus my role as researcher. During the data collection phase, I could have been influenced to judge the participants based on the interview transcripts. Maxwell (2005) referred to this as controlling for “reactivity,” since “the researcher is part of the world he or she studies – is a powerful and inescapable influence” (p. 109). Understanding biases helped me to understand how I may have been influencing the study. I was clear about distinguishing the roles in terms of supporting the PLC at the school site and during data collection for the study. As described in the IRB, I was willing to offer support as the principal of the building by offering protocol guides, space, materials, and communication guidelines as needed. As the researcher, I was clear about offering support while not intervening or influencing the growth and development practices of the PLC. Based on the findings, I was inclined to help support future collaborative practices. A natural tension could have existed as the product of soliciting participation from teachers who are typically autonomous in their practices. To combat those
preconceived notions, I wanted to improve teaching practices within the school that would improve student outcomes. From the beginning of the study, the researcher believed that establishing a PLC for veteran teachers was going to lead to positive outcomes for teaching and learning. However, the researcher remained open-minded to possibility that this may or may not be useful in an elementary setting.

Bracketing these biases helped prevent against threats to the validity of the study. Additionally, my inexperience in conducting a qualitative study and my desire to improve student outcomes at the school where I serve as principal could have created a possible threat to the validity of the analysis and findings. As outlined above, I employed several validity strategies such as triangulation of data, member checking, and discussions with dissertation advisors to protect against this threat.

Protection of Human Subjects

Informed consent. I informed the participants of the nature and purpose of the study. I held an initial meeting with participants to explain in lay language their role as well as the goals of the research project; questions were answered at this time. I distributed and reviewed the informed consent form, and participants were given the opportunity to opt out of the project with no questions asked. Participation in this study presented minimal risks to participants. There were no medical procedures or other potentially harmful interventions that would compromise the health or well-being of either the participants or myself. Participants may have felt uncomfortable being truthful or may have feared retaliation if they expressed negative opinions about the school environment, the principal, and/or teaching practices. They also may have felt pressured to give the perceived “correct” answers during interviews. I intentionally respected boundaries during the interview process and let participants know in advance that they could refuse to answer any of the interview questions if they so chose.
A potential benefit of the project was that veteran teachers participating in this study felt they would have a voice about how collaboration, best practices, and communication should work at the school.

Confidentiality. Confidentiality of all participants was maintained and respected at all times during the study. Only I as the primary researcher had access to any identifiable information. Once there was a confirmed list of teachers participating in the study, I established a confidential means of communication. All interviews took place in a private location. I recorded data on a digital recorder, and the identity of the participants was not be revealed to anyone except for the researcher. All of the names were changed to protect the participants' identities. No names were included in the transcript. Only I, the primary researcher, listened to recordings and transcribed them into written form.

The data was transcribed by hand, and all data was backed up to an external drive at my home. The digital recordings of all of the interviews were maintained in my locked home office until the data analysis process was completed, and they were destroyed within 3 months of the study’s completion. Digital records of the transcriptions were kept on my computer hard drive and back-up drive only.

Conclusion

For educators who are interested in improving student outcomes, research suggests fostering the establishment of a culture where teachers no longer work in isolation but work together to adopt a more collaborative teaching culture. One vehicle suggested for accomplishing this is the development of a Professional Learning Community. Through a PLC at the West Colonial School, veteran educators had the opportunities to share practices, collaborate, and experience job-embedded learning.

The theoretical frameworks of andragogy, social development theory, and a viewpoint on educational reform supported this study’s design in that the participants learned in a collaborative
setting with the students. As the veteran teachers collaborated in the supportive school environment, they implemented the district’s mandated Guided Reading initiative. Veteran teachers working in a PLC context in an elementary setting represented a paradigm shift and gave teachers a new outlook on their profession.

A qualitative investigation was proposed to understand the viewpoints of the veteran teachers participating in the study. Therefore, a phenomenological study was employed to document the perspectives of each veteran teacher participating in the PLC.
Chapter 4: Research Findings

In response to this study of veteran teachers’ impressions of collaboration, several important findings emerged. These participants are women who have taught for an average of nineteen years in an elementary school setting and have had the opportunity to participate in a Professional Learning Community. An analysis of interview transcripts accumulated evidence in response to this study’s research questions. The pertinent results are presented in this chapter in the form of illustrative participant quotes and researcher summary statements and interpretations. Four broad themes arose from the analysis and organize the presentation of these findings: Impact on Teachers’ Perceptions and Self-Image; Increased Knowledge and Capacity of Teachers; Impact on the Classroom: Teaching and Learning; and School Support of a Professional Learning Community; they will be presented in sections I through IV within this chapter. Given this study’s modest sample, the results do not claim to be representative of the entire population of veteran teachers in an urban elementary school; however, the study provides valuable insight into how some experienced elementary teachers view themselves and the impact of such perceptions on their practice as members of a PLC. The outcomes of this study would offer useful insight when seeking to establish a PLC in an elementary school setting, which may or may not be predominantly staffed by veteran teachers.

An analysis of the transcribed interviews suggests a possible conceptual model to represent the data in this study. As Figure 1 illustrates, the data of this study suggests that the impact of teachers’ participation in a PLC can be viewed as having influence at four different

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Figure 1: PLC Levels of Influence

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levels—on teachers’ self image, on teaching, on students, and on the school culture—where the practice at one level actually influences, leads to, and provides the foundation for the impact at the next level. As for teachers’ self image, they became more effective and confident teachers. With improved teaching practices, the participants saw impact on their students’ performance as well as in their own ability to create student-centered educational experiences. The improved teacher confidence and competence and student achievement are believed to be important factors when creating a culture of highly effective educator-collaborators (Kosová, 2010). These impacting factors will be looked at with greater detail within this chapter.

All five teachers who participated in the study are veteran teachers and had also taught at other school settings prior to teaching at the West Colonial School. Their names have been changed to protect their identities. This was the first time in their careers that they collaborated with colleagues in a formal manner. The PLC was specifically geared toward the implementation of the Daily 5, a Guided Reading approach that is a research-based organizational strategy, designed to strengthen management of the literacy block.

Erica is a second grade teacher who has been teaching for 28 years, 15 of those years as a second grade teacher. After earning a degree in Early Childhood Education, Erica taught first grade for many years. She mentioned that her strengths include organization, running workshop centers in the classroom, and differentiated instruction. Erica described the school principal’s role as essential in beginning the process of forming a PLC. “We were all on different pages, and I think you came to us and said, ‘We need to all be on the same page.’ I think you encouraged us, and you became our cheerleader this year, saying, you know, ‘Let’s begin the PLCs. Let’s look at The Daily 5.’” After participating in a few PLC sessions, Erica remarked, “Seeing the boost in my assessments were showing that the [Daily 5] program is being successful. So, sharing that with one another was really encouraging when we started to get it really up and moving.”
Elaine began her career with a decade as a kindergarten paraprofessional. Over the last seven years she has divided her time between three years of teaching second grade and now nearly four years of teaching first grade. She is passionate about teaching ELA and explained that the most essential element to a classroom is the teacher. “You can teach a kid without all the bells and whistles. You really can. It’s nice to have; I’m thankful we have some things that we have, but I’ve done it without… I think the most important thing is, is just to help that individual PLC grow… it’s like differentiating sort of, except with, you know, teachers.”

Nina has been teaching for 20 years, 12 of which have been in kindergarten, her current position. Her general education classroom typically includes a handful of ELL students who arrive from the “low-incidence” countries including China, Vietnam, Haiti, etc. Nina said she felt supported by her colleagues as they collaborated. “I never felt annoyed I had to be with them. I look forward to it… I don’t feel put out. I don’t feel that anyone felt put out. I felt like we’re all in this together and we’re all willing to make some changes.”

Izzy, also teaches kindergarten and is Nina’s partner teacher. Like Nina, Izzy has been an early childhood teacher for 20 years and has been in her current school district for 14 years. Izzy previously taught for six years in the Orange County Public Schools in Orlando, Florida. The majority of Izzy’s experience has been in Pre-K and Kindergarten classrooms. She typically has a small number of special needs students integrated into her classroom who require specialized instruction from a special education teacher. Izzy said that the PLC focus on literacy added to her repertoire of skills and resulted in improved student outcomes as well as reinvigorating her own passion for teaching. “We really had to spend a lot of time with [students] teaching, saying, there’s three ways to read a book… and, teach them the strategy of reading the pictures… or, retelling a story. My kids before would say, ‘I don’t know how to read.’ [Now] these kids never say that because they know the strategies, and if they can’t read the words, they know how to read the pictures. They love to pull books that we’ve read and retell stories. So, that’s exciting.”
Anna, a special education teacher, has been teaching for 21 years. She spent one year in a middle/high school resource room and 16 years in a substantially separate elementary classroom for students requiring specialized instruction. For the past four years, she has worked at the West Colonial School in a model that consists of her pulling students out for specialized instruction and co-teaching and consulting with the K-2 general education classrooms. Anna described her PLC experience in this way: “It was very exciting to be excited about trying something new after being veteran teachers for so long. You know it’s good to be excited about change and going different ways.”

**The PLC Defined**

An important introduction to the presentation of the study outcomes should include a discussion of how these teachers defined a PLC. During interviews, teacher subjects outlined definitions and characteristics of their PLC experience. All five veteran teachers viewed collaboration and idea sharing as essential components of the PLC. Three out of the five teachers said that having this shared goal of improving their teaching techniques was another impacting feature. Three teachers commented on the significance of having a vision or goal to focus their discussions on the implementation of new or improved teaching strategies. When asked to define a PLC, Erica, a second grade teacher, responded with:

I would describe a Professional Learning Community as teachers, be it in a school or district, working together, collaborating to improve their teaching methods with the outcome to better student performance. It’s all basically about the teachers getting together and collaborating; sharing ideas.

She later added:

… a PLC would probably need to have goals and a vision in which they would be working towards as a group… It’s to bring everybody together to be on the same page and to work together. If you were coming in and our goal or vision was to work on the
ELA program, we would target what areas we wanted to work on. And, we would ask you, you know, ‘What do you see? What do you do in your classroom?’

In addition to learning about new teaching strategies, Anna described this collaborative practice as a refinement of her practice:

The point was really to start improving maybe things we’ve touched upon in the past, but really—haven’t really brought into our, you know, daily routine of our teaching… A group of colleagues getting together to discuss how to improve their craft and coming up with new innovative ideas and strategies.

Nina, a kindergarten teacher, highlighted important PLC features in her definition, such as valuing each viewpoint from PLC participants: “Professional people working together, coordinating times to meet, having their own opinions, sharing strengths, and being able to listen to constructive criticism and ideas.”

These statements express the perceptions of what a PLC meant to the experienced elementary teachers in this study. All teachers concluded that during the eight weeks the PLC was established prior to this study, it had begun to change their self-image and their impact on their students, and also to shape their school culture in a substantial way. A more in-depth presentation of these teachers’ impressions will be outlined in the four sections that follow.

**Impact on Teachers Personally: Perceptions and Self-Image**

Within this section the voices of all five participants are used to provide ample and compelling evidence that as a result of involvement in the PLC, the teachers believed that they and their perceptions had been changed. Five
specific themes emerged from the data analysis of interview transcripts related to participants’ viewpoints about their participation. Existing at the core of the conceptual model of the PLC impact on veteran teachers is the effect on the teachers themselves (Figure 2). They claimed increased confidence, renewed excitement for learning, easier acceptance of change, improved relationships, and strengthened collegiality as well as an increased ability to reflect on the efficacy of their teaching practices. Responses suggest that in this urban context (a) teachers in the PLC had increased confidence and improved self-image with instituting new practices as well as in themselves and in their abilities; (b) the PLC participants were excited about the change to their classrooms that grew from their new knowledge and peer support; (c) some participants experienced an improved response to change; (d) many teachers valued the strengthened bonds created among them and its effect on reducing isolation; and (e) their collaboration served to make them more reflective. All teachers readily discussed their viewpoints regarding their participation in a PLC; the analysis of the aforementioned themes will be outlined throughout this chapter.

**Increased teacher confidence.** All five participants claimed that their PLC experience gave them increased confidence in their teaching practices and a more positive self-image of themselves as teachers. They discussed how this increased self-confidence developed as they participated in the PLC and received positive feedback from their colleagues. Teachers noted that their ideas were “listened to,” and they said they felt valued and appreciated as a result of the acknowledgment and encouragement they received during their meetings. Erica, summed it up for most when she said:

It kind of made… it definitely made me feel good about myself. It made me feel that people did respect my opinions and my thoughts and looked up to me. Just as I look up to my colleagues and I see the good in… in everything they do. Sometimes you don’t have that same positive self-image. So by being part of this, it’s like people really wanted to
listen to me too. People liked what I was doing and people respected me, as a teacher. So I think that was positive. Wow, they think… they think… they’re impressed with what I just did; which made me feel good about myself … which made me feel like I wanted to share more.

Anna, a special education teacher, also discussed the impact that support from PLC members had on her self-confidence. She said, “So this group was great because everyone is more than willing to be considerate and not feel like, you know, I’m dumb because I don’t know something.”

Meanwhile Elaine, a first grade educator who was formerly a teacher’s aide, pointed out:

It [the PLC] gave me a little bit more confidence because as the words were coming out of my mouth I realized, you know, really how much I know now… and… and how much I’ve taken away from PLCs or workshops, conferences, and applied.

Later she added that she feels “more professional.”

Izzy, a kindergarten teacher, echoed Elaine's sentiment when she described what she believes are the long-term results of PLC participation: “I would feel more like a professional who is appreciated for her, you know, for the fact that I have something to share. I think it would definitely make me a better teacher.”

These educators all told of how their active participation and the support gleaned from other educators in this forum helped increase their levels of confidence, perhaps even more substantially than their increase in skills or knowledge. For most of these veteran educators, it was the first time they were able to share their knowledge and experiences to this degree, and they came to realize that their peers were listening to their input on points of practice. They interpreted this as professional respect. This self-assurance was a source of renewed excitement for their profession, the impact of which is discussed in the next section.

Renewed excitement. The PLC experience inspired this group of veteran teachers to forgo long established practices and embedded routines. Years of traditional teaching and rituals
were willingly replaced with new innovative practices as a result of the support these teachers gained from the PLC. All five veteran teachers discussed the feelings of excitement and enthusiasm that infused their classrooms as a result of this collaboration. Izzy discussed how a break in the monotony reminded her of the excitement of being a new teacher:

It’s all new stuff. Whereas, the past couple of years, I just kind of just… ‘Let’s pull out the December folder. That’s what we did last year, we’re going to do this again… ’ This year everything is new and different, so um… so you know in a good way… I’m excited about it; and I remember feeling that way when I first started teaching. Of course, I was 24! [laughs]

Two teachers discussed their renewed enthusiasm as a result of the PLC, and also the excitement this generated with their students. Erica said:

So I kind of have come in everyday excited and ready to begin my day because it’s new, it’s different, and the children love it, and they’re excited. So with them showing their excitement, it just has changed my attitude about teaching right now.

Anna also shared:

Just being more excited about what we’re doing has been really helpful. Well, when you start something new, it’s always exciting, and you see the faces of the children that they’re excited about what you’re doing with them. Just even reading to themselves for sustained minutes, and they’ll want to share what they just read, and being at their level when they’re meeting with success. It’s exciting!

These educators related their excitement to renewal in their teaching practices and to increased students’ enthusiasm within their classrooms. Izzy summed up her PLC participation in three words: it has “lit a fire.” This “fire” was the inspiration for the veteran teachers’ renewed passion for their work. All five teachers discussed feeling reinvigorated as they implemented new strategies in their classrooms; they claimed these new practices sparked increased student
engagement in learning. In the next section, the analysis will reveal how, in spite of these positive outcomes, teachers also discussed their initial resistance to the changes encouraged by the PLC and their eventual acceptance and valuing of their ability to change.

**Response to change, including resistance.** The participants in this study reacted to change in a variety of ways. Although they shared how they were initially unsettled about making the changes supported by the PLC’s investigation into new literacy practices, they each mentioned how they came to value the positive outcomes for students. Not surprisingly, all five teachers described their initial resistance to the change in their practices. At the beginning of the new literacy program promoted by the PLC, four out of five teachers expressed feelings of frustration and intimidation related to changing their teaching practices. In fact, Elaine described the innovation initially as “another gimmicky thing.” However, all of them discussed how their new collaborative practice helped them persist in its implementation. Nina also described how the PLC supported her implementation of a new practice while also helping her to overcome her initial resistance to change:

> It has helped me very much with guided-reading, especially. But also, again coming away from what I’m used to and trying something new. Like it’s all about change, and I guess I’m one of those people that have a hard time doing that, but I feel I have and I really want to keep going.

Elaine described how her initial trepidation was overcome by her commitment to being a PLC collaborator for this new implementation:

> Then I started reading The Daily 5, and I thought, ‘Oh, they want me to do it this specific way.’ And I kind of got a little frustrated because I thought, ‘My way works… What do I do?’… I don’t want to be the one that’s not doing it if everyone’s following it exactly.

Participants’ comments highlighted how, in addition to veteran teachers’ beliefs that their practices are satisfactory as is, their resistance to change also rises from their experience of
many “innovations” being in actuality renamed former pedagogical strategies that have reappeared in cyclical fashion throughout their careers. For example, Erica described her experience with encouraging change with veteran colleagues this way:

So it’s really trying to get people on board to be committed and to give it a try. But, I think you hear so many times, “Well. I did that 10 years ago and it didn’t work then. Why do we have to go back and try it now?” So it’s trying to get people to understand how important it really is.

**Turning the corner.** Although initially uncomfortable with implementing the new reading strategies, Nina said that the excitement generated through the common professional development shared by PLC participants helped her to move through her feelings:

Because it was totally out of my comfort zone… With The Daily 5 and the guided reading, I was just intimidated… It seemed like there was a lot of information. Again, when [the expert presenter] was here, too… excitement… but also so much information, it was a little overwhelming.

Anna highlights the importance of the PLC as she contrasts the frustration of a single teacher tackling something new with the power of a group of teachers working together to resolve challenges posed by implementing new literacy practices. She reframed her initial frustration as a collaborative “challenge” to be met:

Well, with anything you don’t know where to begin, you know there’s always some kind of challenge. But, I’d rather say it’s challenging because we know we could work on it and get to where we need to be. As opposed to when you get frustrated, then you might drop something and not continue with it.

Erica discussed the importance of communication in promoting a PLC and advocating for the acceptance of change it would bring to practices among veteran teachers. She described it this way:
I guess it’s through communication and talking with one another, actually trying to get more people involved in it. So communication is a really big part, and I think I could offer that as a strategy. Communicating, maybe to other teachers, about how effective this is and how it’s helping me as a teacher to grow and change. Also, I’m an older teacher so to show that I’m not stuck in my old ways, that I’m willing to change. Change is huge. A lot of people don’t like change and we do get stuck in our own little world. So being able to change and increase my professional knowledge… so if I can communicate that to other teachers, hopefully that would get more people on board.

All participants described the resistance that comes when veteran teachers face changing practices. However, it was also clear from their interview statements they attributed the PLC collaboration to overcoming this difficulty and in shifting their perceptions to one of more acceptance and belief in the strength of collaborative practices in improving student learning. The next section will more clearly outline how participants believed their collaboration strengthened their relationships and discussed the impact on classroom.

**Coworkers becoming collaborators.** Participants all discussed the strengthened bonds and supportive communication which resulted from the PLC collaboration. They cited deepened relationships and strengthened channels of informational exchange. It is worthy of note that they also discussed how the collaboration succeeded in reducing their isolation and weakening traditional autonomous practices.

**Strengthened bonds between teachers.** All five veteran teachers valued the strengthened bonds among them forged through the PLC experience. Not only did they describe an increase in their collegiality but also how the deepened collaborative practice positively impacted themselves and their teaching. They discussed getting along and the importance of friendship. As Anna said, “You know, we just all feel like we’re in it together with the PLC.”
Nina agreed when she said, “Getting along with everybody helped, because I think it’s important to be able to get along with your coworkers. And if you can’t do that, then I think it would be very difficult to work in a PLC.” Erica remarked on the trust that arose from the strengthened relationships: “Okay, so we’re talking about how my perceptions have changed about teaching and learning. And, I guess it goes back to a trust with my colleagues. It’s really built a bond between us all.”

Izzy remarked on the contagion of excitement of being with other teachers and how important it was to her:

Well, because I think when you’re with, it’s kind of like when you’re with your friends and they’re excited about something, you get excited about it too…Because I think just having the support of other teachers, um. You know, giving you feedback, “Ah, good job.” [laughs]

What appeared to be just an initial sense of collegiality evolved into strong valuing of the collaborative practices created among the teachers through the PLC structure. Elaine captured this idea when she remarked:

I feel like I’ve got friends, like friends, the best kind of friends because I’m a person who cares about my work. So they are friends that are focused on, you know, the same thing or focus as I am – the kids. We all have the same thing in our heart. We all want the best and we all work really hard. We all try really hard.

Nina echoed this sentiment when she said, “I feel like you’re not always going to get along with everybody all the time, but I feel like you need to work together for the best interest of the kids.” Anna talked about the PLC’s collaboration and the important potential impact on student learning:

I just think, you know, two minds are better than one, and especially if we’re all working together to see students grow and be the best that students can be. We can’t do it alone…
Well, our PLC was great because it’s all people that are willing to be open and are willing
to take in ideas.

These interview participants claimed that the bonds between them grew and led to a more
productive, collaborative approach to instructional problem-solving. These relationships were no
longer based on collegiality but mutual respect, which served to break down the walls of
isolation behind which many of them had practiced for more than a decade. This important
outcome will be outlined in the next discussion.

**Reduced isolation.** Study participants discussed how their PLC collaboration and
communication served to combat teacher isolation typical in schools. Prior to this study, teachers
agreed that they “got along” with each other, but this PLC triggered deeper trusting relationships
that focused on improving instructional practices and resulted in greater appreciation for each
other. Two teachers discussed communication specifically. Erica remarked:

> Just basically the communication is so important and without it you *now* notice what you
> lacked as a team. And, now that we have this opportunity to communicate with one
> another, you really do, you see that, “Wow. We really lacked being able to play off one
> another.”

Izzy connected communication with change and growth: “Well, if you’re sitting in your
own classroom and you’re not communicating with your colleagues, then you’re never going to
change the way that you do things.” All of the teachers alluded to the impact that the
collaboration had on shifting autonomous practices. Erica’s remarks well-expressed the
sentiments of all when she said:

> I think teachers tend to isolate themselves a lot and it’s easy to go in and shut your door
> and do your thing and to continually do year after year; the same things you’ve done over
> and over again. So by having a PLC, it kind of brings you out and it makes you work
with others and give your thoughts and opinions and ideas, along with taking their ideas and working together.

She eloquently added:

It is a great experience… it actually got me out of my box. I’m not as isolated and by myself anymore. I feel a lot more comfortable talking about things that didn’t work and asking for help and advice. I feel more comfortable to share what was good and what worked for me with my colleagues.

It is evident by their comments that these teachers became more comfortable sharing their ideas with each other, and soon their collegial relationships developed into a deeper collaborative approach to their work. Through this experience they realized how isolated they had been and came to appreciate the benefits of collaboration. As reviewed in the next section, this continual discussion of instructional practices encouraged the study participants to become more reflective about their teaching.

**Reflection and personal growth.** Throughout the interviews, every teacher offered evidence that the PLC collaboration supported them in reviewing and assessing their own teaching practices. Several teachers gave specific examples of how the group discussion encouraged individual reflection. For example, Erica said, “It’s really made me reevaluate myself and see how I can be better.” Nina discussed how she felt comfortable asking for assistance in reflecting on practice adjustments with other PLC members: “I knew if I failed, I could go back and reflect and talk to them about it and ask them if they did it differently.”

The implementation of the Daily 5 with the PLC encouraged some teachers to reflect and actually change their beliefs about their role in the classroom, and helped them in moving towards student-centered classroom practices. Anna realized that there was too much teacher-directed instruction in her classroom:
To me, the aha moment was when we just realized, when I realized, that they need to be reading more by themselves and not feeling like I need to be interjecting during that time for everything… and you know, when the children share and are excited about sharing something that they just read on their own… you know…. it makes you feel like, you know… Wow! You’re doing what you should be doing!

During her interview, Erica reflected on the importance of moving away from her established practice of predominately teacher-led lessons:

I’ve overcome an obstacle with myself…because I did, I knew I talked too much …and knowing how much they take in when somebody’s talking, that they only hear x amount, that they were losing a lot.

Erica’s important insight into the PLC impact on enhancing student-centered learning in classrooms will be discussed in greater depth later.

In summary, the analysis of all interview transcripts revealed that veteran teachers were impacted personally through their participation in the PLC. Their statements revealed how much they changed: they gained self-confidence, they became more passionate about their role, and they responded to change and innovations in a more positive manner. All participants said they valued the strengthened bonds created among their colleagues and its significant effect on reducing their isolation. Importantly, teachers’ comments demonstrated that their new collaborative approach served to make them more reflective.

Having discussed the PLC’s impact on participants' personal perceptions and relationships, the next section will discuss how the participants in this study conveyed the ways their participation in the PLC increased their knowledge and capacity as educators.
Impact on Teachers as Professionals: Educator Capacity and Efficacy

Expanding from the PLCs effects on teachers’ self image is the more tangible impact of their increased knowledge and capacity as educators, the second sphere of influence according to this developing conceptual model, as shown in Figure 3.

The subjects discussed that the professional development associated with the PLC gave rise to increased knowledge and that the collaboration led to improved practices and decision making. Participants shared how the overall experience allowed them to recognize their need for continued learning. Within this section, all five participants disclosed that they believed their instructional capacity had increased as a result of their participation in this PLC.

Four themes emerged from the data analysis of interview transcripts related to this increased knowledge. Responses suggest that (a) group professional development experiences provided the foundation for adopting common understandings and focus for their collaboration, (b) teachers believed that the collaborative goals and practices helped them keep focused on the initiative and supported their decision making, (c) specific and practical strategies and important outcomes arose from this collaboration and from the PLC experience, and (d) it led to the belief that they still had more to learn despite the fact that they are veteran teachers.

Professional development. During the interview, it was apparent that all five educators agreed that group professional development experiences provided the foundation for developing common understandings and focus for their collaboration. These PLC participants attended a
conference about a guided reaching approach called, “The Daily 5” and had in-school professional development, conducted by a district literacy coach, in support of its implementation. In their interviews, the teachers discussed the importance of these sessions in assisting them in developing a common understanding of this The Daily 5. In fact, Erica said, “You increase your professional knowledge by working together, and the student outcome is great. I mean, it [collaboration] only benefits the student.” As mentioned in previous sections, there was a great deal of excitement generated by the collaborative efforts of these teachers. Erica’s comment also highlighted how participants were able to adopt common practices as well as bond as a group by attending the formal trainings:

Well, just going to the conference together, I mean, it was just exciting to know that we were all on the same page and we all wanted to change and we all wanted to work together. That was motivating; it was fun. It was something that we left going, “Let’s do this again.”

Izzy’s comments highlighted the important process of professional development, reflection, and collaboration:

Well, I think there were other times where it was structured, where we had the training piece …. I think that, like, that was the structured part, and we all kind of took it home, filtered it in our own view of what she was sharing with us, and then in a very unstructured way we were able to come back and kind of just talk about it.

Elaine saw the importance of the informational sessions and believed it was helpful to all of the teachers no matter what their teaching background is. She said:

When we all went to the Daily 5 conference, what made it effective is, I’d say, I think everybody took away from it what they could use; because we all have our own background. We could connect to what they were saying… I think everybody got something, though we’re all in different places.
When faced with a new initiative, it is common for teachers to feel overwhelmed. This particular professional development opportunity helped them focus on organizing this guided reading approach into manageable steps. Anna described how important a common PD experience was in simplifying their understandings and in addressing their concerns when she said, “We were making more of it than it had to be,” and she reported that after the sessions they were able to see that it was “doable and not such a great thing to conquer.” Nina summarized it wryly when she remarked, “Because after going and doing all of this, and going to that conference; we’re all ‘buying what they’re selling,’ you could say.”

Nina believed that the professional development experiences were so valuable that other teachers involved and not involved in the PLC would voluntarily attend other after school sessions. She said, “If [the district literacy coach] could come in again, or somebody who has her background to offer, you know, after school, I know people would, or I feel people involved in this PLC, would go.”

These statements provide clear evidence that the participants’ professional development experience was essential in adopting this innovation. During the interviews, the teachers freely admitted that they all came with varying levels of expertise and comfort to this new literacy program. The professional development instituted was instrumental in filling in the gaps and establishing common practices, resulting in greater capacity to focus on moving forward and instituting new practices, some of which will be discussed in the next section.

**Focus and decision-making.** A third clear result of these collaborative goals and practices was increased focus on the initiative and greater feelings of support in subjects’ decision-making. Over the course of the interviews, the teachers gave examples of how the PLC influenced their decisions relating to reading instruction, classroom routines, and lesson-planning. For example, after collaborating with her colleagues, Elaine decided to make changes to maximize student learning time. She said:
What I got from this is… I have the kids all have a reading folder in their desks with leveled readers, leveled specifically for them, so in a pinch, and they like to do this now, they can buddy-read different books to each other. Now why that’s good is because that’s something they can do while I have a guided reading group…

Nina admitted that suggestions made by her peers during the PLC led her to transform her literacy block to include more rigorous academic activities. She described it this way:

It has made changes in my literacy, changes in how I set up my literacy workshops. It is more language-based. It has helped me move away from say, the arts & crafts piece and put in more literacy.

During the PLC, because the topics of discussion all revolved around guided reading practices, teachers were able to stay focused on a single innovation and facilitate instructional decisions about their literacy practices.

In this second section, the analysis highlighted how experts in the field led formal sessions which helped to increase teachers’ knowledge and capacity, and collaboration and sharing ideas with one another assisted in participants’ decision making process and fidelity to implementation. Not only did these instructional decisions impact teachers’ practice, but as expected ultimately the collaboration increased their instructional knowledge and capacity. This important outcome will be the next topic of review.

**Increased knowledge and capacity.** As outlined throughout this chapter, all five teachers realized that their PLC collaboration was the foundation for increased knowledge and capacity; perhaps just as significantly, it also led to the belief that they still had more to learn. Teachers assessed their own capacity as educators; they cited their understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses when teaching reading. For instance, they remarked on developing skills to appropriately match literature to students’ reading levels and becoming more proficient with data collection and analysis to make instructional decisions. Elaine summed it up well
when she said that the collaboration gave her an opportunity to identify her own strengths and weaknesses:

   It was helping me, like you know when you teach or speak, when you have to bring forth your knowledge, you understand what you don’t know and what you know. And, if you are conscientious you’ll take what you don’t know and you’ll go, you know, on your own time to find out.

Erica said that, “From listening to other people, I’ve gained a lot more knowledge.” This veteran teacher remarked on how the PLC supported her commitment to be a lifelong learner:

   But, it’s also let me know that I have so much more to learn…that, I still have about six years left and I don’t want to be that teacher that comes in and shuts their door for six years and just do what I have to do to get by. Right up until the day I retire, I want to continue changing and be better and the only way I can do that is to work with everyone in my school and district to keep my ideas fresh and my teaching methods changing with the times.

During her interview, Izzy echoed those sentiments when she said:

   We still have a lot more to learn, even the guided reading piece, now that we have the structure to do the guided reading. Right now it’s all about getting the routine down and getting the kids into the routine of guided reading and now it’s about, you know, finding out where they are and doing that baseline DRA. So there’s a lot more that we still have to talk about. It’s not really done yet.

Nina reinforced this idea when she said:

   I feel like I can, you can always learn, no matter how many years you have… I’m not in school right now, but I feel like you can always learn by your peers.

Anna also brought up this idea:
I think there’s always opportunities [to learn]. It doesn’t matter how long you’ve been teaching or doing any particular job. There’s always, you know, ways to improve yourself. Throughout the whole process, you know, just kind of rethinking.

It is evident that the PLC had an impact on these veteran teachers’ competence and confidence so far as they felt comfortable enough to admit the need for more information or other capacity-building professional development activities. As could be anticipated, a natural result of this greater knowledge, increased confidence, and collegial support in decision-making was practical outcomes in the classrooms for these educators. This will be discussed further in the following section.

**Practical outcomes arising from collaboration.** All five teachers cited specific and practical outcomes rising from this collaboration: improved classroom organization around guided-reading, working with non-fiction, matching/choosing appropriately-leveled books, promoting and improving student writing, and offering a choice to students. In most cases, the PLC built on existing teacher skills. Nina said she realized her experience in planning learning centers for her kindergarten students was a good foundation, “I had that background, so incorporating those skills into the Daily 5 with the PLC helped me.” Anna recalled how the Daily 5 implementation helped her identify the need to select and use different genres of literature as well as writing: “Now, I’ve been trying to implement a lot of non-fiction, incorporating more writing into it, even though it’s a shorter period of time…so the students can see the connection and try to improve their writing skills, as well.”

Prior to the PLC, several teachers said they struggled with choosing the most appropriately-leveled book for their students. During the PLC, Anna said, “It was good to see teachers getting on board with really realizing how important the levelized part of guided reading is, especially for students that aren’t on grade level.” Nina described overcoming her discomfort in matching students with the most beneficial literature as follows:
When we were going over running records and choosing how to choose appropriate guided reading books…I struggle with that, but I did feel after talking with, even Erica who is second grade and I’m kindergarten, she helped me feel more comfortable doing that…I feel better now choosing the correct guided reading book for the children and breaking them up into groups by their levels because of the PLC.

Organizing guided reading sessions was a topic that was often discussed during the teachers' collaborative conversations. Izzy highlighted the power of the practical examples teachers could offer each other when she said, “For me…I’m not quite as organized. [laughs] But sometimes just to see it, and see how someone else is organizing it, it makes more sense than just reading it out of the book.” Erica recalled that when she had “an issue and concern” about the organization of leveled books in her classroom, she was able to bring it up with her colleagues, and although they ended up using different approaches, she saw the conversation as very important in determining how each was going to address this organizational challenge. She described it this way:

I brought that up and I spoke with two kindergarten teachers and actually they’re now working on how they’re going to set theirs up and it’s a little bit different; the materials, they’re using little bags, I used bins. But they saw that I did it and it worked after they were the ones that gave me the suggestion…and then they were like, ‘Okay, well the bins might be hard for our children; we’re going to go with bags.’ They bought little canvas bags. So it’s kind of like playing off each other, but it worked, and I didn’t even think of the bins before.

The teachers in the PLC determined that offering students choices during the literacy block was essential to their new practice, and they found that collaboration was important in identifying the ways and means to do that. They focused on offering students a choice in both what centers they chose and their writing topics. Erica mentioned that the teachers worked
together to set up a process for students that was “an efficient way so that children get to choose out of the Daily 5 which ones they’re going to and when they’re going to go to them.” She described it this way:

…we’ve been working together to try to come up with some sort of chart or clothespins on how we were going to have children make the decision of choice. So, it’s kind of been another moment where we’re working together and trying to solve some, a problem that arises.

Erica explained one of the organizational dilemmas the PLC was instrumental in resolving this way:

…We were trying to talk about when the children move around and go from group to group, setting that up… but it wasn’t working before…and they would go get their writing folders and they would go and it would be chaos over there with everyone trying to get their materials. So I tried putting them in special areas and it still wasn’t working.

The PLC supported Erica in finding this solution. She happily recalled:

…we had talked about the different ways the children [were] storing their things and how it would be most effective for them to have all the materials they needed. And we talked about bins and, and I went out and bought 27 bins and we figured out how to set them up. And, the first day I brought them in, and all the children set them up, and it worked perfectly. They all were able to rotate from one station to another. They had all the materials they needed right at hand.

All teachers cited specific and practical outcomes relative to their guided reading practices, and they viewed their collaboration as time-saving and significant in making necessary adjustments to improve the teaching and learning in their classrooms. Specifically, they cited the time-saving organizational suggestions and the support working with new materials and adopting new techniques. At least three teachers discussed their enthusiasm and excitement generated from the
Professional Development. At another point Izzy discussed the impact of the Professional Development on her motivation:

Even when we, you know, when we planned to go to that conference on a Sunday, at first I was kind of like, ew, I don’t know. I don’t want to go on a Sunday. But it ended up being such a great experience. We met for breakfast, then we went to have lunch together and left at the end of the day, kind of excited about going home and getting stuff ready for Monday. [laughs]

Erica discussed the importance of Professional Development as an introduction to their collaboration:

We actually wanted to go to the next part, the next day. We were kind of disappointed because we missed The Café [the second day of the conference], which was the next day, and we really wanted to continue it. We felt motivated, excited, and we played off each other as far as we were all in it together.

Anna, a special educator, commented specifically on the PD's impact on them as veteran teachers:

The week after we came back from the literacy conference and we got to sit down and talk about what we had heard at the conference…and it was very exciting to be excited about trying something new after being veteran teachers for so long. You know, it’s good to be excited about change and going different ways.

In general, all of the participants commented how they felt renewed, invigorated, and less stressed with professional development opportunities and their collaboration. The participants discussed how the professional development associated with the PLC gave rise to increased knowledge and how the collaboration led to improved practices and decision making.

Participants shared how that the overall experience allowed them to recognize their need for
continued learning. Within this section, all five participants disclosed that they believed their instructional capacity had increased as a result of their participation in this PLC.

The teachers remarked that this new knowledge had essentially laid the groundwork for assisting them in improving student reading achievement at the Colonial Elementary School. This will be examined further in the next section.

**Impact on the Classroom: Student Performance**

Having discussed the various impacts of the PLC on the teachers as individuals and as they work together, I would next like to elaborate on how results from their efforts improved student learning experiences and achievement. [This is illustrated as the increasing concentric circles as shown in Figure 4.] Building on the graphic used previously, this adds a widened or an increased circle of influence around the teachers as they participated in the PLC. As these educators implemented new literacy strategies in the classrooms, their students responded positively and began to thrive academically. Three specific themes emerged from the data analysis of interview transcripts related to this impact. Responses suggest that interview participants (a) linked their collaboration and consultation experiences to the growth and development of stronger instructional/classroom practices, (b) believed that the outcomes associated with the PLC had a positive impact on classroom climate, and (c) recognized the single greatest impact on their teaching practices was the ability to recognize the potential of and move towards more student-centered learning practices and student ownership of learning.
**Stronger instructional practices.** All five participants agreed that their participation in this PLC led them to change their instructional practices related to literacy within their classroom. The PLC focused a great deal on understanding and implementing research-based organizational strategies, such as the Daily 5 program, designed to strengthen management of the literacy block. Some teachers focused on organizational changes, while others gave more emphasis to implementing the specific literacy strategies that were recommended. Participants remarked on the positive student outcomes that came of implementing pieces of The Daily 5. Erica explained her experience this way:

… the children are reading far more than they ever were in my classroom. First, they have their guided reading groups in which they’re with me, and we pick a strategy that we need to work on. The children then move to a read-to-self and then read-to-someone else and then building word-work. So I think that basically they’re reading all morning. So they’re reading a lot more due to the guided reading PLC.

Likewise, Izzy discussed that The Daily 5 Program helped her to keep focused on specific literacy strategies, such as the ways to read a book, and she noted a significant improvement with how her students were actually reading during the read-to-self block, as opposed to the less focused free reading time offered in previous years. Izzy explained how she taught specific strategies from The Daily 5 to support students in being more independent readers: “They know the strategies, and if they can’t read the words, they know how to read the pictures. They love to pull books that we’ve read and retell stories. So, that’s exciting.” Nina agreed that giving students more options was a practice PLC participants consistently discussed; she saw its positive effects in improving her students’ writing. She said:

Before I used to always give them a topic to write about. Now I give, I might give them some ideas, but I tell them they can write on their own. Again, this is something new in
my classroom, and again that’s not what I usually do. So it’s coming out of my comfort zone again and giving them [a choice].

Erica described the PLCs participants’ excitement when seeing improvement in students’ performance and ability to engage effectively with literature:

I think when we all started feeling really comfortable with working with The Daily 5 and we all kind of were sharing really positive experiences that we were seeing with our class which just gave you that extra boost, that, “Wow, it is working. It is a good thing.”

As result of the teachers’ improved instructional practices developed through the PLC, as well as the job-embedded professional development, students were reported to be reading and writing more and to have become more independent. Teachers reported seeing an improvement in their students’ skills. However, it wasn't just the results that were exciting, but the classroom climates in which they were being accomplished, as I will discuss in the next section.

**Classroom climate.** Interview transcripts revealed that teachers believed that the PLC transformed their classroom climates. Most teachers outlined the process as follows: they adopted a practice that they weren’t convinced was going to work, saw that their students succeeded beyond their expectations, and, encouraged, continued to raise the bar by increasing the rigor of the instruction. The teachers noted that their PLC experience led to higher expectations for their students as well as increased excitement and risk-taking among those students. Teachers themselves said they had more positive attitudes regarding the student learning taking place in their classroom. Erica connected student comfort and increased risk-taking with her own confidence level:

I feel that I feel more relaxed and comfortable, and I feel the children, because of that, feel more comfortable to take chances, to take risks. Um, I think they’ve become more risk takers…I think it's [the Daily 5 practices] made it more fun.
Izzy described at length her collaboration with another teacher associated with one of the Daily 5 activities, building read-to-self stamina, and the excitement as well as the competition that grew between the classrooms and with students. She said:

… and we went over the I-Chart and told the kids what the expectations were, and they got so excited about it. So then Nina and I would be going into each other’s classrooms about a week later and the kids would be telling “Mrs. Curry, we did 14 minutes today!”

So they really got excited about that and I think that was big.

Anna remarked on how her expectations were increased as she observed her students spending more time reading:

Now they read more themselves with, like, different prompted questions to look for while they’re reading. So that kind of opened my eyes more… where they say that the children actually don’t read at all by themselves for most of the day when they’re in school.

Although at the beginning participants were skeptical implementing new literacy practices as suggested by the professional development, they all recognized a positive shift in their classroom climates. As they increased the level of rigor with students, they reported that students became more excited about learning and more willing to take risks. Not only did students become more excited about the learning taking place in the classroom; they also took more ownership of their learning.

**Student-centered learning.** It is worthy of note that all participants detailed the single greatest impact on their teaching practices was the ability to recognize the potential of and move towards more student-centered learning practices and student ownership of learning.

Nina said the PLC forced her to reconsider on her teacher-directed practice:

Everything seems to be teacher-directed. But since this, I’ve stepped back…. Yes, since the PLC, I’ve stepped back. Because of all these great ideas and all these things we’re
learning. So, I’m so grateful for it because I don’t know if I would be there right now, stepping back as much...

Erica described her own instructional transformation and its impact on students:

I feel renewed in a way, it’s different. Um, we had talked before, you and I, a lot about that I work too hard [laughs], that I try and like, I do too much teaching and by letting go, I’ve changed….and, I feel good about it! I feel good about myself and I do see my children thriving and that to me, I’ve overcome an obstacle with myself here, right now… because I did, I knew I talked too much and I knew that I talked to them too much…and one thing that I’ve always had a problem with, it’s been teacher-directed, rather than student-directed.

Anna echoed Erica’s sentiments when she described the need for teachers to release responsibility to their students to promote increased independence. She said:

I think we’ve all kind of seen that the children need to do more of the work and we need to step back more. In the past, I think, we feel we always have to be talking in order to feel like we’re always teaching; and students, actually, the goal is for them to be independent learners… we need to talk less, and they need to do more in order to progress.

Study participants revealed that through the PLC’s Daily 5 Initiative, they were able to transform their traditional teacher-led practices to a more student-centered approach to teaching and learning. As teachers stepped back and allowed students to take ownership of their learning, they observed an increase in independence among their students. They acknowledged that releasing responsibility back to their students was a radical change in their teaching practice, which also led to a more positive classroom climate. Higher expectations, increased student excitement, and risk-taking, as well as increased student independence, were cited as the most powerful and
influential changes supported by the PLC. What follows is a discussion about a PLC’s influence on a school culture of collaboration and how this can be supported.

**A Collaborative School Culture**

As outlined in previous sections, the PLC impacted teachers personally and professionally and had a significant influence on student outcomes and on teaching and learning in the classroom. Figure 5 illustrates how the impact of the collaborative experience moves from the teachers to student performance and engagement and can influence the culture of the entire educational setting. An important consideration in seeking to sustain such positive outcomes is how school leadership can encourage and support a PLC collaborative experience in an elementary setting.

As discussed in the Literature Review, one of the PLC’s main objectives is to promote a culture of collaboration. Culture is defined by Merriam-Webster (2013) as the “set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or organization.” It’s been made clear in this study that a PLC supports a healthy school culture and, in fact, embeds a “culture of collaboration.” This culture of collaboration is supported by structures put into place for the teachers to engage in professional conversations that focus on instruction and student learning. These conversations aim to promote individual and collective responsibility for collaboration.

Within this section, discussion will focus on ways these educators suggested that the school leadership could support the PLC. Most importantly, the participants discussed how the
school environment had been impacted by teachers’ participation in the PLC as a culture of collaboration developed. Data analysis suggests that (a) there are practical supports and resources needed to sustain a PLC that building leadership can provide, (b) time and scheduling were the biggest challenges to implementing and sustaining a PLC, (c) trust and empowerment were the most significant outcomes of a collaborative culture, (d) a collaborative culture promoted high expectations of students and challenged some of their long-held beliefs about the power of collaboration; and (e) as a result of these important outcomes, teachers believed the PLC should be sustained.

**Supporting the PLC.** Study participants discussed several forms of support that they found helpful in establishing and sustaining a PLC in an elementary school setting. During interviews, acknowledgment was given to the importance of the principal as the building leader in supporting and sustaining the PLC. Participants suggested that building leadership should provide encouragement and resources as well as empower the teachers' collaborative efforts. Erica said that the principal’s support in helping teachers collaborate led to create greater consistency across grade levels, that she appreciated the principal's examination of research-based programs for possible implementation. She said:

Well actually, I think [the principal was] the person that basically got us all on board for this, and I believe it kind of started last year as we had our team meetings with our partner teachers… and, we started realizing that the K-2, didn’t have a strong phonics program and, [the principal] started saying we need to research and all be on board… So, I think, [the principal], as the cheerleader, is the person who needs to be able to push this and encourage us. So I think [the principal] played a role in us beginning this new process.

Additionally, study participants recounted how they appreciated being given resources such as the Daily 5 and Café books, resources that helped to guide their conversations during
their collaborative meetings. While these books provided the foundation for their work, Elaine revealed that she believed that teachers as collaborators were the most valuable resource. She said:

…because you can teach a kid without all the bells and whistles…..it’s nice to have….some things that we have, but I’ve done it without. What I think is the most important thing is, is just to help that individual PLC… grow or delve in…. It’s like differentiating, sort of, except with teachers.

In providing access to resources and professional development opportunities, the building leader was perceived to be nurturing and sustaining the teachers’ PLC. It is worthy of note that throughout the interviews, including in this section, teachers saw themselves as a valuable resource. The study participants all agreed that the school principal was fundamental to providing teachers with the necessary support and material resources. One crucial form of support, the teachers cited, was the time to meet. The next section will discuss the impact and challenge associated with scheduling.

**Time and scheduling.** The study participants discussed several obstacles to sustaining the PLC, and they all agreed that lack of time to meet and plan seemed to be the most significant challenge. Erica said that lack of collaborative planning time was a common issue in the elementary schools in their district. She believed that time built into the school day would enhance the work of the PLC. She said:

I think we need to find the time to meet, and I think that’s really the biggest factor in the PLCs as far as an obstacle, would be the time…and, I think just having, somehow, the principal help us find that time during the school day…So time is really the biggest problem; it really is. Um, in the type of school we’re in, there’s no coverage to allow in-school time, which would really be completely beneficial. There’s just no coverage for
that because of lower grade PLC you need coverage for several classrooms. But that would be probably the most beneficial thing in order to make it more successful.

Izzy agreed that common planning time needed to be built into the school day for a PLC to meet and collaborate about best instructional practices. She expressed this proposed schedule change as advantageous, but also admitted that she wasn’t confident it would happen:

We were able to find the time to meet together, um, and you know to discuss things, but there were times when we tried to meet on Tuesday mornings and it was hard for me to get here that early. So, timing was a frustration… and especially because there’s been so much going on this year and that’s what stinks… Well, it would be great for us to have time built into our schedule. I mean, planning time has been an issue, clearly, just regular planning time and getting our classrooms ready. If we could have, you know, time built into our schedule, where we’re really given the time to even have a more structured PLC. That would be a huge benefit…but, that’s like asking for a miracle! [laughs]

Nina admitted that she would often find small amounts of time during the school day and also talk on the telephone after hours to collaborate with her colleagues. She explained:

The disadvantages, again the time, not having a lot of time to plan, to share more ideas…to go over what works and doesn’t work…time. We tried to meet in the morning when, with Erica and Anna. We did that a couple of times, but having the time to really talk and meet, that was difficult. But with Izzy, we were always bouncing things off of each other on the phone…outside, when we were outside with the kids…at lunch. But having the time to really, uh, get down to the nitty gritty – we need more time.

Several study participants agreed that competing schedules interfered with the group being able to set a meeting time when all members would consistently attend. Anna said:
…it either has to be like before school or after school…and, you know, some of us still have to bring their kids to school and pick up the kids after school or because there isn’t any time during the day to do it.

Erica echoed these sentiments when she discussed how the teachers participating in the study were all in various stages in their lives and all had different scheduling conflicts. She expressed it this way:

I guess time constraint is probably the most frustrating and challenging part…is how we’re all going to meet. We all are very different. We all have different lives, different children at different ages and different things going on in our lives…so to try to really schedule time together…that we could have a big block of time to really get the conversations going and to work together. I think that’s probably most frustrating…you’re leaving one PLC and you’re feeling really excited and encouraged, but then you don’t get the time to be with those people again and then to talk about what happened during your day.

As this urban district did not have common planning time built into the day, study participants grappled with carving out times within their schedules to meet. Interviews revealed that teachers would often attempt to make time within their competing schedules to collaborate because they believed the time to meet was essential to implementing and sustaining their PLC. All participants discussed challenges related to time, but overcoming such a challenge was worth it, as they also agreed that trust and empowerment were important outcomes of finding the time to collaborate with their colleagues in the PLC. These outcomes will be reviewed in the next section.

**Trust and empowerment.** During the interviews, these veteran educators said they appreciated and valued the independence the PLC brought to them. They said that they never felt pressured or micromanaged by the building leadership. According to participants, this led to
a supportive environment where participants were able to take risks and feel safe. Erica highlighted that building trust among colleagues was integral to successful collaboration. She claimed that teachers needed to be open to new ideas and to make a commitment to be a part of the process and help each other. She said:

There’s a trust factor and, to feel comfortable that you can come out and say things aren’t working for you. A lot of people don’t like to admit that things aren’t working. So it’s trusting one another that you know you’re going to be there and help one another.

In addition to trusting PLC members, Elaine also said that it was essential that the principal had empowered the group to carry out their goals. As the trust is built, she said there was a stronger likelihood that teachers would not be competitive with each other. She explained:

I like that the principal trusted us, let us go, because it’s not good to be micromanaged, in my eyes. Some people maybe need it. But, when you do that, when someone is micromanaged… then you kind of lose your way because you’re so busy doing it that way. That you don’t, you don’t build your own…

Study participants described how they felt safe to take risks since they developed trusting relationships with each other. Teacher ownership of their PLC project was due in great part from the trust placed in them by building leadership. The strengthened relationships led teachers to believe in the power of collaboration. The next discussion will outline how this trickled down and led them to heighten their expectations of their students.

**Higher expectations.** All five veteran educators expressed a change in their expectations of their students and in some of their long-held beliefs about the power of collaboration. Through the course of the interviews, many teachers made remarks about the PLC’s ability to bring educators together in common purpose across grade levels and disciplines. For instance, some described the importance of including the perspective of the special educator as well as learning to build practices across and among grade levels. Elaine said that support derived from
the PLC collaboration allowed her to overcome her trepidation about implementing expanded literacy expectations and practices within her classroom. She described the impact of having multiple literacy practices taking place at one time this way:

I’ve learned to be trusting of what collaboration can do when it’s done in the right way. If it’s done without pressure and with trust… Yeah and then it [a new strategy] was working with the kids because, I thought, I never thought that that could work. Like two different books, this one’s reading, but you can, then it could go into buddy reading. This child is going to read a page or a paragraph from their book to show you their interest in it and this child and you’re going to listen to this child read.

The importance of expanded collaboration was also a consistent theme that ran throughout one teacher’s interview. Izzy described it this way:

I just think that, like I said, I think that having the opportunity to talk about what we see going on, has helped Nina and I kind of, because Nina gets excited in return, um, and we keep pushing each other forward with it… We were really excited about the posters and the stamina chart, but it was also something that we were able to share with the second grade teachers.

As study participants gained trust in the collaborative process, they also discussed how there was a shift into a culture of high expectations and increased academic rigor within their classrooms. Nina revealed how she overcame her earlier skepticism regarding her students’ ability to achieve at a higher level. She explained:

Giving them um, independence and like when we read-to-self for fourteen minutes and I didn’t think they could do it, but I also never thought, I didn’t think they would be able to write on their own, without me guiding them all the time.

Later during the interview, she added, “Honestly, I didn’t think the children could do it, and I’m so proud of them…and, I don’t know why I didn’t think they could do it.”
When talking about setting up student learning centers, Izzy acknowledged that after starting to collaborate in the PLC, she considered how to make more rigorous use of time than she had in the past:

We always tried to tie it into literacy, but I think there was some wasted time there. I think that the idea was that we wanted the kids to be actively engaged in centers so that we could pull a small group for guided reading. Honestly, if that happened two times out of the whole week, it was a miracle.

The special education teacher, Anna, pointed out the importance of collaboration between general education teachers and special education teachers to reach desired student outcomes. She said:

I think it comes down to and we all look at all our scores and where we stand. Doing it alone isn’t getting it, getting us where we need to be. When we look and we still have children in our classrooms that are like two years below grade level. There’s not one miracle that is going to do it…. We can’t keep doing what we’ve done for, or started doing 20 years ago, and try to, you know, keep the children learning at the pace that they need to be.

All participants emphasized that the PLC’s collaboration was a significant factor in changing their views about working in isolation, as well as increasing their expectations of their students. These educators developed leadership skills as well as a sense of ownership about their professional growth. As will be reviewed next, all of these outcomes led to their conviction that the PLC should be sustained.

**Sustaining the PLC.** All of the teachers said the PLC should be expanded and sustained because of the important and positive results they saw in themselves and their students. They said they had enhanced their instructional capacity through their collaborative discussions.
Elaine discussed how their teamwork fostered collaboration instead of competition. She explained it this way:

I think it’s helpful [to sustain the PLC] because of everything, all the gains that come out of it…and, you’re working together, you’re not competing. You’re working together so that the school can move forward and that’s a really good feeling.

During her interview, Anna agreed that she would be very interested in the PLC expansion to other grade levels at the school. She said, “So that some day if the whole building, you know, was on the same page, it would be great to see what the outcome could be.” Nina expressed a strong desire for additional time to collaborate. She also said she felt confident that she would continue to collaborate with her partner teacher. She described it this way:

I still feel I need, I want to pick their brains about the guided issues and good fit books. I don’t want this PLC to end… I want to keep doing this… the Daily 5 and guided reading, and I would love to keep working with the PLC. So I think it has made me a better teacher as far as guided reading and being able to be flexible… I know that we will continue, Izzy and I will continue to meet and talk.

Erica alluded to the cycle of reforms that she’s experienced during her career. She was hopeful that the PLC would be given additional time to develop into a permanent part of the school culture. She said:

It’s going to take a good three years, I believe, until you really see it coming together…and, I think that’s definitely a fault of ours, in general, because that if you don’t see immediate change, then we tend to stop. So we never know if anything actually worked or not. So I think giving it time is something that’s very important right now.

All participants emphatically agreed on the positive impact the PLC had within the school. They discussed the potential cultural shift that could grow from sustaining and expanding their collaborative practices. Study participants suggested that support of the PLC
include a shared focus, common professional development, basic materials and supplies, and, most importantly, common planning time during the school day and/or the resources to support their collaborative meetings.

**Study Propositions**

The influence the PLC had on this elementary school cannot be understated. As this data analysis has revealed, its impact began with individuals, how their views of themselves as teachers changed, how the practice of their craft changed, how they honed their instruction and improved their classrooms for students. More notably, the results challenged most research related to veteran teachers: study participants discussed openness to change and the value they found in collaborative practice. As a result, the PLC marked a cultural shift that could conceivably impact the entire school community. The findings in this study support the proposition that *current trends in education are moving towards teacher-led educational change* and that this paradigm shift has great value to students, teachers, and schools.

A review of relevant literature identified important propositions upon which the study rested. The next section discusses whether findings from this study’s empirical investigation coincided with these propositions or not. As is so often found in a qualitative study, most findings were neither proved nor disproved, but rather they extended the discussion surrounding the propositions and explained how participants experienced a phenomenon or how they viewed that experience.

The proposition that *PLCs improved instructional practices* has been supported by the study’s findings. Interview comments offered valuable evidence concerning how having a common topic and time to collaborate made explicit and noteworthy changes in how these teachers taught. The participants described how their collaboration supported them in making important changes to how they organized their classroom as well as how they delivered instruction.
The proposition that collaborative practices improve student learning has also been supported by the study’s findings. The teachers cited assessment data and anecdotal evidence that student literacy outcomes had improved as a result of practices supported by their collaboration in the PLC. Extending this conversation were comments related to how these teachers’ instructional practices became more student-centered. They described how they no longer believe that all instruction rested on their moment-by-moment direction.

Findings more than adequately demonstrated that veteran teachers have the knowledge and capacity to help improve student outcomes in a collaborative school setting. The veteran teachers in this study learned together, with and through each other. Their interview comments told how, at different times, each one saw themselves and each of their colleagues as a “More Knowledgeable Other,” leading the learning and being respected and appreciated for doing so.

Several study participants described how in their experience years of educational reform with changes of administration and district-led initiatives have tired educators and made skeptics of veteran teachers. Two teachers at the West Colonial School described their frustration with the cycle of new initiatives throughout their careers, but evidence would suggest this sentiment was likely shared by all participants. In fact, all participants remarked on a newfound willingness to change, collaborate, and adopt new instructional practices when they hadn’t always in the past.

The most striking and impactful findings in this study are concerned with refuting the position that veteran teachers resist change and prefer to work in isolation. Findings in this study demonstrated over and over again how these veteran teachers who were committed to autonomous practices could and would welcome change when supported through collaborative practices, such as those that exist in a PLC. Interviewed participants told of their resistance to change; they described their feelings of intimidation and inadequacy when faced with new practices. These findings refute most researchers’ assertions of veteran teachers’ cynicism and
complacency. Most remarkably, veteran teacher participants in this study’s PLC told of how they believed their new-found willingness to collaborate with their peers and adopt new practices should be adopted by all members of the school community. They said that they were willing to share the PLC impact and their belief that the collaborative practices should be promoted at the West Colonial School.
Chapter 5: Conclusions

Teacher Participation in a PLC

In 21st-century education, stakeholders are looking for innovative solutions to increase student achievement. Central to this goal is a focus on improving teacher effectiveness in the classroom and the ways school leaders provide support. It is important to examine new as well as existing pedagogical strategies as viable options to improve performance. One well-researched approach to staff development includes the establishment of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) of teachers. The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact this well-respected practice had on veteran urban elementary school teachers, individuals who often appear cynical due to numerous seemingly ineffective change initiatives that have resulted from educational reform and their resulting unwillingness to alter their traditional instructional practices.

Following in-depth interviews with study participants, I analyzed the data to discover their perceptions related to their PLC participation and its impact on them personally and professionally in order to highlight important outcomes for students as well as to uncover recommendations for supporting and sustaining teacher collaboration. The PLC collaborative practice has become common and therefore well-examined in secondary schools; this study answers a gap in the research, as it examines the teachers’ perceptions of a PLC at the elementary school level. This study reveals the views of five veteran teachers at the West Colonial Elementary School who were participating in a PLC with a focus on implementing a new literacy structure to improve student reading performance. The following research questions were used to guide the interview structure and obtain phenomenological data: 1) How do veteran elementary teachers describe how PLC participation informs their practice? and 2) How do veteran teachers describe their participation in PLCs in an elementary school? In answer to the first research question, I found that study participants believed the collaboration and job-
embedded professional development significantly contributed to improving teaching and learning. When asked to describe their PLC participation, subjects revealed that the PLC had a considerable impact on them personally and professionally. They talked about the surprising perceptual shifts they experienced as well as some of the reasons why they were so surprising.

As I considered veteran teachers and Professional Learning Communities, it was essential to examine the manner in which adults learn, independently as well as collectively. There is no one theory about adult learning, so I utilized three theories, or three separate lenses, to form a robust framework to examine the problem of practice and study outcomes (Figure 6). Andragogy, the first of these lenses, suggests that adults are self-directed and expect to take responsibility for their decisions. The second lens, Social Development Theory, specifically discusses how adults interact socially in order to acquire new knowledge. Through a lens comprised of educational reform and change process literature, I was able to review decades of educational change initiatives in order to consider the possible impact they had on veteran teachers and how such constant modification might lead to their resistance.

This chapter includes a discussion of the most noteworthy findings in response to the research questions and the relationship between the findings and the theoretical frameworks and extant literature. A conclusion with recommendations for encouraging and supporting a Professional Learning Community in an elementary school setting with veteran teachers will be
offered. What follows is a discussion of the impact the veteran teachers ascribed to their classrooms.

**Impact**

*Classroom practices enhanced.* All study participants boasted about their students’ positive learning outcomes as a result of the new literacy practices they implemented within their classrooms. They cited evidence from the Dynamic Indicator of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) Assessment which revealed a significant and consistent increase in scores from the beginning to the end of the school year. Veteran teachers’ excitement for collaboration came from this accelerated growth, as student performance improvement had been inconsistent in the past. Participant responses during this study outlined specific ways that the PLC supported stronger instructional practices, improved their classroom climates, and encouraged student-centered learning. They also agreed that a shared vision, customized professional development, and ample resources were all practical supports that aided in the successful outcomes of their PLC. In addition to the new pedagogical strategies they learned, participants spoke of their increased knowledge and capacity for instruction that came from sharing strategies in the PLC setting. These practical ideas were implemented in their classrooms, and teachers told how they saw a direct impact in the way these time-saving organizational strategies provided the structure for more student-centered learning opportunities and preserved important time-on-learning.

Each study participant brought previous experience and practical skills, whether it was with materials, organization, or classroom management. These veteran teachers described how they readily accepted guidance from each other as they shared schedules and time-saving strategies. This coincides with the literature, which found in the most successful PLCs that the “focus is not just on individual teachers’ professional learning but of professional learning within a community context – a community of learners, and the notion of collective learning” (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, Thomas, 2006, p. 225).
During the study, participants shared practical instructional strategies, including guidance about classroom management techniques. There was not a specific ‘More Knowledgeable Other’ (MKO), a fact which challenges or expands upon Social Development Theory, as each teacher shared her own individual insights and expertise, and all of the participants benefited equally from one another. This coincides with the research of Iancu-Haddad & Oplatka (2009) which says that veteran teachers utilize “their organizational influence” and years of experience to assist colleagues. These researchers found that when educators share their collective wisdom, collaboration also gives them an opportunity to gain new instructional practices (Iancu-Haddad & Oplatka, 2009). As educators met in the PLC, the teachers adjusted their organizational strategies regarding how they physically arranged their classrooms and how they reorganized their schedules to provide workshop time and additional small group instruction. Study participants agreed that these practical suggestions and time-saving techniques improved classroom management and their ability to spend more time on effective instruction. In fact, several educators remarked that the initial time invested in acclimating students in the new routines and protocols suggested by the PLC resulted in more effective and expanded time spent on learning within their literacy blocks.

My findings align with those of Fluckiger, McGlamery, and Edick (2006), which say that veteran teachers provide “needed support and collegiality by helping new teachers gain perspective and encouragement, implement strategies to get started, avoid isolation and manage workload,” (p.9). Study participants attributed the changes in their instructional practices as well as in the classroom environment to their ongoing collaboration within the PLC and also between “official” meeting times of the group. Their description of “the PLC” wasn’t always as a large group but often times included partner teachers or two grade level teachers who came together initially because of their connection to the PLC. This practice is important because of the challenges in PLC organization at an elementary school. More casual meeting time occurred
because it was more conducive to teachers’ schedules. The organization of the PLC at the elementary school may be more suited to less frequent larger group meetings and to a commitment to “partner and small group/grade level” meetings. Cross-grade, school-wide, subject-wide teacher meeting time is limited if not unavailable at the elementary school level; however, pairs of teachers/partners would find it easier to meet more frequently as part of a PLC structure agreement.

An educational reform lens and existing research is consistent with this study’s findings, as all participants agreed that years of numerous professional development workshops and change initiatives did not result in significant student performance improvement or positive school cultural shifts (Wells, 2008). The ongoing professional dialogue within the PLC helped teachers focus on their commitment to the Daily 5 literacy structure and opportunities to share small and early successes. Unaware of the PLC outcome claims of DuFour and DuFour et. al. (2004, 2006), the participants confirmed that the increased job-embedded professional development and collegial discourse within the PLC allowed their teaching skills to be honed and resulted in an improved learning environment for their students.

**High expectations promoted.** Researchers have found that when a school functions as a PLC, the faculty members take responsibility for themselves and expects high levels of learning for all students (DuFour, et. al., 2006). As an expert in the field, DuFour (2004) discussed how the implementation of PLC practices results in teachers working to end excuses for low student performance and seeking instead to determine the best instructional course of action based on the data they have. In the study at West Colonial Elementary School, educators focused on results instead of blaming extraneous factors such as student discipline and staff morale for low performance data; all of their effort was focused on student learning. Study participants described how, as they worked collaboratively to implement and assess new literacy strategies along with the impact on student learning; they found that their expectations for student
performance increased substantially. In addition to promoting higher expectations, teachers told how they became more committed to sticking with students as they struggled with challenging tasks. DuFour, et. al. (2006), explained this phenomenon in the following way: “The very essence of a learning community is a focus on and a commitment to the learning of each student” (p.2).

Based on their experiences in increasing instructional rigor within their classrooms and promoting higher expectations for each of their students, this study’s participants believed that it is vital that a PLC at the elementary school level be supported and maintained. It was also noted by the participants that the PLC encouraged these veteran educators to take risks in implementing new strategies inspired and supported by their colleagues’ experience. This idea strongly aligns with the Social Development Theory that suggests that people more easily develop knowledge and new skills after interacting with others and sharing ideas. These study participants were able to learn about effective instructional practices because they interacted and reflected in a social setting with their knowledgeable colleagues rather than isolating themselves in autonomous practices. This concept is further supported by Vygotsky’s Social Development Theory and the idea of a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which says that “a space is created between a more competent participant and a less competent participant for the purpose of guiding the latter to the most proximal developmental level with the assistance of the former” (Eun, 2008, p. 142).

An important observation made in this study challenges or expands on one of the tenets of the Social Development Theory; that learning is enhanced with the assistance of a More Knowledgeable Other (MKO). Participants discussed how shared professional development not only increased their skills but allowed them to readily accept support from other educators. None of the veteran teachers were experts in the Daily 5 initiative, and the professional development actually “leveled the playing field.” As mentioned previously, as there was no one
consistent More Knowledgeable Other per se, these teachers assumed the role based on personal strengths and were able to learn and work together. The shifting of the MKO role promoted a collaborative instead of competitive spirit among participants. Each veteran teacher described in her own way how the PLC collaboration changed her relationships with her colleagues, shifted the culture of her classroom, and improved student outcomes. Based on their individual previous practical knowledge, teacher participants were able to encourage each other to try different strategies that improved student performance and also enhanced the classroom climates. One notable result of these new strategies was much more student-centered learning, which will be discussed more in depth in the next section.

**Student-centered learning.** Study participants disclosed how the influence of the PLC allowed them to transform their style from teacher-directed instruction to more student-centered learning environments. Their classrooms became filled with student voice rather than teacher voice, differentiated learning centers, and structures to support and empower independent learning. Elmore (2007) encouraged this sort of move describing how progressive reformers promoted an important move from teacher-centered, fact-centered, recitation-based pedagogy to student-centered schooling system in the context of the real world.

All study participants strongly agreed that the greatest impact they saw in their own instructional practice was their newfound ability to release responsibility to students for their own successful learning. Researchers have long encouraged teachers to move away from the text books to offer a more student-centered curriculum that includes flexible scheduling, student choices, individualized instruction, and non-graded schools (Gelbrich, 1999). Teachers said they initially felt that “if they weren’t talking, they weren’t teaching and therefore the students weren’t learning.” The PLC conversations about the Daily 5 literacy practices that were supported by their shared professional development made them realize that students needed more of a “voice” in their own learning. During the interviews, the teachers described how their
students were transformed from passive to more active learners. Given the positive classroom outcomes associated with PLC research and in this study, it is important that school leaders recognize and support such collaborative practices in their schools, especially given that PLC participation positively impacted not only the way these veteran educators taught but also how they viewed themselves.

**Veteran teachers’ perceptual changes.** In answer to the second research question, it was found that the PLC experience influenced participants' perceptions about themselves, their practices, and their relationships with colleagues. It was remarkable how these veteran teachers, who were typically quiet and rather content with their instructional practices, were now excited and enthusiastic about the PLC’s efforts. It was clear from the analysis that the study participants actually attributed the significant shift in their perceptions to their participation in the PLC. Participants in this study expressed astonishment at the positive impact on their classrooms functioning and climate and disbelief at how quickly their students’ literacy skills improved. In fact, these teachers described how they moved from belief in the need to guard their autonomy in their classroom to valuing the strength of collaboration to improve practices. These findings add to extant literature, which does not describe these significant perceptual changes that participant teachers undergo as they experience a PLC and witness its positive impact on students.

**Trust and empowerment.** As a result of a recent state-wide focus on student academic growth rates, veteran staff with more traditional teaching methodologies became more open to new practices. DuFour, et. al, (2006) discussed that a PLC is composed of collaborative teams in which faculty rely on each other for support and are accountable to each other as they aim to achieve common goals. Similarly, participants in this study discussed how, with the support of their colleagues in the PLC, they could more readily explore novel practices that they may have not felt confident enough to do on their own. The findings of Stoll, et al., (2006) support the premise that mutual trust, respect, and support among faculty; inclusive membership; and
openness, networks, and partnerships are particular characteristics needed in a successful PLC. Coincidentally, study participants described the PLC as a safe environment in which they could freely be engaged and forthcoming about their goals, teaching practices, materials, pacing, questions, concerns, and results.

For years as building principal, I attended meetings with many veteran teachers to discuss new initiatives or concerns. I always viewed these veteran teachers as confident educators but reluctant to adopt new programs or curriculum, and I never recognized that change efforts actually intimidated them. Kosová, (2010) describes teachers’ insecurities as a common barrier to innovation. This finding alone has significantly impacted me as an elementary school leader and will inform how I approach and support veteran and experienced teachers in advancing school improvement efforts.

**Cultural shift.** Veteran teachers have always been highly-regarded and admired for their years of service and expertise. Similar to findings in the literature by Kardos, et. al., (2001), over the years, conversations with veteran teachers left me with the impression that they equated being a “good” teacher with their veteran/experienced status. In the past, new teachers entered the profession and sought out their advice and guidance on instructional practices and classroom management. I found it revealing that these veteran teacher study participants believed they had more to learn and were willing to continue efforts to improve student performance. Darling-Hammond (2000) suggests that “Veteran teachers in settings that emphasize continual learning and collaboration continue to improve their performance” (p. 6). In fact, all of the study participants conveyed their excitement for change as an attribution of their encouragement and support of each other as they adopted new collaborative practices. The descriptions offered by the interview participants in this study coincide with findings from DuFour et. al (2006), Fullan (2001), and others who suggest that PLCs can change the culture of the school on many levels, including the alteration of deeply-rooted traditional practices. This study’s findings point toward
the conclusion that the institution of PLC at West Colonial School has resulted in a positive school cultural shift. This suggests the relationship between PLC efforts and support to veteran teachers as continuous learners has strong potential to create the all-important change-agents that can transform elementary schools.

**Sustaining a PLC**

The PLC participants emphatically agreed that their efforts increased student achievement and boosted their own confidence. They felt excited, and they discussed their improved instructional capacity. Their experiences are aligned with findings by researchers such as Barth (1990), Fullan (2008), Hord (1997), and Senge (1990), who believe that, when fully supported, PLCs can produce exceptional results in instructional outcomes. According to findings in this study, the professional culture of a PLC at the middle and high school levels can and should be replicated and sustained at an elementary school as long as the supports are put into place by the school leadership; these are common planning time, access to job-embedded professional development, and a data-driven focus. All study participants stated that because of the success they experienced, they believed the PLC should be sustained.

**The role of school leadership.** As the principal at West Colonial School, I believe this study has had a significant impact on me in my role as a school leader. Not only did I learn from these veteran teachers of practical ways to support them while they participated in a PLC, but I gained valuable insight about myself as a leader. Prior to this study, I viewed myself as the primary architect of the vision and direction of my school and responsible for giving structure and resources to teachers to perform their duties. I believe I now see my role as less “top-down management” and more as a support to teachers who would lead change and improvement based on a school’s vision and goals, a realization I find all the more significant given that the teachers were discovering the same thing about their role in relation to their students’ learning.
The literature on PLCs has not yet fully discussed how the leadership style of a school principal could be reshaped as a result of PLCs in their schools. While conducting this study, I witnessed these teachers assuming and leading instructional change at a rate I never accomplished. I now believe it imperative that in order to be an effective school leader, I must release responsibility for student growth to teachers. By supporting PLC structures, I believe I can empower teachers in accomplishing the important educational improvement goals I had always sought to fulfill.

This study’s findings suggest that school leaders can rightly view PLCs and empowering teachers as integral to school improvement efforts and also can reshape their belief of what school leadership’s functions. Existing literature as well as participant interview statements, describe the supports these teachers require from a school leader. This practical topic will be discussed in the next section.

School support of a PLC. PLC participant responses described the support needed from school leadership. They agreed that a shared vision, tailored professional development, and material resources were all practical supports that aided in the successful outcomes of their PLC. Initially, as the principal, I had data-based conversations with educators to help establish a shared vision. The reports of mediocre student performance reports created a willingness among the teachers to consider employing the PLC collaborative practices I suggested. During the interviews, PLC participants told how they found it important that their time discussing student performance be structured, with a shared common goal and focused approach to addressing it.

In addition to a shared vision, all study participants agreed that the initial professional development they received regarding literacy practices, as well continual support from the district literacy coach, provided and sustained the common focus of the PLC. Similarly, in their research, Ford & Opitz (2008) found that teachers needed professional development that is tailored to meet individual or group needs and sustained to continue the implementation of any
or a guided reading practice. The time necessary for professional development opportunities, as well collaborative meeting times for educators will be covered in the next discussion.

**Time and scheduling.** Although collaboration still occurs among pairs and some intimate grade-level groupings, the formal or large-group PLC has ceased to meet. According to the teacher participants, this is due to lack of common planning time or funding to pay teachers to meet beyond the school day. One of the biggest challenges to implementing and sustaining a PLC in an elementary school setting will be to overcome the common planning time scheduling dilemma at the elementary level in order to establish this kind of excitement and commitment. The fact that these veteran educators believed they were not provided with adequate time to meet on a regular basis was the greatest negative point made during all their interviews. Teacher participants strongly suggested that common planning time built into the school day is necessary to avoid conflicting schedules and for all participants to be in attendance. DuFour (2004) asserts that when given the proper supports, a devoted group of staff members will stop making common excuses such as, “we just can’t find the time;” instead, they “will find a way” to collaborate and build the collaborative culture of a PLC (p. 9).

During the study, teachers agreed to meet for at least one hour after school each week since the contract did not provide common planning time during the school day. While the majority of the times teachers kept this commitment, the study participants also said that conflicting schedules did lead to occasional absenteeism. Along these lines, the literature by Watts and Castle (1992) found that lack of time is “one of the most difficult problems faced by schools and districts engaged in restructuring” (p. 2). These authors believe school leaders across the state and country must get creative with schedules and common planning for teachers if their efforts to support sustainable change are to succeed.

While built-in time during the school day would be an ideal way for teachers to meet and collaborate as part of a PLC, it is often not possible with the way in which most teacher contracts
have been negotiated and elementary schools' schedules are organized. I believe, because of these study’s findings, that educational leaders should continue to work with schedules and contractual limitations to investigate the possibility of common planning time during the school day. In the meantime, I would like to suggest that one way to address this may be for school leaders to solicit grants to fund this important work during after school hours.

Even though the large group is not meeting formally, I have been told and seen on my own that teachers are no longer working in isolation. In fact, the classroom doors are open, and all teachers are sharing and have become reflective about their instructional practices. Due to the success that study participants have experienced throughout their PLC participation, they describe their teaching roles as more complex, and they are convinced that they cannot do it alone. Their interview statements reveal that they have changed and experienced growth personally and professionally.

Reflection

There are three things that have struck me as a researcher and school leader in response to this study. The first is that elementary school teachers have had no opportunities to participate in collaborative practices, and while initially they did not understand the collaborative approach to improving student outcomes, they became re-invigorated through their PLC participation. Secondly, I had never connected veteran teachers’ reluctance to implement new programs with the self-doubts they described. Finally, this study has compelled me to reflect on my leadership style, ultimately reshaping it to focus on support for teachers.

Teachers re-invigorated. I was surprised by the increased confidence and enthusiasm that veteran educators conveyed about their PLC participation. I realize the importance of providing the collaborative structure for teachers to meet and empowering teachers to facilitate their own meetings and direction. I believe the study findings ought to suggest to all school leaders that teachers be trusted to investigate and implement instructional improvement. I am
convinced that even though the study participants agreed to participate in the PLC, their limited experience with collaboration meant they had little faith in its potential for them as professionals. Even after professional development was delivered, material resources were given, and the PLC meeting time was established, the veteran teachers did not appear to have high expectations.

I believe that excitement and confidence elicited from the veteran teachers rose partially because they initially had few or no expectations; when they experienced positive outcomes quickly, it motivated them to become more committed to the PLC and more passionate about their jobs. If I were to redo this study, I would perhaps conduct an initial meeting to help set the focus and also to clarify common language and structures and to set the bar for increased expectations. It would be interesting to investigate how participant descriptions and reactions would differ.

The positive collaboration impacts that the veteran teachers experienced are appropriately viewed with the andragogy as well as the Social Development framework; as there were empowerment factors that created more independence and seemed to aid and encourage adult learners. Their collaboration supported their journey from knowledge and theory to practical application. Study outcomes have compelled me to reflect on the number of times that school leaders send teachers to one-day trainings only to have little follow-through or provide trainings for initiatives that never get fully implemented. I have learned, by conducting this study, that it’s more important for me as a school leader to provide times for teachers to collaborate in a safe environment about research-based practices that they believe are important to improving student performance.

**Implementing new programs.** It has been eye-opening for me to see that, much like students, when teachers are empowered to structure their own learning and identify ways of implementation, they are more fully committed, passionate, and successful than they have been in response to anything the school district has attempted to implement over the past decade. This
was the first time in my nine years as principal at the school that I observed a commitment to collaboration and broad excitement over any initiative. I had never recognized that teachers’ reluctance to adopt new pedagogical practices should not be viewed as resistance to change but perhaps more appropriately as a failure on the part of school leadership to appropriately understand and support veteran teachers who may lack confidence. As in the case of this PLC study, as the teachers released responsibility to the students, the students developed more ownership of their learning and were more successful; likewise, I believe that through my support of the PLC, the teachers became more confident, leaders emerged from the group at various times and the initiative progressed faster and more successfully than if I had led it myself.

As a result of this study’s findings, I believe that district and school leadership should consider the way they choose to implement new programs in schools with many veteran teachers. Based on study findings, it should not be a pre-packaged initiative that is rolled out without considering a way to involve teachers in the process because as the lens of Andragogy suggests, when adults learn, they can become problem solvers and self-direct. In order for wholesale school improvement to occur, it is imperative that school leaders and teachers be committed to collaboration at all levels. I believe that as a school leader I need to turn the top-down model upside-down to encourage leadership at all levels.

**Leadership role.** Perhaps the most remarkable finding has been that while this study’s PLC significantly impacted teachers themselves, their students, their classrooms, and the school, it also changed how I viewed myself as a school leader. I never imagined that this study would cause me to reflect so deeply on my role as school principal in supporting teachers. This study has caused me to question and reflect on my leadership role and examine my priorities within the school. While I had possessed a belief in shared leadership prior to the study, I now realize the power and influence I may have over teachers may be based on my position itself. What began
as an investigation as a way to help teachers improve has turned out to be a lesson on leadership. While I always valued the teachers’ input regarding curriculum design, I realize that it is essential to include teachers at the onset of any initiative if I expect to replicate the many positive impacts of this study. Moving forward, after facilitating a shared focus, I believe that I can best serve the students in my school if I continue to empower all educators to collaborate, to help identify valuable professional development, and to support them in implementing new practices.

As I reflect on my experience in conducting this study, I have learned that, as a school leader, the most essential component to improvement in my school is supporting collaboration. I now know that it isn’t only providing the supplies that teachers need, or addressing the common planning time challenges. I know that my actions clearly communicate that I trust the teachers in my school and that I am committed to empowering them by giving them the responsibility for their students’ growth and success. In summary, my biggest lesson is that while this study significantly impacted teachers to change personally and professionally, it also changed me. I would like to see this study replicated in other elementary schools, with veteran and non-veteran teachers, across more grade levels, with and without embedded common-planning time, to confirm or challenge my findings.

**Recommendations**

This study’s findings suggest important considerations school leaders must consider when seeking to encourage and support collaborative PLC practices in an elementary school. These recommendations should include:

- Educating PLC participants on common language of collaboration and PLC practices
- Utilizing data to identify areas of need in student performance and identify specific areas of shared focus for PLC efforts
• Offering common professional development to all PLC participants to “level the playing field” and provide the foundation for discussion

• Providing necessary resources (ex. books or professional development experts) to PLC participants; an expert should be someone who can gain the trust and respect of PLC participants

• Considering more frequent partner/small group/grade level meetings (ex. weekly) that contribute to a large-group PLC that meets less frequently (ex. monthly) if common planning time is an issue at the elementary school level

• Empowering teachers to become leaders in the process by not micro-managing the PLC agendas and efforts

• Acquiring funding through grants or other ways to provide weekly after school stipends or monthly guest speakers to meet with students which would enable teachers to be released from their teaching duties for the purposes of meeting in their PLC

Conclusion

As the researcher and principal at the West Colonial Elementary School, I hoped to learn about the perceptions of veteran teachers in a PLC which would suggest how they can be supported to improve instructional practices and educational outcomes for students. I discovered that while it may take some organization and creativity, implementing and sustaining a PLC at an elementary school is a worthwhile endeavor. This phenomenological study found that a PLC had significant impact on its participants. Findings demonstrated that a school can experience exceptional growth in teaching and learning after gaining veteran teachers’ interest in collaborating about the need for student performance improvement. This study strongly suggests that, contrary to common perceptions and research, veteran educators do not have an unchanging
commitment to autonomous practices; rather it is their isolation and lack of support for
collaboration that has made them insecure and reluctant to adopt change.

One of the most noteworthy outcomes was that the teachers themselves said this
experience allowed them to accept and get excited about change, and they believe it was
important that their non-participating colleagues would also experience it, so much so that they
presented the PLC concept, their experiences, and relevant student data at a staff meeting with
the goal of encouraging others. After they presented, the teachers in Grades 3-5 (the rest of the
faculty) decided to commit one afternoon per month of their individual planning time to coming
together in a PLC with a focus on literacy practices.

Although this study was limited by the number of participants, it certainly adds to the
body of research and extends conversations about the image of veteran teachers and the potential
impacts of PLCs in elementary schools. This investigation has demonstrated with strong
evidence that a PLC in an elementary school can be transformative for all involved, including
school leaders like me, and is worthy of being supported.
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