EXAMINING PLCs IN AN URBAN HIGH SCHOOL:
AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF TEACHERS LEARNING
FROM OTHER TEACHERS

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Abstract

This phenomenological study applied Bandura’s (1986) social cognitive theory (SCT) to understand the learning experiences of teachers in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Specifically, the study examined the lived experiences of teachers learning from other teachers in PLCs. The research addresses a gap in the literature and provides practical insights for those implementing PLCs. Through interviews with teachers, three themes emerged: teacher modeling is an integral component of PLCs, teacher conversations allow more in-depth discussion of topics, and sharing feedback allows teachers to learn from each other. Teacher modeling occurs when lessons, student behavior, or other classroom activities are demonstrated to help teachers learn from other teachers. Step-by-step demonstration process, hands-on learning, and one-on-one learning are all way that modeling takes place. Conversations between teachers provide them an opportunity to learn from other teachers by asking questions and discussing a number of topics. Feedback is valued by teachers during PLC time. Feedback is usually verbal and provides teachers with opportunities to take advantage of the insights they are receiving from their colleagues. Teacher modeling, conversations, and feedback are integral components of the lived experiences of teachers learning from other teachers in a PLC.

*Keywords: Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), modeling, conversations, feedback*
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In loving memory of Anthony P. DeMarco III
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Chapter 1: Introduction

As school leaders compete for ‘Race to the Top’ money or other performance-based funding, one area that continues to receive attention is the development of effective teachers (Harris & Jones, 2010). Prior research has focused on individual teacher performance and student outcomes, but research regarding the value of teachers sharing best practices in schools is still in its early stages. Existing research tends to focus on the implementation of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and teacher collaboration, rather than the lived experiences of teachers learning from other teachers in PLCs.

A Professional Learning Community (PLC) is a “group of teachers who meet regularly with a common set of teaching and learning goals, shared responsibilities for work to be undertaken, and collaborative development of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) as a result of the gatherings” (Richmond & Manokore, 2010, p. 545). Student learning is the main priority when teachers work in PLCs (Richmond & Manokore, 2010), and the knowledge teachers gain as a result of learning communities is often based on teachers learning from other teachers. For the purpose of this study, learning is defined as “the activity or process of gaining knowledge or skill by studying, practicing, being taught, or experiencing something” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). “Teachers may improve on their practice by learning from each other” (Richmond & Manokore, 2010, p. 545). PLCs provide teachers with an opportunity to learn from one another.

Great Schools Partnership worked closely with the study site as PLCs were implemented (Great Schools Partnership, n.d.). Great Schools Partnership is a non-profit organization that provides support and coaching to schools (Great Schools Partnership, n.d.). They helped the study site develop a working definition of PLCs and set the guidelines for implementation. Based on their definition, PLCs are described as teams who share the same content area (Great
Schools Partnership, n.d.). These learning communities meet regularly to learn from one another as they discuss teacher work, student work, research, or data (Great Schools Partnership, n.d.). “The goal of these groups is to capture and build on the knowledge and skills of participating teachers in ways that will help them increase the aspirations and achievement of their students” (Great Schools Partnership, n.d.). PLCs are thought to bring structure to professional conversations and provide an opportunity for colleagues to share pedagogical philosophies, content knowledge, and instructional strategies, while also working through challenges as a group (Great Schools Partnership, n.d.).

**Statement of the Problem**

Hord (2004) provided an in-depth look at the history of PLCs, crediting *A Nation at Risk* (1983) as the spark that led to learning communities in schools. Her study identified under-qualified teachers and lack of training as two of the fundamental issues in education (Hord, 2004). In 1990, Peter Senge’s *The Fifth Discipline* focused on learning within organizations. Several authors used Senge’s ideas and applied them to educational settings resulting in the use of the term ‘learning communities’ (Hord, 2004). “When teachers had opportunities for collaborative inquiry and its related learning, the result was a body of wisdom about teaching that could be widely shared” (Hord, 2004, p. 6). Once educators realized that learning communities could improve learning in schools, they began to allocate teachers’ time to meet and work together to share ideas (Hord, 2004).

Teachers act as leaders when PLCs work effectively. PLCs can be used as a tool for staff development, while also acting as a powerful strategy for school and system improvement (Harris & Chrispeels, 2008). Shared-decision making is an integral component of learning communities (Hord, 2004). If PLCs function properly, then they give teachers an opportunity to
share best practices (Leithwood et al., 1997). Additionally, properly functioning PLCs provide teachers with a chance to continually improve their practice (Leithwood et al., 1997). In general, PLCs provide teachers with an allotment of time to model lessons, share best practices, and learn from one another as they attempt to enhance teaching practices.

Teacher learning is an essential component of PLCs. As teachers continue to learn, they share information with their colleagues so they can improve student learning (Harris & Muijs, 2005). The Alberta Commission on Learning (2003) found, “Teachers continuously seek and share information and act on what they have learned. All of their efforts are concentrated on improving their practice so that students can achieve the best possible results” (Alberta Commission on Learning, 2003, p. 64). Along with sharing information, feedback from teachers is important in order to fully understand their lived experiences as they learn from other teachers in PLCs.

However, existing research about PLCs tends to examine teacher learning without significant input from teachers themselves (Harris & Jones, 2010; Kramer & Crespy, 2011; Richmond & Manokore, 2010; Rigelman & Ruben, 2012; Riveros, Newton, & Burgess, 2012; Servage, 2008; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). The intent of this study is to focus on learning as teachers describe their own experiences in PLCs in their own words.

PLC meetings vary from school to school. At the study site, teachers are members of the staff working in PLCs on a weekly basis and meetings are bi-weekly for about forty minutes. Teachers meet before students enter the school from 7:35 a.m. to 8:14 a.m. PLCs are specific to each department and give teachers an opportunity to learn from one another. For example, the history department meets as a PLC to discuss student data, student work, and to share best practices. In general, the mission of a PLC is to encourage teacher learning as a means to
improve student learning in the school. Each PLC has at least one facilitator who is in charge of organizing the bi-weekly meetings. Facilitators had to apply for the position and were selected by the administration. They are in charge of planning meetings, surveying their colleagues for feedback, and finding the best use of time for their group.

PLCs emphasize learning within a group and provide teachers with an opportunity to share knowledge with one another. “The focus is not just on individual teacher’s learning but on professional learning within the context of a cohesive group that focuses on collective knowledge and occurs with a context of mutual trust and learning” (Harris & Jones, 2010, p. 178). Examining teacher experiences in PLCs allows for a better understanding of how teachers learn from one another as they work in PLCs.

**Significance of the Problem**

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) have become common in schools and attempt to support teachers learning from each other (Riveros et al., 2011). PLCs are implemented in schools to ensure that teachers are working together to improve student achievement (Wells & Feun, 2013). Yet, Richmond and Manokore (2010) described PLCs from the point of view of teachers: “Participating teachers viewed themselves as professional learners who came not only to recognize issues with their own understanding and practice but learned to leverage their own and others’ knowledge as well” (p. 558). Accumulating knowledge from peers assists teachers with their goal of improving achievement. “The professional learning community model is a grand design—a powerful new way of working together that profoundly affects the practices of schooling” (DuFour, 2004, p. 6). PLCs provide opportunities for school improvement (Wells & Feun, 2013). This seems to be the most popular component of PLCs. Focusing on the learning experiences of teachers provides the opportunity to consider multiple
aspects of PLCs—the positives and negatives as perceived by those who make up the PLC.

“One of the points usually stressed in the literature on professional learning communities is that teacher practice or teacher practices are something that is/are to be improved through the strategic application of a collaborative decision-making model” (Riveros et al., 2011, p. 204). Lovett and Cameron (2011) indicated PLCs benefit new teachers, while Rigelman and Ruben (2012) expressed their belief that learning communities promote teacher learning. There are just a few recent studies that examine the potential benefit of PLCs (Harris & Jones, 2010; Hipp, Huffman, Pankake, & Olivier, 2008; Kramer & Crespy, 2011; Rigelman & Ruben, 2012; Richmond & Manokore, 2010; Riveros, Newton, & Burgess, 2012; Vescio, Ross, & Adams 2008). However, greater depth in examining teacher experiences in PLCs is still needed. This study provides the reader with an in-depth analysis of PLCs at a high school in the Northeast, including interview data from members of the staff, and recounts the lived experiences of teachers learning from other teachers in PLCs.

Members of the staff at Random High School (RHS), a pseudonym for the study site, have been working in PLCs for four years. Prior to this study, no data were collected at RHS regarding PLCs, other than a brief survey given to the PLC facilitators. Individual PLC facilitators have asked for feedback in the form of surveys, but this has not been a consistent practice throughout RHS. The interviews in this study were a way to delve deeper into the experiences of teachers who were learning from other teachers in PLCs. This research is useful to the staff and administration at RHS, as well as the central office administrators and those outside the school system. Currently, PLCs are being implemented district-wide, which means results from this study may be used to help other schools in the district during the implementation process. Input from teachers is an essential component that can be used to
ensure PLCs are working toward district-wide goals. Beyond this school and district, this 
research addresses a gap in the literature with regard to the lived experiences of teachers learning 
from other teachers in a PLC.

Positionality Statement

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) were implemented at RHS four years ago. A 
new principal, who will be referred to as Dr. Smith, explained to the staff that PLCs were the 
best way to keep moving the school forward. Members of the staff learned about PLCs during a 
professional development seminar. Staff members were initially resistant to PLCs, but Dr. Smith 
made sure to emphasize the potential benefits of learning communities, including the chance to 
learn from one another. After initial staff resistance, PLCs were adopted by the school, and 
teachers applied to become PLC facilitators. PLC facilitators organize and run bi-weekly 
meetings. Most departments have two facilitators that work together to plan meetings and work 
toward departmental goals, which are developed by facilitators, department heads, and other 
administrators. They are not considered administrators and were chosen solely to assist with the 
PLC process.

Four years ago, I was chosen as the PLC facilitator for the history department at RHS. I 
believed that PLCs would benefit our school and wanted to work as a leader in our department. 
The history department has a second facilitator who works with me to plan the meetings. In the 
last four years, the school has revised the curriculum and common assessments, created common 
Document-Based Questions (DBQs), shared lessons, analyzed data, examined student work, and 
worked to implement a new flipped-learning model. It has given staff members a chance to learn 
from one another and accomplish many of our departmental goals.

The intent of this research study was to present an unbiased descriptive view of teacher
learning experiences in PLCs through semi-structured interviews. In my role as a facilitator, I have seen the value of PLCs and therefore have a positive bias toward their usefulness. However, by clarifying my own position on PLCs, I was able to bracket out my own personal bias as I considered the experiences of those interviewed.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of teachers learning from other teachers in a PLC at an urban high school in Massachusetts. Data collected through interviews were used to understand the process of teachers learning from other teachers as they work in PLCs.

**Research Question**

This study sought to understand the learning experiences of teachers in PLCs. The primary research question for this study was: How do teachers at an urban high school in Massachusetts describe the lived experience of learning from other teachers in a PLC? Data were collected by interviewing participating teachers. The experiences teachers described can help school administrators determine the value of learning communities and help them to develop strategies that can be used during the implementation process. Teacher interviews also allow the reader to gain valuable information regarding PLCs.

**Theoretical Framework**

Social Cognitive Theory guided this study. Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) was first discussed in Bandura (1986) and further developed in a number of his research studies. “Social cognitive theory adopts an agentic perspective to human development, adaptation, and change” (Bandura, 2002, p. 269). SCT focuses on people’s acquisition of behavioral patterns and the fact that individuals learn better from people they can relate to (Bandura, 1986). PLCs give teachers
an opportunity to learn from one another. During PLC time, teachers examine student work, review sample lessons, and share any other knowledge they have gained from their experiences. This study examined the perceptions of teachers learning from other teachers in PLCs to better understand their lived experiences.

PLCs are thought to enhance teacher learning while giving staff members an opportunity to learn from one another. People learn the best from people who are most like them if they are willing to share common ideas (Bandura, 1986). PLCs are built around the idea of teachers sharing best practices. They also focus on teacher improvement and learning through observation, which is also described as key component of learning Bandura (1986) described. Thus, PLCs should provide teachers with an opportunity to share and learn from one another. Based on the description provided by Bandura (1986), SCT is the most appropriate theoretical perspective for this study.

**Mastery modeling.** Bandura (1988) described mastery modeling as the process of teachers learning from one another. He described it as an essential component for teachers working collaboratively. Bandura (1988) described the three aspects of SCT as “developing competencies through mastery modeling, strengthening people’s beliefs in their capabilities so they make better use of their talents, and enhancing self-motivation through goal systems” (p. 276). PLCs give teachers an opportunity to learn from other teachers and Bandura (1988) indicates that mastery modeling can help people develop competencies and certain skills they can utilize in the classroom. (See Table 1.)

**Application of theory.** The three components discussed in Social Cognitive Theory each contain at least two steps, as Table 1 lists. The first of these is mastery modeling. Mastery modeling gives teachers an opportunity to learn from their peers. Bandura (1988) described
three steps to the process:

First, the appropriate skills are modeled to convey the basic competencies. Second, the people receive guided practice under simulated conditions so they can perfect skills. Third, they are helped to apply their newly learned skills in work situations in ways that will bring them success. (p. 280)

PLCs provide teachers with an opportunity to master each of the three components Bandura (1988) described. First, protocols are used to give teachers an opportunity to model lessons and have them critiqued by their peers. The presenting teacher provides the other staff members with a sample lesson, giving the presenter an opportunity to work under simulated conditions. Eventually, feedback assists the teacher as they continuously improve their lessons.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component to SCT</th>
<th>Mastery Modeling</th>
<th>Strengthening Beliefs</th>
<th>Enhancing Self-Motivation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td>Skills are modeled</td>
<td>Practice in simulated situations</td>
<td>Continuous practice prior to implementing new skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>Guided practice under simulated condition</td>
<td>Receiving informative feedback</td>
<td>New skills are practiced in situations that will provide success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3</td>
<td>New skills applied in work conditions</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Second, teachers have a chance to practice skills during PLC meetings. Protocols are typically used to examine sample lessons. A protocol is a list of steps that the teachers follow to
examine student work or a sample lesson. It helps to guide them through this process. A protocol is used when one teacher brings in a sample lesson and shares it with the rest of the PLC group. In order to strengthen beliefs, practice takes place in simulated situations and feedback is received (Bandura, 1988). The teachers listen to the participating teacher as they describe the lesson and take notes. Typically, they examine the work for five to ten minutes and then share ‘cool’ (critical) and ‘warm’ (positive) feedback to the teacher. Protocols may vary, but this is the basic idea. This process coincides with the second step of mastery modeling.

Finally, teachers have an opportunity to apply their new skills. Once a teacher receives feedback from their peers, they have a chance to adjust their lesson. Teachers share the results of their adjusted lesson with the teachers at future PLC meetings. Enhancing self-motivation is the final component discussed as part of SCT. Self-motivation is enhanced when (1) continuous practice takes place and (2) new skills are practiced that will lead to success (Bandura, 1988).

There are direct links between the aim and application of PLCs and the construct of mastery modeling, a major component of SCT. SCT was useful as a theoretical framework for this study because PLCs require teachers to share best practices as they learn from one another in order to improve overall performance.

Summary

This study examined the lived experiences of teachers learning from each other in PLCs. Interviews were conducted to obtain valuable information from teachers to better understand their experiences in PLCs. Understanding teacher learning experiences in PLCs provided valuable insight into learning communities.

Key Terms and Definitions

Best Practices: Procedure that is considered the most effective way of doing something (in
teaching this typically refers to lesson plans) (Vesely, 2011).

Learning: “The activity or process of gaining knowledge or skill by studying, practicing, being taught, or experiencing something” (Merriam-Webster online).

Mastery Modeling: Bandura (1988) describes mastery modeling as the process of teachers learning from one another.

Professional Learning Community (PLC): A group of teachers who meet regularly to work together and learn from each other and who share common teaching and learning goals (Richmond & Manokore, 2010).

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT): SCT focuses on people’s acquisition of behavioral patterns and the fact that individuals learn better from people they can relate to (Bandura, 1986).
Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter links the research regarding PLCs with literature that examines implementation of PLCs, teacher learning in PLCs, teachers learning from other teachers in PLCs, and potential shortcomings of PLCs. Based on a thorough review of literature, there are a number of key issues related to teacher experiences in PLCs, as well as the overall effectiveness of PLCs. Literature reviewed in this study can be organized into four topic areas:

1. Implementing PLCs in schools;
2. A culture of learning through PLCs;
3. Teachers learning from each other in PLCs;
4. Potential shortcomings or problems associated with PLCs.

Each of these topic areas is explored in this review of the literature to better understand the potential benefits and downfalls related to PLCs.

Implementing PLCs in Schools

Richard DuFour (2003; 2004; 2007) wrote extensively about PLCs. It should be noted that DuFour is a proponent of PLCs who actively promoted the use of learning communities in schools. DuFour is cited by many authors as an authority on implementation of PLCs. DuFour’s works show a bias in favor of PLCs, but provide significant information about the implementation process. DuFour (2007) identified successful implementers of PLCs as well as ineffective implementers. For example, DuFour (2007) analyzed schools where several school administrators assumed their school was working in PLCs, but which did not meet many of the criteria. Instead, these schools were working in teams and not necessarily in learning communities (DuFour, 2007).

PLCs focus on learning and attempt to improve teaching practices, which was not always happening in the aforementioned schools (DuFour, 2007). DuFour (2007) did not state there was an exact recipe as to what constituted a PLC, but explained that a school should “focus on
learning rather than teaching, work collaboratively on matters related to learning, and hold itself accountable for the kind of results that fuel continual improvement” (p. 8). These are the same criteria missing in many of the schools discussed by DuFour (2007).

Servage (2008) and Muirhead (2009) each wrote about how the implementation of PLCs can take a significant amount of work, but that it can also benefit schools. In order to incorporate PLCs into a school, Higgins, Weiner, and Young (2012) suggested the use of implementation teams. Their research showed that implementation teams are instrumental to facilitate the process to establish PLCs (Higgins et al., 2012).

Abbott and Fisher’s (2011) work has been influential for many attempting to incorporate PLCs into their school districts. Sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education and Great Schools Partnership, Abbott and Fisher (2011) discussed five dimensions that help schools develop professional learning communities. The dimensions described are school leadership, staff culture, professional development, instruction and achievement, and policies and resources (Abbott & Fisher, 2011). A strong emphasis is placed on the school leadership team and that they must take the lead to develop professional learning communities (Abbott & Fisher, 2011). The pair suggest that in order for PLCs to be successfully implemented, a culture of “trust, respect, and transparency” must be present among members of the staff (Abbott & Fisher, 2011, p. 7).

The implementation of PLCs is extremely important (Bullough, 2007). Conclusions from Bullough’s (2007) study showed that PLCs attempt to “build teacher strength” (p. 179). As teachers gain control over the decision-making process in schools, they are more likely to implement new practices. “Ignoring teacher autonomy often ensures that teachers don’t implement new practices” (Knight, 2009, p. 511). PLCs are a way to provide teachers and PLC
facilitators with sufficient autonomy to make positive changes.

**Shared leadership during implementation.** Some authors (including Leach & Fulton, 2008), argued that shared leadership in regard to PLCs is an essential component that every school should consider. The pair described the concept of shared leadership and its benefits for those working in PLCs. They state that shared leadership begins with the principal, but includes each of the stakeholder groups. In order to share leadership in a school and implement PLCs, Cranston (2009) discussed how trust was an important factor, explaining, “Trust was seen as critical for both the individual development and collective collaboration that leads to learning in a professional community” (p. 11). This is supported by the assertion that implementing PLCs in a school must be a vision that is spearheaded by the principal with a shared vision and trust from all of the stakeholders (Leach & Fulton, 2008).

Sheppard and Brown (2009) had similar feelings about using shared leadership to implement PLCs in schools, and stated that shared leadership was an absolute necessity when creating change in a district. They even argued that implementing PLCs required a school district to develop leadership capacity (Sheppard & Brown, 2009). Their research included a case study that involved district-wide change using a collaborative approach.

**Teacher leadership during implementation.** Implementation of PLCs extends from the principal to the teachers in a school. Lambert (2006) wrote that schools can improve by incorporating shared leadership. In Lambert’s study, teacher roles were carefully delegated by the administration, but stressed that teacher leadership roles helped teachers to learn from one another. “As leadership capacity grew, teachers experienced a personal and collective journey from dependency to high levels of self-organization” (Lambert, 2006, p. 244). Leadership capacity increased as a direct result of shared leadership and teacher learning in schools in
Lambert’s study.

Carson, Tesluk, and Marrone (2007) discussed implementation of PLCs in their work. This quantitative study brought forth a lot of information on shared leadership, but the most telling result was the fact that coaching by an external team leader assisted in the implementation of PLCs. Based on their findings, schools should outsource professional development to effectively implement a shared leadership model like PLCs. Unfortunately, this may not be possible for every school district or organization. The study also stressed the importance of using shared leadership in a professional setting.

In similar fashion, Contractor, DeChurch, Carson, Carter, and Keegan (2012) examined collective leadership and the potential benefits it can have within an organization. Contractor et al. (2012) conducted an extensive study that further developed earlier concepts of collective leadership and shared leadership. Their research showed the potential benefits of using a collective leadership model by examining prior studies and showed evidence that shared leadership is an effective method of leadership that helps encourage teacher learning.

**The role of the principal.** Muethel and Hoegl (2012), Thompson and McKelvy (2007), and Wilhelm (2010) discussed the role that the leader plays in shared leadership and PLCs. The authors state that a principal has to be willing to delegate authority to teachers (Thompson & McKelvy, 2007) while also modeling their expectations to staff members (Wilhelm, 2010). Although shared leadership can be effective, it is not an easy process for many principals. Portlin (2010) described many of the difficulties principals face using a shared leadership model. But evidence provided by Lambert (2006) after thorough analysis at several schools demonstrated that shared leadership can be effectively used.

Muethel and Hoegl (2012) explained that professionals make conscious decisions to
either follow or not follow a shared leadership model. They set out to answer the question, “Is shared leadership effective in independent professional teams?” (Muethel & Hoegl, 2012, p. 1). The authors presented evidence that shared leadership can be an effective method of leadership if the principal is able to delegate authority to staff members. PLCs give teachers a chance to become more involved in the day-to-day decisions, while also requiring them to take on leadership roles, as discussed by Wilhelm (2010) and Muethel and Hoegl (2012).

Leadership was also discussed by Skytt (2003). Skytt (2003) built a foundation for future researchers, including Abbott and Fisher (2011), by saying that “leadership is a key factor in the success of professional learning communities” (p. 7). A principal that uses distributed leadership and is willing to support teachers are two of the key elements expressed by Skytt (2003) and “attention has shifted from solo models of leadership to more collaborative forms of leadership” (Higgins et al., 2012, p. 385). This shift to shared leadership is part of the collaborative process that starts with the principal.

A Culture of Learning Through PLCs

Teacher learning in PLCs. “The key rationale for having PLCs is to provide opportunities for teacher learning” (Richmond & Manokore, 2010, p. 558). Professional learning is thought to make teachers more effective and help them to produce desired results (Rosenholtz, 1989). “Studies which have been done clearly demonstrate that a learning community model can have a positive impact on both teachers and students” (Vescio et al., 2008, p. 88).

PLCs support learning. A focus on learning can lead to productive learning communities. “A shared vision that will result in creation of environments that are supportive and conducive to teacher learning is critical for the development of successful and productive PLCs” (Richmond & Manokore, 2010, p. 546). Teachers can potentially benefit from PLCs once learning becomes
part of this culture (Richmond & Manokore, 2010).

There is the possibility for teachers and students to improve learning in schools when PLCs are in place (Vescio et al., 2008). It is suggested that a focus on teacher learning in PLCs will have a direct correlation with student learning (Vescio et al., 2008). “This model is working to shift teachers’ habits of mind and create cultures of teaching that engage educators in enhancing teacher and student learning” (Vescio et al., 2008, p. 89). Educators have the opportunity to share important ideas in PLCs, which is also thought to improve learning in schools (Muirhead, 2009).

DuFour (2004) examined Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) extensively in his research. He suggested they developed as a way to ensure that learning takes place in schools. If implemented properly, PLCs give teachers an opportunity to observe student learning, while also developing curriculum and common assessments to improve learning (DuFour, 2012). Teachers understand that learning together can improve student achievement (Wood, 2009). Muirhead (2009) explained that PLCs, if properly implemented, improve student learning and foster teacher growth.

Servage (2008) summed up the growing popularity of PLCs best when she said, “The concept of a professional learning community has captured the collective imagination of North American educators with its promise of fundamentally altering teaching, learning, and the bureaucracy and individualism that pervade so many schools” (p. 63). It is this promise that has influenced many schools to incorporate learning communities as a way for teachers to learn from one another with student growth in mind. Servage (2008) indicated that PLCs, if used properly, enhance learning in schools. Similar ideas are echoed in research conducted by Hord (1997), Thompson, Gregg, and Niska (2004), as well as Rigelman and Ruben (2012).
Hord (1997) explored professional learning communities and considered them “communities of continuous inquiry and improvement” (p. 2). This is similar to the concept discussed by DuFour (2004) who suggested PLCs can improve learning in schools as a direct result of teacher collaboration. A learning community described by Hord (1997) has students, teachers, and administrators invested in learning. Investment in learning is one of the potential benefits stressed in literature regarding PLCs and learning. Hord (1997) went beyond the basic concept of learning, describing the main reason learning communities are important for both staff and students: teachers can observe one another in the classroom or provide each other with sample lessons. Once lessons are reviewed, teachers give one another constructive feedback that is used to improve teaching.

Feedback. Constructive feedback is also an essential building block to learning communities (Thompson et al., 2004). Thompson et al. (2004) stated that schools should be about adult learning and that student learning would improve as adults learn. PLCs give adults an opportunity to learn from one another. While many schools attempt to provide adult learning opportunities through professional development programs, Hord (1997) took teacher learning one step further. She explained that teacher learning should include classroom observation and feedback, leading to improved learning at all levels (Hord, 1997).

Langford (2015) focused heavily on the use of PLCs to implement change, but touched upon the importance of feedback, describing feedback as a component that enhances teacher learning. “This feedback from teaching colleagues was significant in that it embellished the reservoir of resources exponentially and thus increased learning capacity” (Langford, 2015, p. 171). In a similar fashion, Bailey (2014) studied the implementation of PLCs, noting how feedback helps add to teacher confidence. Harris and Jones (2010) found it was typical for
members in a productive learning community to accept feedback. Hipp et al. (2008) used the term “critical friends” to describe the relationship between teachers in a PLC. “Critical friends is credited widely for the dramatic change in the way teachers come together as a faculty to learn from sharing and feedback” (Hipp et al., 2008, p. 183). However, they do not provide additional details on the experiences of teachers with feedback.

Research examined in this study shows teacher learning can improve overall learning in schools. There is a direct correlation between teacher learning and student learning in schools (Rigelman & Ruben, 2012). Rigelman and Ruben (2012) added to research conducted by earlier authors by describing the positive impact PLCs can have on teaching in schools. Teaching has grown more and more complex over the last several years (Hammond, 2010) and many students do not reach their full capacity as learners (Rigelman & Ruben, 2012). PLCs provide staff members with an opportunity to improve pedagogy and teaching practices and increase learning in an organization (Hord, 1997).

**Student learning in PLCs.** Hord (1997) described student learning as a priority of PLCs. As established, researchers indicated that PLCs lead to better student learning in schools. Student learning takes place through authentic pedagogy, organizational capacity, and external support (Hord, 1997). Most importantly, student learning can improve with external support (Hord, 1997). PLCs give teachers a chance to discuss support strategies. DuFour (2004) explained that a “coordinated strategy” can help ensure that student learning is taking place (p. 2). Coordinated strategy refers to the process that schools use when working in PLCs (Dufour, 2004).

Both DuFour and Hord emphasized the importance of student learning. DuFour (2003) examined a school district that decided to place a particular emphasis on student learning through
the development of PLCs. The superintendent of the district asked every school to find a way to monitor student learning while also developing ways to assist students experiencing difficulties with learning (DuFour, 2003). Hord (1997) and DuFour (2003) agreed that student learning is a priority in schools and PLCs are an effective way to monitor whether or not progress is taking place toward that goal.

**Teachers Learning from Each Other in PLCs**

**Teacher modeling and learning in PLCs.** Professional learning communities build a culture of collaboration and, in many cases, give staff members a chance to work together toward a common goal (DuFour, 2004). As teachers model and share lessons, they work together to improve teaching and learning. Harris and Jones (2010) explained that “successful professional learning communities work together to inquire and to generate new professional knowledge” (p. 178). The knowledge that is generated by working together is part of the learning experience in PLCs. These learning experiences can be expressed in different ways. For example, Vescio, Ross, and Adams (2008) provided evidence that PLCs give teachers an opportunity to learn and discuss student work.

PLCs also give teachers an opportunity to share and model new ideas, concepts, and knowledge with one another. “The collaborative act of sharing resources that individuals bring to and receive from other PLC participants can result in learning” (Richmond & Manokore, 2010, p. 555). Richmond and Manokore (2010) found that teachers enjoyed the relationships they developed while in PLCs and “acknowledged that they learned” from one another (p. 558). Relationships were a direct result of learning that took place in PLCs (Richmond & Manokore, 2010). The team effort during PLC meeting time and the ability to learn from one another are two of the many reasons why PLCs are implemented in schools.
Sharing best practices is thought to have a major impact on teacher learning. “Studying best practices has value and utility as a form of teacher learning” (Servage, 2008, p. 65). PLCs give teachers an opportunity to share best practices with one another as part of the learning process. These opportunities often include modeling the new strategies and then providing teachers with an opportunity to practice the strategy followed by a period of time for self-reflection (Garet et al., 2001).

Teacher modeling can also be an effective way for teachers to learn, giving them an opportunity to improve practice by trying newly-learned strategies. Lambson (2010) described the value of this process by describing the way in which the learner acquires skills through practice. Modeling can assist teachers of all ability levels, but research suggests it has the greatest impact on new teachers (Lambson, 2010).

PLCs bring teachers together and give them a chance to build a strong sense of community (Servage, 2008). PLCs allow teachers to take part in practices such as “peer observations of practice, analysis of student work, and study group” (Jacobson, 2010, p. 39). Each of these practices gives teachers an opportunity to learn from one another. “The underlying assumption in professional learning communities is that peer collaboration has the potential of transforming teaching practices in ways that will bring about a higher rate of student achievement” (Riveros, Newton, & Burgess, 2012, p. 204). Rigelman and Ruben (2012) expanded on previous research, emphasizing the impact PLCs have on teacher learning.

**Conversations.** Lovett and Cameron (2011) wrote about the importance of conversations between teachers in PLCs. “A particular interest is the opportunities these teachers have to engage in focused conversations with other teachers about how to improve their teaching and learning” (Lovette & Cameron, 2011, p. 88). The authors generated ideas about the
significance of conversations, but further research is necessary to fully understand the impact they have on teacher learning.

Bailey (2014) also discussed these conversations in her research, writing, “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” (p. 105). In this example, Bailey demonstrated a potential benefit of conversations, but does not delve into the teacher perspective on this topic. Additionally, Bailey (2014) noted that teachers “engage in professional conversations,” and focus on student learning during PLC time (p. 87).

**New teacher learning.** Lovett and Cameron (2011) and Lambson (2010) are the primary authors who described how PLCs benefit new teachers. First year teachers face a number of different challenges (Lambson, 2010). The first years of teaching are typically described as an essential time for a teacher who is trying to become an expert (Lovett & Cameron, 2011). The early years of teaching can also be extremely difficult and a bit overwhelming (Lovett & Cameron, 2011; Lambson, 2010). Evidence seems to support that teachers can overcome many of these challenges by learning from experienced teachers in Professional Learning Communities.

New teachers can benefit from PLCs in a number of ways. They have the opportunity to work closely with experienced colleagues and learn specific teaching practices from veteran teachers (Lambson, 2010). “Both pre-service and beginning teachers can benefit greatly from opportunities to participate in practices alongside veteran teachers” (Lambson, 2010, p. 1667). Modeling lessons is one such opportunity for new teachers. Lovett and Cameron (2011) cited several studies that present evidence of the need for teachers to learn from one another.
PLCs also help new teachers become acclimated to the culture and practices within the school (Lambson, 2010). Eventually, new teachers increase participation within their group and the school in general (Lambson, 2010). As new teachers begin their “professional journey,” they have a support system in the form of PLCs that benefits them as educators (Lovett & Cameron, 2011, p. 80).

**Potential Shortcomings or Problems Associated with PLCs**

Teacher learning is a potential benefit of PLCs. However, the literature also shows that there are some questions and potentially negative issues that can arise when PLCs are implemented in schools. The common criticisms of Professional Learning Communities include difficulty implementing PLCs, difficulty sustaining PLCs, and failure to use PLCs appropriately. Additionally, the time required to collaborate properly is also considered a potential shortcoming of PLCs.

**Common critiques of PLCs.** PLCs require a great deal of support from the administration and are difficult to implement in schools that have trust issues and (Muirhead, 2009). Administrative support (or lack thereof) is a deciding factor in the implementation of PLCs (Muirhead, 2009). Several authors, including Muethel and Huegl (2007), explained that the principal plays an important role in the implementation of PLCs. This role is critical and not every principal is right for the job (Muirhead, 2009). A principal should be willing and able to designate teachers as leaders in the school, while sharing leadership with them. If a principal is not willing to share leadership, then it may be difficult for a school to implement PLCs.

Servage (2008) also critically examined PLCs and explained that professional learning communities, which study best practices as a way to improve student outcomes, were a complete “representation of collaborative processes” and in and of themselves were “not transformative.”
(p. 65). Servage (2008) described how critical reflection is a missing component of many PLCs. Failure to provide time for reflection in PLCs is a “short-sighted and impoverished use of collaborative dynamics” (Servage, 2008, p. 70). Critical reflection gives teachers an opportunity to think about their profession, lessons, and interactions with students.

Servage (2008) stressed transformative learning and critical reflection during PLCs and stated time for reflection was essential. This is in contrast to the concept of using PLCs as time for group learning. PLCs should go beyond day-to-day educational practices to truly be successful (Servage, 2008). Teachers should have an open line of communication during PLC meetings, discussing short readings to converse about government legislation and its impact on schools (Servage, 2008). An open line of communication gives teachers an opportunity to have a bigger voice in the school, while also allowing them to discuss issues they deem necessary to school improvement. Teachers can share experiences and discuss scenarios that delve into larger areas of concern, such as “social, economic, and political characteristics of their local school communities” (p. 74).

Tarnoczi (2006) was critical of PLCs, challenging the assumption made by many authors that PLCs have a positive impact on teaching and learning in schools. Much of the early literature focused on the ability of teachers to take on a specific attitude and change their beliefs (Tarnoczi, 2006). The idea of “modifying individuals takes place in school districts as a way to give the administration and local politicians a greater influence on the educational system” (Tarnoczi, 2006, p. 5). Teachers expect to have time for collaboration during PLCs, and a vested interest in the direction of the school. Tarnoczi (2006) suggested that teachers do not in fact have the ability to influence the direction of a school through the use of PLCs, and, as such, PLCs rarely “live up to teachers’ expectation[s]” (p. 21).
**Proper use of PLC time.** Muirhead (2009), Servage (2008), and Tarnoczi (2006) discussed obstacles that PLCs face on a daily basis. However, they failed to adequately discuss ways to address these issues. Lujan and Day (2010) offered ways to overcome roadblocks. First, they described some of the roadblocks, which include: time restraints, isolation among teachers, and divergent views among teachers (Lujan & Day, 2010, p. 14). Of these, an essential roadblock discussed was time, and Lujan and Day (2010) emphasized how PLC time should be reserved only for those in the group. PLCs should meet consistently and have structured meetings (Lujan & Day, 2010). Overall, the pair suggest that training is the most effective way to overcome roadblocks (Lujan & Day, 2010).

**Sustaining PLCs.** Leadership and administrative support play a crucial role in the sustainability of PLCs (Kilbane, 2009). Sufficient time, echoing Lujan and Day (2010), and support from the administration are two ways Kilbane (2009) suggested ensuring sustainability of PLCs in schools. Kilbane (2009) found leadership to be a potential limitation to PLCs by reviewing the actions of teachers at four schools and focusing on the restrictions brought forth by the administration. For example, the administration restricted the topics teachers could discuss during PLC time because they were concerned with members of the staff trying to challenge the administration by questioning school practices (Kilbane, 2009). Yet, this undercut the teachers’ ability to communicate freely and undermined the autonomy the processes was supposed to foster.

**Summary of Literature Review**

The potential benefits of PLCs include the opportunity for teachers to improve teaching and learning in schools. PLCs have some potential drawbacks (Servage, 2008; Muirhead, 2009; Tarnoczi, 2006; Lujan & Day, 2010; Kilbane, 2009). The common criticisms of PLCs are they
can be difficult to implement, difficult to sustain, and some schools fail to use allotted PLC time to collaborate properly.

Servage (2008) developed a working definition of PLCs, describing them as collaborative groups that improve student learning. Working together is essential for schools to be successful. Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, and Thomas (2006) spoke to this bias, stating that teachers working with one another promote teaching and learning in schools. Muirhead (2009) encapsulated the positives, stating, “Professional learning communities offer a format that gives educators the opportunity to share with their colleagues what are the most important skills and knowledge that students need for being successful in their next grade” (p. 47).

PLCs can benefit both teaching and learning in schools attempting to improve student achievement (Wells & Feun, 2013). Wells and Feun’s (2013) extensive research in multiple schools that had implemented PLCs found, “The expectation that teachers would be analyzing student learning for the purpose of improving teaching delivery and student achievement was now part of the culture” (p. 254). Schools that implement PLCs do so with the expectation that student achievement will improve as a result.

Failure to appropriately collaborate and the question of PLCs’ sustainability are two of the criticisms of PLCs in the literature. Servage (2008) stated that PLCs should be used to provide teachers with time for self-reflection, a recommendation inconsistently incorporated. Support from the administration and sufficient time for PLCs are two downsfalls discussed in Kilbane (2009) and Lujan and Day (2010). Kilbane (2009) cited leadership as a potential roadblock to PLCs, while Lujan and Day (2010) described how common planning time should be reserved for the teachers within the group. Both present evidence that the limitations can impact the sustainability of PLCs.
After reviewing the literature it is evident that research in this doctoral thesis adds to prior studies regarding PLCs. Literature covers a variety of topics, including benefits, downfalls, and even the ways that teachers learn in PLCs. However, the lived experiences of teachers learning from other teachers in a PLC is an area that necessitates additional research.
Chapter 3: Methodology

This qualitative study used an interpretative phenomenological analysis to understand the learning experiences of teachers as they work in PLCs. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted and analyzed to gain understanding of the learning experiences of teachers in PLCs. Research was guided by the following research question: How do teachers at an urban high school in Massachusetts describe the lived experience of learning from other teachers in a PLC? This question focused on the lived experiences of teachers working in PLCs and was purposely open-ended to give teachers an opportunity to provide their own responses and perspectives. The research question was designed to allow teachers a chance for self-reflection on their learning experiences in PLCs. Teacher self-reflection provided the researcher with valuable data regarding the way in which teachers learn from other teachers in a PLC.

Research Design

Qualitative paradigm. Qualitative research has a particular focus on the human experience (Jackson, Drummond, & Camara, 2007). Qualitative researchers collect data from the research site and often talk with people to in order to gain detailed information on an issue or a situation and can “empower individuals to share their stories” (Creswell, 2013, p. 48). Teachers interviewed described their experiences in PLCs, allowing for understanding of their shared learning opportunities.

Qualitative research is also used when “a problem or issue needs to be explored” (Creswell, 2013, p. 47). It helps people understand a particular issue (Creswell, 2013). In this study, the issue explored was teacher’s experiences in PLCs. A qualitative approach provided the reader with an in-depth exploration of teacher experiences and their overall feelings about working in PLCs. Quantitative research would not have allowed for the thick description of
personal experiences. Thus, qualitative research was the most appropriate methodology for this study.

**Phenomenology.** Phenomenology is “the study of lived experience or the life world” (Laverty, 2003, p. 22). Understanding phenomena is the focus of phenomenology (Ehrich, 2005). “Phenomena include anything that appears or presents itself such as feelings, thoughts and objects” (Ehrich, 2005, p. 2). Studying phenomena provides a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of the participant. “The study of these phenomena intends to return and re-examine these taken-for-granted experiences and perhaps uncover new and/or forgotten meanings” (Laverty, 2003, p. 22). Phenomenology “would not separate mind from matter: rather it pointed to experience as one is conscious of it as a central feature of life” (Ehrich, 2005, p. 2). It is an attempt to understand the lived experience in daily life (Laverty, 2005).

Edmund Husserl, considered the father of phenomenology, argued that phenomenology was the “basis of a programmatic system in philosophy” (Smith et al., 2009). Ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions all contribute to an understanding of phenomenology. Ontology examines the “nature of reality and ‘being’ in the world” (Laverty, 2003, p. 27). Understanding one’s reality or being in the world places the emphasis on one’s lived experience. Epistemology studies the “relationship between the knower and the object of the study” (Laverty, 2003, pp. 27-28). In a phenomenological study, emphasis is placed on an individual’s interpretation of events and the description of the lived experience. Knowledge is seen as reflective of a person’s experiences (Hutton, 2009). The axiological assumptions of phenomenology coincide with the subjectivity that is associated with research (Hutton, 2009). Assumptions regarding phenomenology support the interpretivist frame work where knowledge is diverse, establishing research methods that demonstrate the lived experiences of the participant.
A phenomenological study is one that “describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). This approach gives the researcher a chance to peel back the layers and get to the core of an issue or subject under investigation. The investigation focuses on a “group of individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 78). Data collection involves interviewing individuals in the group. The unit of analysis moves from considering individual experiences to the identification of the shared experience of group members.

An additional element of a phenomenological study is the researcher’s ‘bracketing out’ of their own experiences and perspectives related to the subject under investigation (Creswell, 2013). Bracketing allows the researcher “to identify personal experiences with the phenomenon and to partly set them aside so the researcher can focus on the experiences of participants in the study” (p. 78). Acknowledging one’s personal experiences gives the reader a chance to decide whether a researcher has “focused solely on the participants’ experiences in the description without bringing himself or herself into the picture” (p. 79).

**Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).** Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is an “examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 1). IPA delves into the “meaning of the experience to participants and how participants make sense of that experience” (Smith, 2011, p.9). Emphasis is placed on what meaning individuals ascribe to their experiences, how they describe, and how they understand the lived experiences being investigated. IPA is concerned with the “detailed examination of human lived experience” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 32). Phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography are considered the philosophical underpinnings of IPA, drawing key ideas from each
of these concepts (Smith et al., 2009).

Phenomenology was first described by Husserl in the early 1900s. The researcher remaining true to the particulars and how they reveal themselves is a key aspect of phenomenology as described by Husserl (1960). Staying true to the facts help the researcher to carefully examine the experiences of the participants (Smith et al., 2009). Husserl was: particularly interested in finding a means by which someone might come to accurately know their own experience of a given phenomenon, and would do so with a depth and rigor which might allow them to identify the essential qualities of that experience. (Smith et al., 2009, p. 12)

Examining a phenomenon to understand the human experience is one of the critical components of IPA.

Hermeneutics is the second major component of IPA and focuses heavily on interpretation of a phenomenon and “an important part of intellectual history and offers important theoretical insights for IPA” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 28). Understanding the fundamental concepts of hermeneutics allows a researcher to “thicken their understanding of the research process” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 29). “IPA is concerned with examining how a phenomenon appears, and the analyst is implicated in facilitating and making sense of this appearance” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 28). Hermeneutics is concerned with the “methods and purposes” of interpretation to make sense of the phenomenon (pp. 21-22).

Idiography is the third influence on IPA, focusing heavily on the particular (Smith et al., 2009). As a result, IPA studies are detailed, use a small sample size, and require a thorough analysis (Smith et al., 2009). “IPA has a commitment to an idiographic level of analysis – which implies a focus on the particular, rather than the general” (Larkin & Thompson, 2011, p. 102).
This focus on the particular is the third in final component that contributes to an IPA study. Phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography all have a major influence on IPA and its emphasis on examining lived experiences of people experiencing a particular phenomenon. This study used IPA to investigate “what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, pp. 76-77) and examined the use of PLCs at RHS to find the ‘real’ and the ‘natural attitude.’ The researcher began from the assumption that teacher attitudes can vary based on their experiences in PLCs. This study used IPA to understand the lived experiences of teachers learning from other teachers in a PLC. Interpretative phenomenological analysis provided a careful and detailed examination of participants’ shared learning experiences. The detailed analysis and sense-making of teacher experiences in PLCs gave the researcher a chance to delve deeper into the contribution of PLCs make in teacher learning.

Analysis requires interpretation of the phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). “There is a phenomenon ready to shine forth, but detective work is required by the researcher to facilitate the coming forth, and then to make sense of it once it has happened” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 35). The researcher must uncover details and information that may be hidden beneath the surface. This study carefully examined and interpreted teacher interview responses to elucidate teacher learning experiences in PLCs. In the same light, an IPA study is described as a ‘double hermeneutic’ because the “researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 3).

**Site and participants.** The research site is Random High School (RHS), an urban high school with about 1,500 students. Professional learning communities (PLCs) were implemented at RHS in 2011 as a way to serve the diverse student population, while also improving teacher and student learning at RHS. RHS has a racially diverse student enrollment where white
students comprise 45% of the population, Hispanic students 40%, Asian students about 7%,
black students about 4%, and ‘other’ is roughly 4%. 55% of the students speak English as a
primary language. English is not the first language for 47.3% of students in the district, but
many have adopted it. 55 different languages are spoken in the district and 27 different
languages are spoken by RHS students.

As a result of the diverse student population, the administrative team sought ways to meet
the learning needs of all students. One way to do this was the establishment of PLCs. PLCs
gave teachers an opportunity to work together with the best interest of students in mind. At
meetings, teachers interact directly with the PLC facilitators on a bi-weekly basis. They discuss
student work, teacher lesson plans, and work to revise common assessments. The relationship
between a teacher and the facilitator is the same as any other teacher-to-teacher interaction. As
described below, facilitators are members of the staff that organize meetings. They are not
administrators and are not expected to act as such.

Typically, IPA studies have a small sample size that can be studied in detail (Smith et al.,
2009). The study site has learning communities for each of the core subject areas, as well as
physical education and the arts. This study focused on a small sample size from the core subject
areas, providing an opportunity to examine and analyze participant responses in great detail. It is
typical to interview “between three and six participants” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 51). In this study,
six participants from the core subject areas were interviewed to help the researcher understand
the learning experiences of teachers working in PLCs. Purposeful sampling allowed an in-depth
look at PLCs by selecting “information rich cases” (Patton, 1990, p. 169). “Information-rich
cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the
purpose of research, thus the purposeful sampling” (Patton, 1990, p. 169). The sampling came
from a small homogenous group, which allowed for an in depth analysis of a “particular subgroup” (Patton, 1990, p. 173).

109 teachers work at RHS and come from a number of diverse backgrounds. The majority of teachers are white Americans, but there are also teachers who are African American, Hispanic, Asian, Russian, and several other nationalities working at RHS. Teachers at RHS have varying levels of experience. The majority of staff members working at RHS are in their first 10-to-15 years as a teacher. Most staff members have a background in education and a small percent worked in another career prior to teaching. Each classroom teacher is part of a content-specific PLC group that works to improve student learning at RHS.

PLCs are made up of the teachers at Random High School. Each department has its own PLC meeting on a bi-weekly basis. Administrators are not part of a PLC at RHS, delegating most of the decision making to the teachers in these learning communities. Each PLC has a facilitator that plans the bi-weekly meetings and acts as a middle ground between teachers and the administration. However, the facilitator is a teacher and is not expected to act as an administrator.

Participants were asked to participate in the study to provide an understanding of the way in which teachers learn from other teachers in a PLC. Many of the teachers were interested in providing data that could benefit teaching and learning at RHS. Teachers were favorable to an opportunity to voice their opinion on PLCs and discuss their understanding of potential concerns and/or benefits. Teachers that participated in the phenomenological study provided the principal investigator and the researcher with valuable data on this topic.

**Data collection.** The most common form of data collection in a phenomenological study is interviewing (Creswell, 2013). Individuals that have experienced the phenomenon are
interviewed to help the researcher explore the impact of their experiences within an organization (Creswell, 2013). Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. “In the semi-structured interview, the researcher has a specific topic to learn about, prepared a limited number of questions in advance, and plans to ask follow-up questions” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 31). Interviews were between eight and ten questions with the potential for follow-up questions using the semi-structured format. Semi-structured interviews (see Appendix C) were used to encourage the interviewee to give detailed responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Interviews followed both a topical and cultural format. Topical interviews focus on facts, events, and any examples that help answer the research questions. On the other hand, cultural interviews attempt to help the researcher understand norms and values that are responsible for people’s behaviors or their traditions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The research question in this study focused on PLCs and the experiences of teachers during common planning. Interviewing staff members can be an efficient and helpful way to compile data from significant stakeholders (Butin, 2010).

The interview process has been described as having a “conversation with a purpose” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 57). Conducting interviews as a “conversation with a purpose” gave participants an opportunity to discuss the topic in depth and encouraged them to tell their story in their own words (p. 57). Many RHS staff members had been working in PLCs for almost four years at the time of the study, giving them an adequate amount of experience with this topic. Setting up the interviews as a “conversation with a purpose” gave them an opportunity to contribute their knowledge of PLCs, and more importantly, their shared experiences in a learning community.

Interview sessions relied on a schedule of interview questions. The practice of
developing a schedule can help a researcher to “think explicitly” about what topics they want to cover in the interview (Smith et al., 2009, p. 58). “The aim of developing a schedule is to facilitate a comfortable interaction with the participant which will, in turn, enable them to provide a detailed account of the experience under investigation” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 59).

Interview questions are usually broad and open-ended (Creswell, 2013) and “prepared so that they are open and expansive” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 59). This gives the participant an opportunity to reflect on their experiences and provide open and honest feedback. Questions in the interview did not lead the participant toward answers and were open-ended enough that participants had the opportunity to formulate their own thoughts and opinions (Smith et al., 2009). In order to make the participant feel comfortable with this process, questions were asked that required them to recall information from a specific experience (Smith et al., 2009). See Appendix C for interview questions.

Interviews were conducted after Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained. Interviews were recorded. Each participant was interviewed twice for approximately 90 minutes. Field notes were kept from each of the interviews. As the participant reflected on their experiences, notes were taken that were later analyzed for deeper meaning. Field notes were organized after each interview to help make sense of participant answers. Personal experiences were identified so bracketing could take place while field notes were written.

**Data analysis.** Once the data collection process was complete, each interview was analyzed following a step-by-step analysis recommended by Smith et al. (2009). Smith et al. (2009) described a six step process to analyze data in an interpretative phenomenological study. They suggested starting with a case-by-case analysis and then eventually looking for patterns across cases to make sense of the phenomena, specifically “analyzing the first case in detail,
moving to the second case and doing the same, then moving to the third case, and so on” (p. 82).

The steps are:

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Step 1: Reading and re-reading

Step 2: Initial noting

Step 3: Developing emergent themes

Step 4: Searching for connections across emergent themes

Step 5: Moving to the next case

Step 6: Looking for patterns across cases (Smith et al., 2009, pp.82-101)

The first step in the process was a line-by-line analysis, which required the researcher to first read and then re-read the interview (Smith et al., 2009). This helped the researcher to find key themes and findings that were consistent across each interview (Smith et al., 2009). Coding is a descriptive process. Key words are identified and then summarized “in a word or short phrase” which helped the researcher compile a list of central themes (Saldana, 2013, p. 88). Emergent themes were developed through the analysis of the interview data (Smith et al., 2009).

Next, the researcher examined and identified patterns that arose during the interviews (Smith et al., 2009). Once the themes were developed, the researcher found commonalities between themes and drew conclusions from this information (Smith et al., 2009). After each theme was organized, they were charted or mapped to see how they fit together (Smith et al., 2009). This is considered the fourth step, which requires a researcher to search for connections across themes. Some themes may be discarded, while others were further examined for deeper meaning and understanding. This is the final step in the process of analyzing a single interview. The fifth step requires a researcher to move onto the next case, which is followed by step six where patterns across cases are examined.
Finally, the author developed a full narrative that included evidence and a detailed commentary (Smith et al., 2009). In this study, evidence focused on the learning experiences of teachers in PLCs. The narrative includes evidence from the data analysis to help the reader understand the reasons why teachers have developed these perspectives regarding their collective work in PLCs. The author reflected on his “own perceptions, conceptions, and processes” to help conceptualize the information provided by the participants (p. 80). Smith et al. (2009) encouraged researchers to follow these steps when analyzing data, but said there was potential for adjustment to the suggested strategies.

**Validity, Credibility, and Trustworthiness**

Validation has been described “as an attempt to assess the ‘accuracy’ of the findings” (Creswell, 2013, p. 249). In order to ensure validity, prolonged engagement and persistent observation must take place. This provides evidence of “building trust, a learning culture, and checking for misinformation” (Creswell, 2013, p. 251).

**Researcher bias.** In order to ensure validity, the researcher disclosed his role as PLC facilitator and his goals as an educator (see Appendix B). It is important to note that the researcher planned and facilitated bi-weekly PLC meetings at the research site. The researcher strove for neutrality during the interviews and avoided questions that could lead the participant toward a particular answer. The researcher remained unbiased by conducting semi-structured interviews that focused on the experiences of the participants and by ‘bracketing out’ personal experiences. Participants also had a chance to review the interview transcript which aided in the accuracy of reporting.

**Triangulation.** Triangulation is a validity construct based on the merging of multiple perspectives as a way to confirm data and ensure that all facets of the phenomenon are being
investigated (Knafl & Breitmeyer, 1989). Krefting (1991) referred to this as “triangulation of
data,” and explained, “Triangulation of data sources maximizes the range of data that might
contribute to complete understanding of the concept” (p. 219). Teachers from different content
areas were interviewed to provide an in-depth understanding of teacher learning in PLCs.

**Member-checking.** In order to ensure credibility, participants were provided with an
opportunity to review any data collected from their interview. This member-checking process
allowed participants to “recognize their experiences in the research findings” (Krefting, 1991, p.
219). “This strategy of revealing research materials to the informants ensures that the researcher
has accurately translated the informants’ viewpoints into data” (Krefting, 1991, p. 219).
Participants reviewed materials to help prevent “chances of misrepresentation” and ensure
credibility of the research study (Krefting, 1991, p. 219).

**Protection of Human Subjects**

Research and the publication of data requires an author to consider professional ethics.
The standards of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) must be met. These standards, as listed in
the Belmont Report, are beneficence, justice, and autonomy. Beneficence assures the well-being
of individuals is being protected; justice assures fairness; and respect for autonomy assures
participants are able to provide honest opinions. Carefully following these standards is critical in
research. Each of the standards was taken into account when interview questions were
developed to ensure fairness to participants. The author closely followed each of the ethical
standards to receive approval from the Institutional Review Board.

Standards of data collection and reporting are also important. “These standards include
concerns about consent agreements, data collection, and reporting” (Rocco & Hatcher, 2011, p.
189). Interviews require informed consent forms (see Appendix A) and proper data collection.
Summary

As more and more schools begin to implement PLCs, teachers can provide valuable feedback based on their experiences. The goal of this study was to give teachers an opportunity to reflect on their learning experiences in PLCs by prompting a discussion through open-ended interview questions in an IPA study. The data collected is discussed in the next chapter.
Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis was to examine the lived experiences of teachers learning from others teachers in a professional learning community (PLC). Six participants were interviewed and shared their experiences working in PLCs. Data were compiled from each participant individually and then parallels were drawn between and among the participants. Through the analysis of the transcribed interviews, three superordinate themes and five sub-themes emerged. The superordinate themes are teacher modeling is an integral component of PLCs, teacher conversations allow more in-depth discussion of topics, and sharing feedback allows teachers to learn from each other.

Participant Profiles

Interviews and follow-up interviews with participants provided a detailed account of their lived experiences as they learned from other teachers in a PLC. Each participant provided details of his or her lived experiences working in PLCs and reflected on the ways in which they learned from other teachers. The six participants were given the pseudonyms Joe, Eric, Toby, Dayla, Maggie, and Liz. The teachers’ classroom experiences ranged from two to eighteen years. There were three male and three female participants. Each participant worked within a different PLC, providing data from their experiences. The teachers participated in following learning communities: math, English, English language learners (ELL), small learning group math, special education, and science (biology). Criteria for participant selection were based on two things: their status as a teacher in a PLC at RHS and participation in different PLCs. The background information, years in the classroom, subject matter, and interactions in PLCs are described for each participant.

Participant 1: Joe. Joe is in his eighth year as a high school teacher and has spent his
entire career at RHS. He teaches English language learners (or ELL students). These are students with little or no English proficiency who are either born in the United States or in a foreign country. The ELL department has its own Professional Learning Community (PLC) that works separately from the core subject areas. Joe teaches Sheltered History I, US History I, and US History II, as well as World History to ELL students only. He has worked in PLCs since their adoption four years ago. His PLC contains six teachers who are responsible for around two hundred ELL students. He described his PLC as a “focused group” that dealt with this small population and one where it is easy for “academic debates” to take place due to the size of the group.

Participant 2: Eric. Eric was a new teacher nearing the end of his second full year at RHS at the time of his interview. He completed a semester as a student teacher at RHS prior to being brought on full-time. He teaches 10th grade English and participates in the English PLC. He has been working in PLCs since he started teaching two years ago. The English PLC is the largest in the school with 20 teachers. Eric is able to learn from teachers with a wealth of knowledge, which he said is the biggest strength of his group.

Participant 3: Toby. In his eleventh year as a teacher, Toby has spent his whole teaching career at RHS and has taught a variety of grade levels. He started out teaching juniors and seniors Algebra II and project-based math in his first five or six years. At the time of the interview, he had settled in as a teacher in the Freshman Academy. The Freshman Academy’s nine math teachers have their own PLC separate from the rest of the math department. Toby teaches Math 1B in the Academy, which is three quarters of Algebra and one quarter of Geometry. He has worked in PLCs since joining the Freshman Academy four years ago and described his PLC as a “close-knit” group.
Participant 4: Dayla. The biology PLC is made up of a small group of seven teachers who work closely together. Dayla is a relatively new teacher who teaches freshman and is in her fourth year at RHS. She has taught and worked in the biology PLC for four years as well. The teachers in her PLC have teaching experience ranging from one to over twenty years.

Participant 5: Maggie. Maggie is currently in her fourth year as a teacher and has spent all of her years RHS. She has been working in PLCs since she began teaching. Maggie teaches both geometry and advanced algebra to 10th graders in an inclusion class. Inclusion classes consist of students who are general education students and those with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). Students with IEPs receive special accommodations based on their needs or disabilities. There are 16 teachers who work together in the math PLC, making it one of the largest.

Participant 6: Liz. Liz has been teaching for 18 years. This is her seventh year at RHS as a small learning group/special education English teacher. Her PLC group has a dozen teachers and is average in size when compared to other PLCs. Liz teaches students in 9th through 12th grades. Her PLC was made up of inclusion and small learning group teachers. Together, they focus heavily on behavioral issues. Liz described two common types of issues they face: anger management and students who are diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum.

Superordinate Themes

The three superordinate themes revealed through this interpretative phenomenological analysis include: teacher modeling is an integral component of PLCs, teacher conversations allow more in-depth discussion of topics, and sharing feedback allows teachers to learn from each other. Brief descriptions of these themes are presented along with subthemes, after which the themes are discussed in greater detail utilizing the voices of the study participants.
Teacher modeling is an integral component of PLCs. Demonstrating lessons, ways to address student behavior, or other activities, such as ways to use technology, help teachers to learn from other teachers.

*Step-by-step demonstration process.* The process of modeling when a presenter teaches his/her colleagues through a sequence of steps.

*Hands-on learning.* When activities are presented to the group, they offer teachers hands-on learning opportunities. Several teachers described their experience when modeling took place and said that they learned when they had an opportunity to work on a lesson or with equipment as it was being modeled to them.

*One-on-one learning.* In most cases, activities were presented to the whole group. However, in some instances, modeling took place between two teachers in a one-on-one environment.

Teacher conversations allow more in-depth discussion of topics. Conversations between colleagues during PLCs benefited each participant greatly, while also giving them an opportunity to learn from other teachers by asking questions and discussing a number of topics.

*Focus areas.* Teachers described a number of topic areas that were discussed during their PLC, including strategies and classroom management.

*Benefits of conversations.* Benefits, such as teacher reflection, the ability to ask questions and learn, and building relationships were discussed by teachers to describe the way they utilized knowledge gained from conversations.

Sharing feedback allows teachers to learn from each other. Teachers value the feedback they receive during PLC time. Typically, feedback was verbal and required teachers to process the information they received from their colleagues. Feedback was part of an ongoing
experience during PLCs, which helped explain the ways in which teachers learn from other teachers.

**Theme 1: Teacher Modeling is an Integral Component of PLCs**

Teachers described the process of modeling as part of their experience learning from other teachers in PLCs. They valued the step-by-step demonstrations that took place in PLCs. Teachers also appreciated the hands-on learning opportunities they had during modeling. It provided them with an opportunity to manipulate lab equipment or test an iPad app while it was being demonstrated. Additionally, one-on-one learning opportunities were available during PLCs. For instance, teachers could sit and work with other teachers and show them how to create a lesson, activity, or demonstrate the best way to use an app. Participants examined the ways in which their teaching could improve by learning from other teachers as they modeled a lesson or activity. Once they experienced the step-by-step process, they had a chance to put the new lesson, app, or activity into practice.

**Sub-theme 1A: Step-by-step demonstration process.** Liz indicated the step-by-step process was best for her learning style. She said, “I am very visual so it allows me to pull that all apart and say, yes, this piece should go over here.” Not only is she a visual learner, but she also enjoyed the value of learning step-by-step from a colleague with examples. As she explained:

I learn by exemplars. I learn by seeing a particular document that has to be filled out for every IEP that I have and to be able to see specific examples of how it’s supposed to look or what information needs to be there. I learn best by seeing specific examples.

Unique to the group of participants, Liz learned Individualized Education Program (IEP) writing through the step-by-step process of modeling. She had experienced a teacher sharing sample IEPs with the staff to show them the new expectations for writing one. As she explained,
“They’ll give us some solid examples so that we’re making sure that this is what [the director] wants it to look like, and then we can follow suit.” Liz was able to learn from this presentation and benefited from the examples provided to her by a colleague. In addition, teachers experienced going through each step so they could learn how to create a document. Liz stated that the reason she learned the material so well in this particular instance was because, “It was the step-by-step.”

**Lesson planning.** Dayla recalled a time when a teacher showed the biology PLC stations that he had made for his students that did not involve technology. She liked the fact that the teacher “explained it as we were discussing what we were doing that week or next week.” Dayla continued, “He explained what he was doing and he actually had his lab chart.” The step-by-step modeling process gave the presenting teacher an opportunity to “show us pictures and images of what those stations looked like,” which was favorable to her. “In discussing the stations, I can have an idea of what those stations may have looked like, but it wasn’t until I actually saw the actual images in the text that he had that I knew I wanted to create or modify something.” The images, in particular, helped Dayla to visualize the activity and the ways in which she would be able to use it in her class. The stations demonstrated to Dayla were different from the process of writing an IEP that Liz described, but both teachers were taught using a step-by-step process.

Joe also described the step-by-step process of modeling and how it impacted his ability to see how something works within a specific lesson. He explained, “It’s great if you read it, but then when someone actually shows you that professional courtesy of ‘this is how you do it,’ that is phenomenal.” The demonstration Joe described is part of the process of modeling and one way that he learned from other teachers in his PLCs. As he said, “It’s definitely the modeling and sitting in there and having a task, having the activity done so we can see how it works.”
When teachers model activities, Joe described his internal thought process as, “That’s a great idea. How can you apply it to your own classroom?” Joe’s description and learning experience is similar to Dayla’s. As he said, “It really works for me when I see something in front of me and I see it explained and I can see the mechanics of how it’s done.”

Eric, much like Dayla and Joe, learned an entire lesson on the Great Awakening through a modeling process. He said, “I think that was definitely a good one to see how to integrate really disparate sources into one writing assignment.” As Eric described it:

It was the work leading up to it. It was about looking at the painting, the questions that they had for the students. It’s how they even structured the whole class. They had all the worksheets, played the whole video that was part of it, showed the painting. I learned a new strategy of breaking down sources as a whole class.

A step-by-step tutorial of the lesson was presented to Eric and other teachers in his PLC by the presenting teacher. Eric learned from this experience and it is one that he indicated this is beneficial to his learning style. He explained, “I like this, where you’re seeing the way they break it down, seeing all the materials that go along with it and then I’m also hearing from them how they structured the class.” He continued, “That’s the best!”

During PLC time, Eric wanted to focus on making his lessons more interesting and relevant. He explained, “Bring in the fun aspect and the interesting part and then going ‘Okay, what’s going on behind this thing?’ I think that’s always a good approach to lessons.” He described his experience learning, “They said with the set up, ‘We’re going to do this first, then we’re going to do this, and then we’re going to do that.'” As a result of the step-by-step process, Eric implemented a new strategy in a lesson of his own:

I have an Enlightenment unit and the first thing that we watch is this 60 Minutes clip
about this place called the Baby Lab, where they try to determine if humans are born with morality or not. It’s a thing that a lot of students are like, ‘Why are we doing this? This is a history class, why are we watching this?’ Then, because the whole Enlightenment comes down to whether or not these philosophers believe that humans are innately good or evil it’s as a good way to grab them in with something fun.

The step-by-step modeling experience gave Eric an opportunity to make his lessons more relevant, while also giving him a chance to reflect on his teaching. He commented, “I think what came to mind was that I think I don’t do this enough, where I’m bringing in that fun hook, grabber part, and then digging into what’s behind it.”

Toby loved the idea of teachers “being able to tell other teachers ‘this is what I use and it works for me,’ [and] now they don’t have to waste time trying to come up with or going through all the missteps.” Similar to Dayla, Joe, and Eric, he has learned from other teachers that share lessons with him. Toby explained, “I had a teacher who showed me how to implement a financial plan unit; she showed me some different videos to use, showed me the different templates of worksheet assignments that I should use and maybe questions that I should post to the kids.” Toby found experiences like this to be valuable learning opportunities. In a second example, a teacher took Toby and his colleagues through an entire lesson one step at a time. He explained, “She modeled her lesson in terms of what she expected the kids to be able to do.” Toby enjoyed learning in this fashion. He said, “It’s just nice to be able to say all right this is what worked well for her and then I thought maybe I can do something similar to that.”

Maggie also learned lesson ideas from the step-by-step process of other teachers in her PLC. As she shared, a teacher might say to Maggie, “I have a really great strategy for teaching that, or I have a really great performance assessment that you can give to your students.’ I think
that’s been really helpful, the most helpful, I think.” The teacher would then bring this lesson into PLC to share with the group. Teachers sharing lessons step-by-step with Maggie helped her to improve as a new teacher and learn the best way to teach students. She said, “I think what I got most from that was sharing of best practices and sharing of activities that teachers would use in their class.”

Often teachers shared something that worked well in their classroom and modeled it with the hope that it would assist a colleague. Maggie explained, “I think we’ve always had opportunities where we share student work, but I think over the past couple years, we’ve made more of an effort to make sure we’re sharing best practices too.” Maggie learned a variety of ways to teach lessons when members of her PLC decided to increase the number of times they model best practices.

Maggie reflected on a specific time when a teacher brought in a lesson and described her learning experience. In this particular instance, the teacher shared a lesson on domain and range of functions. Maggie was having a difficult time teaching students the topics in class and wanted to learn from her peers. As Maggie described the experience:

“We were talking about interpreting domain and range of functions and how one teacher shared how she talks about it like walls in a classroom. About how domain, you see it as left wall to right wall, where range you would want to see it as back wall to front wall. I thought that was really clever and realistic for kids to understand domain and range. As a result, Maggie utilized this new method of teaching domain and range in her class.

Dayla, Joe, Eric, Toby, and Maggie were all taught new lesson ideas through the step-by-step process of modeling.

Instructional strategies. Joe described an experience when a teacher modeled a strategy
for him in his PLC. Joe talked about how he learned from the ELL teachers who he described as “experts in second language acquisition.” He was able to learn about the different types of worksheets and activities they used with their students as they were modeled to him using a step-by-step process. Joe said the teacher explained everything from the set-up of the worksheet to the types of questions he should ask his ELL students. Eric also mentioned the impact modeling had on the worksheets he created for his students. During PLC time, he stated that he has obtained a number of strategies, but one that has stuck with him he said may seem like a “mundane thing.” However, it is a strategy he uses often when creating worksheets for his students. Eric recounted how he learned “what worksheets look like and what’s a good worksheet.” The step-by-step process helped him to follow along with his peers and helped him to realize that he needed to develop “something that you’re able to follow from the task to the expectations and having everything right there, on one page, and concise.” Working in a PLC afforded Eric this opportunity. “I’ve never considered having all that on a page before, but I’ve seen some worksheet designs that I definitely learned from.”

Eric discussed strategies he learned through modeling the modeling process after analyzing data from the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). He said, “Our MCAS numbers-- we were able to really dig into those, break down the areas that students needed to work on to get our scores up.” The English PLC shared strategies after looking at data to help them improve teaching. After careful analysis, Eric realized that he needed the most improvement teaching vocabulary. Once he recognized his deficiency he was able to call upon his colleagues to help him improve through the step-by-step demonstration process of modeling. “What do you do for vocab?” he asked. This led to a formal presentation in his PLC. He explained, “Then [the presenting teacher] will share and I’ll have new approaches to it.” Based
on his question, instructional strategies were shared with the group that included the best ways to teach vocabulary. Learning experiences like this have helped Eric as a new teacher.

In similar fashion, Toby and his group also analyzed student data and shared strategies that will benefit students. He said, “We get the scores-- now we can go back and say, ‘All right, the kids are having trouble with this particular problem. What are some of your strategies that worked well?’” Typically, a teacher volunteered to model a strategy to the group. Toby explained the importance of using a step-by-step process as a presenter, “Modeling is important because now teachers have a visual of what’s happening in the classroom or in the flipped environment.” In this case, a flipped learning, or student-centered strategy was modeled in his PLC. Toby also wanted to find the best way to have kids present their projects effectively. He described his lived experience when he said, “The other teachers did a great job in terms of explaining the expectations that you want to have from the kids so that they will be clear.” This demonstration helped Toby to learn new instructional strategies and as a result he gained a number of different ideas. “I like to see what other teachers are doing and having their strategies helps.” Eventually, he will select one that works best from his class and try it, “Maybe I can use it. That’s the thing to be able to share that with each other.”

**Using technology in the classroom.** Integrating technology into the classroom can be a challenge. The step-by-step process of modeling was effective for Joe when teachers were first asked to use iPads with their students. One teacher modeled an app that allows students to journal electronically. Joe described this experience and the impact it had on him personally. He said, “[The presenter] just went through the whole app, explained how to sign in, went through what the students were doing, went through what she’s looking at.”

The process of using the app eventually led to demonstrating examples. Joe explained,
“She showed us her example that she showed the students, so pretty much taught us the lesson.”

Following his PLC meeting, Joe’s class completed a lesson on famous Americans, including George Washington. He used the knowledge that he gained from other teachers in his PLC to teach his students how to use the app to bring technology into his lesson.

Like Joe, Dayla also described how modeling impacted using the iPad with her students. She said, “Having a chance to learn from others on how they use the iPad, having that time to share, has helped me become more flexible in the classroom.” According to Dayla, this flexibility encouraged her to use the iPad more with students, while also recognizing it can be a strength in her classroom. She also described the process of modeling in her interview and the impact it has on her improvement as a teacher, “Sharing resources helps me do my job better.”

As a group, Dayla’s PLC shares a lot of different materials, but she specifically remembered a situation that involved lab reports and the use of her iPad. She explained, “We were sharing how we structure our lab reports so it is similar.” The structure Dayla learned from one of her peers included the set-up of the lab report, the key components that should be included in the report, and how to accrue data with the iPad, all during a PLC meeting.

**Student behavior.** Liz found that some of the most productive meetings in the special education PLC took place when student behavior modification techniques were modeled in a step-by-step manner. She explained, “When a student is really struggling, sometimes one of our social workers, for example, will create what’s called the behavior intervention plan. It’s called the BIP.” Social workers are members of the special education PLC, since they deal primarily with behavior issues. The behavior intervention plan begins when the social worker gathers data on the student from his or her classes. According to Liz, the social worker would say, “This is our concern” and then model how to implement the intervention plan. This became an
opportunity for all the special education teachers to learn from this activity.

In one specific example, the social worker modeled an effective way to deal with students that have varying levels of anger. Liz explained:

[The presenting teacher] would have those strips of paper. She would model walking around. Some of the students may need a strip of paper on their desk that’s red, yellow, and green. I can let the student know where he is. If he’s very agitated, I’d point to red. She said the BIP is specific to a particular student and was helpful for her as a special education teacher. Teachers had an opportunity to see a student behavior modeled, which is part of the way Liz learned from other teachers in her PLC. Liz said:

We have a chance together as the teachers who know the student in a particular class. We try it and [if] it works great, [if] it doesn’t work, we go back to the drawing board and we start again. Again, there’s an opportunity for us to learn from each other, to learn from her, and again, the social worker to use her own experience of similar students and things that have worked.

The steps Liz described are taken in an effort to learn how to deal with student behavioral issues. Reflecting on this experience, Liz said, “It is good to see things from the light of different eyes.”

Sub-theme 1B: Hands-on learning. Maggie wanted to incorporate literacy strategies in her classroom and had an opportunity to learn from a teacher who modeled an activity while she worked on it at the same time. Maggie recalled, “One teacher modeled an activity where his students had to describe the features of a graph in words, but also the transformations in words.” She explained, “It was really interesting because it was a great way of getting students to write, but also allowing them to understand these features a little bit better.” She described herself as a person who likes to interact with something at the same time she is learning. The math PLC has
modeled apps, lessons, and other strategies throughout her four years, allowing her to learn from other teachers.

“I’m an observant and a hands-on learner, so I have to watch someone doing something in order to mimic it,” Maggie said. She had this opportunity in one of her PLCs when a teacher modeled an app called Desmos. The app is used as a graphing calculator and turned out to be something that is valuable to Maggie. She explained, “I thought it was really helpful because we have to work a lot with graphs and their transformations.” Maggie continued, “[The instructor] put up a function and she modeled how you can set sliders for students--so basically, showed how a graph can shift or how a graph can either shrink or grow wider.” As the teacher demonstrated how to use the app, Maggie and her colleagues were clicking on the app to make graphs shrink or grow. “I thought that was really helpful because I automatically thought of ways where I could have students take a look at different transformations and develop their own rules for transformations.”

Maggie recalled another time when an app was modeled in her PLC allowing for hands-on learning. She said, “I was able to learn from it. It was nice, too, because the app--we were all on it individually--so we were playing, kind of, with the app as [the instructor] was going over it.” Hands-on learning helped Maggie to learn from other teachers in a number of ways. However, in this instance, Maggie said, “It helped me to think about ways I could use this lesson, or these particular lessons, more hands-on for students.”

Dayla learned in a similar fashion when new lab equipment available within the department was modeled for Dayla. She remembered her experience learning how to use the lab equipment in detail, though it was “pretty complicated”. A teacher in the department took professional development to learn how to use the equipment and then modeled how to use it to
the rest of the PLC. When asked why she learned in this instance, she said, “He was super confident about how to use the technology, which helped. He not only modeled it for us but we also had the opportunity to set it up for ourselves like he was doing.” Dayla made mistakes, but learned because “we were able to figure that out” and even receive assistance throughout the process. After learning from this teacher, she said, “It has become a lot less confusing as we’ve been using it together.”

Joe explained that hands-on modeling was one of the most effective ways that he learned in his PLC. He enjoyed seeing something demonstrated in front of him. This helped him to learn from the examples of another teacher. However, he also likes being able to work with the lesson, app, or other materials as they are demonstrated by another teacher. As he explained, “There’s a lot of modeling. It works with me, when something is demonstrated and I have hands-on work with it and hands-on activities, then I understand.” Modeling helps Joe to learn, but the hands-on activity enhances his experience.

As a special education teacher, Liz often has IEP writing modeled. However, she never passed up an opportunity for a hands-on learning experience to better understand the proper way to write out education plans. “I thought ‘This went there? Is this a place where this information goes?’” when learning how to manipulate IEPs under new expectations. She explained a typical response during a presentation including, “In my experience, this is what the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education is looking for on this particular page.” She learned best in these situations by “either physically taking notes down right then or we decide together as a group that, yes, creating a shared document in Dropbox that we can all access works best.” Liz added, “This is definitely an opportunity for me to learn from those colleagues.” Liz described writing as the area she learned the most about during these meetings. She said, “I’m not a strong
writer, and this report-writing is a big part of my job. I’m able to learn a lot from my colleagues.” When an actual IEP needed to be written, Liz credited “all [of] these exemplars or sets of specific directions” as critical components. She was able to learn this part of the IEP process from other teachers in her PLC.

**Sub-theme 1C: One-on-one learning.** Liz reflected on a time when she “learned so much about how to use a whole new app… called Prezi, in order to present information.” Liz learned how to utilize technology more effectively during PLCs and time spent working one-on-one with another teacher has enhanced her experience. Liz explained that, in the past, she “shied away from technology,” even though it may not have been ‘major’ technology. She described her experience learning, “Having something right there for that instance with the teacher, it was on the SmartBoard and walking through it was helpful.” Modeling the app one-on-one gave Liz an opportunity to ask the other teacher questions. “I can see her click on something and I can see how I could produce the same. I ask them to show me.” In addition to the modeling, Liz said the one-on-one experience was very helpful and “great.”

Eric learned from other teachers in his PLC when he worked one-on-one with someone and had a lesson or activity modeled to him. For example his colleague “laid out, first, we’re going to start with identifying what people think irony is.” The one-on-one work continued with his colleague saying, “This is how I structure my lessons, and I do this every time.” He went on to model a new method of compiling data, Google Forms, something Eric had not done before. He explained his success:

I think it was just having someone right there showing me one-on-one when I asked questions and have them clarify it, and just knowing that this is a teacher who uses this every day. I knew it was a worthwhile thing to be learning about.
Eric said that having the support of another teacher throughout this process helped him to learn in this particular instance.

**Theme 1 summary.** Teacher modeling is an integral component of PLCs at RHS and something that happens often during meetings. It can be a step-by-step demonstration process where the whole group learns from a presenter. Modeling can also provide a hands-on learning experiences for teachers, giving them a chance to practice as they learn from their colleagues. Modeling can be a one-on-one experience where teachers have a chance to work closely with a presenting teacher. Lessons, instructional strategies, IEP writing, and behavior plans were all modeling experiences the participants described. While these were the areas the participants described, effective modeling is not limited to these areas.

**Theme 2: Teacher Conversations Allow More In-depth Discussion of Topics**

PLCs provided teachers with an opportunity to converse about a number of focus areas, including, but not limited to students and classroom management. Each focus area was a unique learning opportunity for the teachers. Participants explained how they benefited from conversations and how this led to learning opportunities. Conversations typically took place in a group of teachers during PLC meetings, but the participants described how one-on-one conversations were a way they gained the most knowledge, though not all of the conversations recounted were one-on-one.

**Sub-theme 2a: Focus areas.** Participants described several different conversational topics that came up in their PLCs. Topics discussed included: teacher lessons, student learning, understanding students and student behavior, and classroom management. Each of the participants gained a unique learning experience from the aforementioned focus area conversations.
Instructional strategies. Similar to the step-by-step demonstration process of modeling, conversations were a way for teachers to learn instructional strategies. In the ELL department, Joe suggested that nearly everything they accomplished begins with a conversation. “It starts with a conversation and then it gets to the work at hand.” Joe described one such learning experience, “Recently I had this conversation with another teacher and I asked for some English support, some graphic organizers they use, and how they would approach this topic.” The teachers gave Joe some ideas regarding graphic organizers that Joe tried with his class. He shared, “I used the example she put forth. I’ve been going over it, and the kids are getting it.” Conversations became so important to Joe and the other teachers in his PLC that they added them to the weekly agenda. “Every week we have about five to ten minutes of just, ‘This is what’s going on in our classrooms with the students.’”

Eric also learned from others during the quick conversations that took place during his PLC. He explained, “Often we’ll do quick share-outs, like, ‘This is my lesson,’ and we talk about it for a minute or so, which is good.” These “quick share-outs” lasted less than five minutes and as Eric said, “you just explain your process and what you’re doing and why you’re doing it and how it works.” Eric got “a good idea here and there” from these quick share-outs. One of Eric’s goals was to learn more about mastery-based units. During his interview, he described one particular instance when he “wanted to try a mastery-based unit. Then in PLC, a teacher shared a mastery-based unit that they had done.” Eric was able to learn from the quick share-out that took place and the ensuing conversation he had with his colleagues.

Learning about students. Teachers model student behavior in order to learn about their students and find out ways to address certain conduct in class. Conversations gave teachers an opportunity to learn a variety of details about their students. Joe, for example, learned a lot about
his students during conversations in his PLC. Typically, he asked about the students in his class from teachers who previously taught them. He explained:

We ask about a student’s personality, behavior in your class, typical grades, and typical ability. Do they do homework? What’s their attitude? Are they apathetic? Are they interested? Just trying to get a snapshot of the students. Then, a lot of times we notice that as students grow and change they have different experiences. We do a lot of that.

As a result of these conversations, he knew his students better than he did before. Joe explained that conversations that took place during PLC meetings allowed teachers to learn and be “more on the same page with our students.”

Liz also learned about her students during PLC meetings, but her conversations tended to focus on student behavior. According to Liz, in the special education PLC, conversations often start with, “I’m really concerned about a certain child.” Liz shared that her PLC’s teachers understood that if someone was concerned about a certain student, then more likely than not, the other teachers were having the same issue. Typically, teachers talked with one another to learn about a student’s behavior and decide a course of action. A teacher would describe the behavior of the student in his or her class and the other teachers would listen. The ensuing conversation gave teachers an opportunity to learn more about the behavior, discuss strategies, and figure out the next steps for handling this student. Liz described a typical conversation noting, “This is of utmost concern and we decide whether a parent needs to be involved and call a meeting depending on how intense the behavior is.”

Learning from other teachers about a student’s behavior helped Liz to find the best way to address a situation. Conversations were of vital importance to the special education department, especially at the beginning of the year when behavior issues tended to be prevalent.
Liz mentioned that her special education students dealt with “heightened uncertainty” at the beginning of the year. Liz added, “It was always so important to try to find a common time for all of us. Now we have that opportunity in PLC that we did not before.” Liz said the conversations in the special education PLC were a necessary part of her learning experience to best meet her students’ needs.

Classroom management. Conversations helped teachers, especially new teachers, to learn important skills like classroom management techniques. Second-year teacher Eric shared:

I remember one specific conversation with a teacher [in a PLC]. I told him how I had a large class. This was my first year, and it was a 32-student college prep English class. I was finding that I could get them to do what they’re supposed to be doing, minimal disruptions, and it would last maybe a week, a week-and-a-half, and then it would fall right back to chaos and disorder. I talked to one teacher and they suggested taking some time and telling the student what the problem was and [letting them know] that we’re not able to learn if we have this situation. Then creating a list of rules that we meet in order for us to get done what we’re supposed to get done.

Clearly, Eric identified a new way to manage his class because of the discussion he had in PLC.

Dayla described a similar experience when she learned classroom management through conversations in her PLC. She said:

It's like, ‘I have this one student, here she is doing this and how do I fix it?’ That is certainly been an area that I have improved on but still need to improve on more like, managing the class. My first year, it was horrible. I'm trying to figure out how to manage a classroom so looking at the veteran teachers on some of their topics has been really helpful throughout the years.
Support from her colleagues helped her learn new skills. She explained, “They have shared their experiences like they said, ‘Yeah this happened to me and this is what I do.’”

**Student learning.** Conversations in the math PLC helped to enhance student learning in the classroom. Maggie described how she talked with other teachers about the learning standards and other important information students will need to learn. She explained, “We talk about what that means for our students and what they need to know from that standard.” Maggie also said that she listened to the conversations between her peers and tried to find ways to “improve my practice.” A simple conversation between teachers gave Maggie a chance to learn and find ways to improve a lesson or the ways she taught a specific learning standard.

Toby described the ways that student learning was discussed in his PLC. In one such experience, he explained that RHS had begun to focus on student-centered learning. He also said that teachers in his PLC helped him to better understand his students. “It’s just being able to bounce back ideas with other teachers,” Toby explained. He learned from conversing with other teachers and “being able to have that communication, the line of communication with all the other teachers in terms of what works in terms of putting our ideas together.” Getting advice, applying it, and finding that it worked helped Toby to focus on student-centered learning in his class. He said, “I learned from other teachers making sure I have the available technology, coming up with the right technology to use in the classroom so it’s more student-centered.”

**Sub-theme 2b: Benefits of conversations.** Teachers benefited from conversations in a number of different ways. It appears that each benefit led to additional learning experiences in the participants’ PLCs.

**Ability to ask relevant questions and learn.** Conversations during PLCs provided teachers with the opportunity to ask questions about a number of different focus areas.
Questions led to deeper conversations and learning opportunities for teachers. Joe explained that a conversation starter could be anything from an interesting article to a new app that someone tried at home. When his PLC recently read an article as a group, they asked questions like, “How does this article mirror what’s happening or what’s not happening in our classroom?” Joe said questions like this started conversations in the ELL PLC. In turn, this gave Joe an opportunity to learn from his colleagues. “Just having that open conversation” was important to Joe.

Joe also asked a lot of questions about creating lessons during his PLC:

We haven’t had too many formal presentations. It’s a lot of just, ‘Oh, I want to show you what I did,’ and a lot of, ‘Oh, that’s great,’ or, ‘I can adapt that,’ or, ‘How would you change it for this?’ or, ‘How would this work for a higher level proficiency student?’ ‘How would it work for a lower level student?’ ‘How can you tailor it for my class?’ Joe described the process of having conversations in great detail and said it led to learning opportunities in his PLC that will benefit students.

Joe said this learning allowed him to “make learning valuable to the students.” For example, “Students are big into annotations this year.” This led Joe to ask his colleagues for information regarding annotations. A teacher said to him, “So when you have them next year, bring more of that [annotating].” He added, “They also said our students like writing and performing in plays or more creative activities. This is a creative class, so work on that.” Joe has benefited from asking questions to his colleagues. He said his colleagues took information and “pass that information to the teachers, so that way it’s a heads up.”

Similar to Joe, Toby also mentioned a time when he benefited from asking questions about lessons during his PLC. He described typical questions that he might ask as, “What are
your strategies? What are some benefits? What did you do differently?” The resulting conversations gave Toby a chance to ask questions and learn new instructional strategies from other teachers. For example, Toby was focused on flipped learning and the best way to utilize it in his class. Without opportunities for discussion outside of his PLC time, PLC conversations and the resulting learning made the experience even more valuable for him. Toby explained that he may ask his PLC, “All right, I have questions here. What’s going on with my classroom management? What can I do to make it better?” These types of conversations in his PLC have enhanced his ability to learn.

**Building relationships.** Conversations that took place in PLCs allowed teachers to build relationships with their colleagues. As teachers built relationships with other teachers, the level of trust between them increased, and they began to communicate more openly with one another. Toby vividly described how conversations benefited him as a teacher, noting that he built relationships with other teachers during PLC time, which enhanced his learning. In turn, this helped him to develop greater confidence in his teaching abilities. Toby credited his PLC for this positive change and explained, “You can build that relationship, that you can have someone to go to, that’s important.”

Improved relationships opened a line of communication between teachers. According to Toby:

Communication is key in terms of if you want to present something, if you want to show something to the group, you can easily do that as opposed to reaching out to a larger group of teachers.

This level of communication seems to have improved learning opportunities.

Toby described a conversation he had with the group and reminisced about the advice
given to him by one of the teachers. It started with the teacher’s personal experience “I have to say this is what I experience and I added ‘All right this is what worked well for me.’ ‘What are your strategies?’” In the ensuing conversation between Toby and this teacher, Toby’s colleague discussed strategies with the group that they could use in class. He explained, “It’s just more or less to open up that conversation that’s important so that maybe this will be the best strategy for the kids in terms of student learning.” Toby hoped that his learning experience will also enhance student learning. Summarizing sharing in his PLC, he said, “That’s just part of the collegiality aspect of it, right? You’re sharing your experiences and see what works best and what the best strategies are.”

Toby also enjoyed the fact that he could “comfortably and easily contact colleagues” during PLC time. Toby mentioned the ability to generate a meaningful conversation as an important part of his PLC time. He said, “I feel now that I’m very close to the other teachers who are in my PLC group. I feel that whatever I need I can just go to them and vice versa.” This sense of comfort has helped Toby to learn from his peers as well as have conversations that he may not have had prior to working in a PLC.

Prior to his participation in PLCs, Toby said he was unable to build the same strong relationships with his colleagues. He explained that his relationships developed over time and the communication and common goals of his PLC group increased opportunities for him to learn over the last four years, particularly when it came to meaningful conversations. He explained, “Before, obviously, there [was] no set time for us to meet so I would have to put a lot more effort to meet with other teachers.”

**Teacher reflection.** As part of the learning process, teachers tended to reflect on their own practice as conversations took place. Joe said, “I can just go through and I’m saving these
things in my head and saying ‘All right, I’m going to use this, I’m going to use that, I’m going to use this.’” As Joe learned new information through conversations, he also thought about ways to use the information in his classroom.

Like Eric, Joe learned how to structure worksheets for his ELL students during a PLC meeting. Reflecting during a conversation, he realized that he may be “over-complicating an issue,” and other times “simplifying something.” He determined that he should make more challenging work for students in his class. In this example, Joe reflected on his experiences and improved his teaching practices as a result.

Maggie also reflected on how information was shared and said, “Usually, when I see teachers sharing, I try to think of ways that I could adapt their practice to my classroom and how that would work for my students.” Sharing ideas allowed Maggie to reflect on her own practice to become a better teacher. She described one such shared idea as “important…because I thought it was really concrete and something that kids could grasp onto while still understanding the concept of domain and range.” Sharing was not exclusively receiving information. Maggie said, “For the teacher that needs help, I try to usually think of how I may have taught it in the past and if my strategy was successful or if it was something that I struggle with too.”

Maggie learned from other teachers when they shared best practices through conversations. Maggie appreciated it when teachers gave her quick strategies to use in her class. Maggie explained how she learned from other teachers through reflection and said, “I automatically try to think of how I can apply it to my classroom, even if they don’t teach something the same as me.” Part of Maggie’s learning experience included reflecting on the shared lesson or activity and attempting to apply it to her classroom. Self-reflection benefited Maggie and Joe as teachers.
Theme 2 summary. Conversations took place every week in PLC, but the impact of the conversations appears to mean the most to teachers. Teachers could learn about a number of different focus areas during conversations, while also benefiting from them in a variety of ways. Instructional strategies, learning about students, student learning, and classroom management were all described as conversational focus areas by the participants. Conversations that took place in PLCs provided the participants with opportunities to discuss relevant topics that helped them to become better teachers. Conversations also benefited them in a number of other ways. Teachers has the ability to ask their colleagues relevant questions. Participants described how they built relationships with other teachers during PLCs, extending lined of communication. Finally, the participants described their experience reflecting on a number of topics, including ways they could improve as a teacher. Self-reflection during conversations appears to be part of their learning process and it benefited teachers with all levels of experience.

Theme 3: Sharing Feedback Allows Teachers to Learn from Each Other

Participants valued feedback from their colleagues when they worked with other teachers in PLCs. Maggie noted, “There’s constant feedback going on--constant--whether it’s about an assignment, a teaching methodology, an activity, something a student shared, or an experience that a student had in your class.” Maggie described how teachers brought in an assignment to share with the group and received feedback. Presenters explained the lesson in great detail to the group with the idea that everyone would provide feedback on how to improve the lesson or activity.

Joe described feedback from his peers after sharing a worksheet. He learned, “You just can’t give a student an example of something that happened one time and then expect them to remember it.” He explained how he learned a strategy based on feedback from teachers that
went to school to teach English to ELL students: “A lot of these techniques I didn’t really know when I first came into teaching, and being put into this department has helped me tremendously.” Joe valued how his colleagues constantly shared valuable feedback with him. He explained how they would examine one of Joe’s assignments and say, “Well, this is what I would do to modify it for your particular group of students,” giving Joe a chance to strategize and find the best way to use it in his class.

Joe also described a time when he brought in an assessment and the other ELL teachers helped him to revise it:

I brought in my final and the ELL teachers looked at it. We really went over my test as to how appropriate it was for an ELL student, what types of questions [to ask], the wording of the questions, [and] what might trip up the students. I took notes on that exam and I always go back and look at it. I shouldn’t have a straight multiple choice test. I shouldn’t have just short answers questions. I should really vary it up. Have a word bank. Having these tips and tricks that students can look at can help them be successful on the exam.

The learning experience described by Joe is something that was based on feedback he received from his colleagues. Joe said this process helped him to improve his teaching.

Like Joe, Dayla often sought advice by sharing an assignment and then receiving feedback from her PLC colleagues. She said the feedback taught her to improve her teaching. She would approach a peer and say, “Let me share what I’ve got. Can you give me feedback on what I did?” For Dayla, “Getting feedback, frequent feedback in a small period of time is helpful.” Dayla explained these learning experiences, “I’m trying to make adjustments on that. Let’s think about what I just learned.” Based on the feedback, Dayla adjusted her lessons.
Dayla described her ideal feedback, “I’m more of a visual learner, but also a verbal learner, like I need to be able to talk my ideas out with others to get feedback or even to give feedback to others so I can get ideas off of what they’re on.” Receiving feedback from her colleagues gave her a chance to formalize many of the ideas that she had been processing:

For me, I have a lot of ideas generated in my brain and until I can verbalize them and think out loud it may not turn into anything. I like getting feedback from others because they can tell me how to improve it or make me think differently about it. If I'm not talking about what I’m doing then I feel like I'm not learning and not growing my profession.

She shared how learning from her colleagues has impacted her:

It's definitely important because it makes me see like, my lessons differently and enhances them and just makes me feel more confident going into a lesson that it's just not my eyes that have been or my eyes have been listening or thinking about the lesson that other people have contributed to that.

Both Dayla and Joe described learning new material from peers who were more experienced in their content area. Dayla explained, “It was like a support model for me initially.” Dayla said feedback has helped her to become more confident in her abilities:

I think it has made me more confident in my ideas because if I’m willing to share them and get support from teachers and say “Hey that’s good or you should try this and modify this a certain way.” I think it’s made me become more confident because I’m getting supportive ideas and feedback.

Similarly, she explained that feedback has helped her to become a better classroom teacher. “I feel more comfortable with what I’m doing and why I am doing it and why the kids should be
Liz described when she shared a formal presentation in the special education PLC and received feedback. She told the group, “All the feedback you guys gave me, this worked. I tweaked this due to the constructs of the other kids in the classroom.” Liz was able to learn from feedback provided by her colleagues. She, too, stated that feedback was an important part of her learning process.

Joe also shared formal presentations with his colleagues and receive feedback. He presented an entire lesson used with his ELL students. Joe wanted to improve the lesson, specifically to ensure it would suit the ability level of his students. He needed to improve his worksheets. Based on feedback from his peers, Joe made adjustments. He learned, “I have to make sure that the worksheets are more widespread. They’re not going to go above or really below student’s heads, I have to have them kind of bobbling on top of the water.” Receiving feedback allowed him to find a strategy that works best for his students.

A formal presentation in her PLC was also a learning opportunity for Dayla. Her experience was similar that of Joe and Liz. She explained, “I think the verbal feedback is definitely the best because I think, I think initially like, I think you have to think things through.” The concept of “thinking things through” after feedback demonstrated how PLCs give Dayla an opportunity to think about her own practices. When sharing a lab report in one of her PLC meetings, a teacher said, “We need to modify it this way,” and she added, “that would be suggested amongst everyone.” Receiving feedback was “helpful so I could set [the lab report] up for my students.”

Maggie described presentations in the math PLC, “At the beginning of the year we had an activity where we talked about what we would like our students to have when they are coming
into our class.” This eventually led to feedback from the teachers in her group. She said this was something that benefited her as a teacher. According to Maggie:

It was very helpful. Their biggest thing was having a better grasp of technology, which is specifically graphing calculators. So, that was helpful to us too because it helped us think about how we can embed it in our daily lessons.

Feedback from her peers was part of her learning experience. Maggie shared that she tried to find a way to learn from feedback and make it part of a lesson that she uses.

Eric also used PLC to share formal presentations and learn from the experience, particularly the feedback. “Even if it’s just as simple as someone else saying, ‘Oh that’s good. Have you tried this twist on it, or have you tried doing it this way?’” As a result, Eric explained, “I think feedback always does inform what I’m doing. I’ll think about it and incorporate it, usually pretty soon. I’ll be trying out something that I learned about.” Similar to Maggie, Eric tried to discover ways to become a better teacher by learning during PLC meetings.

**Theme 3 summary.** Feedback was one way participants described gaining knowledge from other teachers in a PLC. They described feedback as something that helped them to improve their practice and become more confident in their abilities. Feedback occurred during PLC meetings and appears to be something that was a constant between teachers. PLC members’ willingness to help each other during PLC time enhanced the learning experience for teachers of all ability levels.

**Conclusion**

Chapter 4 provided a detailed summary of the results of an IPA study through the data analysis of six teaches at an urban high school in Massachusetts. Interviews and follow-up interviews provided a detailed account of their lived experiences learning from other teachers in
a PLC. Three superordinate themes and five sub-themes emerged as a result of this process, which has provided a deeper understanding of the ways in which teachers learn from other teachers in a PLC. Modeling, conversations, and feedback are integral components of the common experiences shared by the six participants. Chapter 5 discusses these themes in light of the literature review and theoretical framework, while also examining the implications and limitations of the study.
Chapter 5: Interpretation of Findings, Recommendations, and Conclusions

This interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) sought to better understand the lived experiences of teachers as they learned from other teachers in Professional Learning Communities (PLC). While PLCs have been studied before, and the literature includes teachers’ perspectives on PLCs, much of the extant research focused on “teacher perceptions of the value of this work” and the goals of working in a learning community (Vescio et al., 2008, p. 89). This study addressed a gap in the literature by examining the experiences of teachers learning from other teachers in a PLC. Understanding teacher experiences in PLCs can contribute to a better understanding of the ways learning can take place in these environments. Six teachers participated in two semi-structured interviews to answer the study’s research question: How do teachers at an urban high school in Massachusetts describe the lived experience of learning from other teachers in a PLC?

This chapter discusses the primary findings viewed through the lens of Bandura’s (1988) social cognitive theory (SCT) and the literature on PLCs. Consideration was given to how the findings confirm, complicate, or contradict aspects of the literature and what conclusions can be drawn. The chapter concludes with a section on the implications for current practice and recommendations for future research.

Interpretation of Primary Findings

Three superordinate themes were identified regarding the experiences of teachers learning from other teachers as a result of this study: (1) teacher modeling is an integral component of PLCs; (2) teacher conversations allow more in-depth discussion of topics; and (3) sharing feedback allows teachers to learn from each other. The primary findings were based on an analysis of information provided by the six participants, and align with the existent literature.
Theme 1: Modeling is an integral component of PLCs. Bandura (1988) wrote that the step-by-step process of modeling was central to learning, making SCT a valuable tool to discuss this theme. Step-by-step modeling gave participants an opportunity to learn from one another by demonstrating lessons, activities, and even behavior intervention plans. The teachers described a variety of ways they experienced modeling, including through a step-by-step process, hands-on learning, and one-on-one learning.

Participants described their experiences and explained how modeling played a role in their learning. They described specific details of their experiences as their colleagues shared step-by-step directions regarding an activity or other area of focus. They were able to see how a lesson was set up and understand the necessary components that were included in the lesson. In turn, participants were able to learn how to incorporate the lesson into their classes. The participants detailed the ways in which lesson plans, instructional strategies, technology, and strategies to address student behavior were modeled. Eventually, they brought their newly learned skill to the classroom and applied them.

The participants’ experiences seem to support Bandura’s (1988) conception of a step-by-step demonstration process, which included modeling of skills, followed by guided practice, and the application of new skills. New skills were modeled; new skills were applied. However, participants did not describe guided practice as part of their learning process, which is inconsistent with Bandura’s (1988) SCT model. Additionally, teachers already had some of the skills, though these skills were honed as part of their learning experience.

Most participants described some element of a step-by-step demonstration process when they discussed modeling. However, in one-on-one learning situations, there was also an element
of guided practice, which gave participants an opportunity to try a new app or skill as it was being modeled to them. Participants were able to sit down with a colleague and go over a new app or lesson that was being modeled. Then, they were able to work on the app or lesson with their colleague as part of the guided practice. This gave them an opportunity to fix any mistakes as they learned from other teachers in a PLC. Finally, participants tried the app or lesson with their class, which is consistent with Bandura’s (1988) mastery modeling process.

Hands-on learning was also part of the modeling experience. Participants had an opportunity to work on lessons or apps while they were being modeled. However, in these instances, they were not working one-on-one with a colleague. As part of their learning experience, a strategy was modeled to them. At the same time, guided practice took place and they were able to work on lesson or app as it was being demonstrated to them. Finally, the newly learned lessons were applied in a classroom setting. Hands-on learning provided teachers with an opportunity to experience all three phases of Bandura’s mastery modeling. Thus, findings are consistent with Bandura’s (1988) process.

Modeling new practices is an important part of the learning process and leads to individual teacher reflection (Hammond, 2009). Accordingly, modeling new practices allows teachers to examine ways to improve their teaching practices. Each participant vividly described modeling as a valuable part of his or her learning experience. Learning took place when participants were taken step-by-step through a lesson plan, activity, or even a way to address student behavior. Once a lesson or activity was modeled, teachers took time to reflect on the experience and considered ways to put what they observed into action. This coincides with the application part of the process described by Bandura (1988).

Clearly, parallels can be draw between the findings in this study and Bandura’s (1988)
SCT. When participants experienced one-on-one learning or hands-on learning they also experienced modeling, guided practice, and applied newly learned skills. However, the modeling described in the lived experiences of the participants was not always completely consistent with Bandura’s theory. Findings in this study demonstrate that guided practice was not always part of the learning process when modeling took place.

**Theme 2: Teacher conversations allow more in-depth discussion of topics.**

Conversations often took place between teachers in the participants’ PLCs. Hord (2004) found that conversations helped teachers learn new information and apply new ideas, and this study’s findings are consistent and expand on Hord’s work. Teachers described a number of focus areas discussed in their conversations, including instructional strategies, learning about students in their department, classroom management, and progress in student learning. The conversations provided teachers with an opportunity to learn from one another. Literature alludes to the importance of conversations and sharing when teachers learn and this study adds to prior research on this topic.

Servage (2008) said that sharing had a positive impact on teacher learning, which participants confirmed in this study. In PLCs, teachers had an opportunity to share lessons, activities, and ideas as they converse with one another. Additionally, participants described the ways in which sharing through conversations impacted their learning in a PLC. Teachers learned from other teachers during conversations as they shared instructional strategies, information about students, and even classroom management techniques, consistent with Harris and Jones’s (2010) assertion that teachers can acquire new knowledge by working together and conversing with one another.

The focus areas described in this study include areas of teaching and learning. However,
Servage (2008) indicated that effective teaching and learning conversations should extend beyond these areas. There does not seem to be sufficient evidence of more foundational discussions in the participant interviews, but it was not sufficiently addressed to draw a conclusion about alignment with Servage’s recommendations:

Teachers should deliberately direct conversations to foundational—rather than immediate—educational issues: Participants can share formative experiences as teachers or students who shaped their beliefs and values about schools; explore what it means to ‘learn’ or to be ‘educated’; or consider social, economic, and political characteristics of their political community. (p. 74)

The focus areas discussed by Servage (2008) are very different from the pedagogical areas described by teachers at RHS, therefore there is a lack of consistency based on data collected.

Conversations benefit teacher learning in a few ways. For example, sharing through conversations gives teachers an opportunity to reflect on their own teaching practices, ask relevant questions and build relationships with other teachers (Richmond & Manokore, 2010). Often times, participants described their thought processes and reflected on the ways they could improve a lesson or activity. Participants were able to learn from the shared materials and apply new skills to their own classroom practice as a result of the conversations they had in PLCs.

Asking relevant questions was also a benefit of conversations in PLCs. Data collected in this study confirms Servage’s (2008) findings that stated a primary goal of conversations should not be to “find answers,” but instead, to focus on questions (p. 74). The belief was that this will lead to more learning opportunities for teachers (Servage, 2008). This study demonstrates how the opportunity for participants to ask questions was an important part of learning in a PLC. At least two participants took advantage of opportunities to ask questions, which in turn enhanced
their learning experience.

The participants, and in particular Toby, described how the ability to build relationships was a benefit of PLCs. Toby said that this made him more comfortable with his group. In turn, he was able to better learn from his colleagues because he was comfortable. This finding furthers Bailey’s (2014) research on learning in PLCs. Bailey (2014) found that relationships enhanced the level of trust between teachers and this helped teacher’s focus on areas they needed to improve. Richmond and Manokore (2010) said that relationships benefit teacher learning. This study further develops this theme by demonstrating the impact building relationships has on teacher learning in PLCs explored through the descriptions of the lived experiences of teachers. Toby believed building relationships enhanced his comfort level in his PLC, which in turn made it more likely for him to engage in an experience where he would learn during PLCs.

Sharing through conversations is discussed in prior literature, but examination through the lived experiences of teachers has provided additional research on this topic. This study further develops this topic and provides additional insight on the potential benefits that conversations have on teacher learning.

**Theme 3: Sharing feedback allows teachers to learn from each other.** Hord (2004) suggested that structured time be allotted for teachers to provide feedback. The most productive PLCs have a “willingness to accept feedback and work toward improvement” (Hord, 2004, p. 22). Findings in this study are consistent with Hord’s statement. A willingness to accept feedback provided learning opportunities for the participants.

Participants explained how, in most cases, when a lesson was shared by one teacher, the other teachers in the group listened, learned, and then provided feedback. Consistent with Rigelman and Ruben (2012), the experiences teachers shared allowed them to provide one
another with valuable feedback. Teachers worked in departmental PLCs, which meant they shared common experiences and feedback would be valuable to them, allowing them to learn from one another.

Feedback also gave teachers an opportunity to correct mistakes and continuously learn from colleagues. Participants shared how feedback helped them to see lessons created through a different lens. This is one way that feedback benefits new teachers. This sentiment affirms Lovett and Cameron (2011) who examined the impact of PLCs on new teachers and described how one participant expressed that he would benefit from more feedback.

Teachers were able to learn from their colleagues as they received valuable feedback and then put newly learned instructional strategies into practice in their classes supporting Langford’s (2015) work. Though Langford (2015) focused on the implementation of PLCs, teacher experiences are also described. “PLC members applied the new techniques to their own personal practice and through feedback on how they worked, began to change their individual instructional practices” (Langford, 2015, pp. 184-185). Data collected suggested that feedback was a significant tool in the process of teachers learning from other teachers in a PLCs.

In the literature on PLCs, an additional benefit of feedback was noted: building confidence. Bailey (2014) described the connection between feedback and teachers’ confidence: 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 feedback from their colleagues. (p. 63)

Similarly, the participants in this study affirmed that feedback created more confidence in their role as teachers.
Data from this study showed that feedback benefited teacher learning in PLCs. This is significant because feedback was an important part of the learning experiences participants described. Feedback is mentioned in other studies, but is not typically a primary finding to support how teachers learn from other teachers in a PLC.

**Implications for Educational Practice and Future Research**

Findings of this study are relevant to professionals in education who are interested in the implementation of PLCs because they shed light on how one school structured PLCs and how the teachers carried out the work of learning communities. This study could also be helpful for schools that may be having problems with their PLCs as it describes a positive structure and process from the perspectives of teachers who are living it.

**Recommendations.** Data reviewed in this study illustrate the need for a better understanding of teacher learning experiences in PLCs. PLCs are referred to as Professional “Learning” Communities for a reason. They give teachers an opportunity to model lessons, converse with one another, and provide feedback to each other in an environment that encourages and enhances learning. Much of the current research focused on the value of PLCs and goals of working in a learning community (Vescio et al., 2008), but does not sufficiently examine the lived experiences of teachers and the process of learning from other teachers.

It would be useful to examine PLCs at other schools to see if they benefit from the same learning opportunities, while also examining the lived experiences of their teachers to see if similarities or differences exist. Additionally, focusing future studies in a similar fashion will add to the research in this study and perhaps find additional methods of learning in PLCs. After analyzing the results, several recommendations are offered for the implementation and ongoing running of PLCs:
1. Emphasis should be placed on the ways teachers learn from other teachers in PLCs. Leaders and facilitators of PLCs should create more opportunities for modeling, teacher conversations, and feedback. Incorporating these three strategies along with other tactics will benefit teacher learning.

2. Facilitators should focus on the needs of new teachers. PLCs provide new teachers with opportunities to interact with experienced teachers. Specifically, opportunities for modeling, teacher conversations, and feedback are valuable because they give new teachers a chance to learn and ask questions. Teaming new teachers with veteran teachers in PLCs will enhance their learning experiences.

3. PLCs provide teachers with an opportunity to build relationships as they work in learning communities. Providing multiple opportunities for conversations and interactions can help teachers feel more comfortable learning in PLCs. As a result, they will be more inclined to learn from their colleagues.

4. Greater emphasis should be placed on teacher modeling in PLCs. Hands-on learning and one-on-one learning provide opportunities for teachers to learn from their colleagues as they model lessons and activities. This provides teachers with an opportunity to experience a modeled lesson or activity, use guided practice, and then apply the activity to their classes.

5. Feedback helps teachers to develop confidence in their classroom practices. Appropriate feedback gives teachers a chance to learn from their colleagues and improve their lessons and activities during PLCs. Facilitators should provide specific opportunities for teachers to receive feedback.
Limitations. This study contributes to prior research conducted on PLCs; however, it does have limitations. One limitation of this study is the role of the researcher. As cited, I am a Professional Learning Community (PLC) facilitator and have worked in PLCs for four years. In addition, I teach in the designated school. Participants were selected from a variety of PLCs and do not work in my PLC. I do not feel the participants provided answers that I would expect, since this study gave them an opportunity to reflect on personal experiences. At the same time, I do know each of the participants so it is certainly possible. To ensure the participants I would be unbiased; a subjectivity statement was disclosed prior to their interviews. Additionally, I recorded field notes during and after the interview that were made available to each participant. Also, I attempted to bracket out my own experience in order to focus on the experience of the participant (Creswell, 2009). A second limitation is the sample size, which includes six participants. A small sample size provides in depth interviews based on the lived experience of the participants involved. However, the results cannot be generalized due to the small sample size (Moustakas, 1994).

Future research. Future studies on teacher learning in PLCs should consider the following:

1. While this study focused on teacher learning of those with a range of teaching experience, future studies should focus on the lived experiences of first year teachers as they participate and learn in PLCs.
2. Further research should give consideration to the connection between teacher learning and student learning.
3. Teachers described reflection as part of their learning process. Additional research should focus on whether or not there is sufficient time for teachers to reflect in PLCs and
the role this plays in teacher learning.

4. Future studies should explore the role conversations play in a learning community and focus on this aspect of a PLC. Examining ways to structure effective conversations between teachers during PLC meetings could further research conducted in this study.

5. This research identified modeling, conversations between teachers, and feedback as things that provide teachers with an opportunity learn from one another in PLCs. Future research should examine additional factors that allow teachers to learn in a PLC.

Conclusion

This study sought to better understand PLCs and the ways teachers learn from one another in this setting. The results of this study indicate modeling, conversations, and feedback were the most prominent ways teachers learned from other teachers in the study site’s PLC. Bandura’s (1988) SCT provided a lens to examine the lived experiences of teachers learning from other teachers and was generally supported in the findings. This study adds to prior research on PLCs in the areas of modeling, teacher conversations, feedback and teacher learning and supports future research on how best to utilize PLCs.
References


and Curriculum Development, 45-53.


Jacobson, D. (2010, March). Coherent instructional improvement and PLCs: Is it possible to do


Sheppard, B., & Brown, J. (2009, May 1). Developing and implementing a shared vision of


Appendix A: Informed Consent

INFORMED CONSENT/ASSENT
For a Research Study Titled:
Examining PLCs in an Urban High School: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Teachers Learning from Other Teachers

Northeastern University,
College of Professional Studies,
Department of Education
Boston, MA 02115, U.S.A.

Name of Investigators: Dr. Sandy Nickel, Principal Investigator, Jon DeMarco, Student Researcher
Title of Project: Examining PLCs in an Urban High School: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Teachers Learning from Other Teachers

Request for Consent to Participate in a Research Study
We are inviting you to take part in a research project. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask the researcher any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. Your choice to participate is entirely voluntary. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
You have been asked to take part in this study because you have participated in PLCs.

Why is this research being done?
The purpose of my study is to examine teacher learning experiences in PLCs. You were selected as a possible participant in this study, because you are a member of a PLC and can share valuable information for this study.

What will I be asked to do?
You will participate in two interviews. At the beginning of the first interview, you will be asked to give a brief description of your biography and some background on your high school experience. At the second interview, you will reflect on your experiences learning from other teachers in PLCs.

The research question to be investigated in this study is:
How do teachers at an urban high school in Massachusetts describe the lived experience of learning from other teachers in a PLC?

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
The interviews will take place at a location of your choosing and will last between 60-90 minutes on two different occasions. Each interview will be audio taped for transcription and analysis purposes only.
Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There is no foreseeable risk or discomfort for you. However, if you wish to stop for any reason, let the researcher know and the interview will end immediately. If you decide to withdraw from the study, any data collected or recorded from the interview will not be used in this research.

Will I benefit by being in this research?
There will be no direct benefit for you for taking part in this study. However, your answers may help us learn more about the learning experiences of teachers in PLCs. It is my hope that the findings of this study can be used to help our school understand the learning experiences of teachers in PLCs. I also hope that other schools in the district will benefit from the findings as they attempt to successfully implement PLCs.

Who will see the information about me?
A pseudonym will be used for your name and the name of your school to ensure confidentiality and your identity as a participant in this study will not be known. Only I will know that the answers provided during your interviews were provided by you, but nobody else will be able to match these answers to you. Audio recordings of each interview will be stored on my flash drive with a second copy stored on a laptop that is also owned by me. Audio recordings will be maintained in these two locations for a period of 2 years following the conclusion of the study. Hand written notes taken by me during the interviews and coding documents will be kept in a locked desk in my office for 2 years upon completion of the study. After two years, audio recordings and electronic documents will be deleted and hard-copy documents will be destroyed with exception of the completed study which will be saved. A certified transcriptionist will transcribe all recordings. Only your assigned pseudonym will be known by the certified transcriptionist.

Can I stop my participation in the study?
Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Even after beginning this study, you may quit at any time with no implications to you whatsoever.

Will I be paid for my participation?
You will not be paid for your participation in this study.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
If you have questions about this study please contact Jon DeMarco at [redacted] or [redacted], the person mainly responsible for this research. You can also contact Dr. Sandy Nickel at (978)369-6884 or s.nickel@neu.edu, the Principal Investigator.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115, telephone: (617)373-4588, email n.regina@neu.edu or irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

I agree to take part in this research.
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Printed name of person above
Appendix B: Subjectivity Statement

To increase transparency, I disclosed my subjectivity statement to each research participant prior to beginning the research:

“Even though the site of this study is where I work as a teacher and PLC Facilitator, and where you work as well, please let it be known that my position during the research is to remain objective. As I interview you, I will do my best to put aside prejudgments and approach the interview with an unbiased, receptive presence while actively listening to your responses.”
Appendix C: Interview Participant Recruitment Letter

Dear Staff Member,

I am writing to you today to ask you to participate in an interview conducted by me, an Ed.D candidate at Northeastern University. This interview is being conducted to support my dissertation entitled *Examining PLCs in an Urban High School: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Teachers Learning From Other Teachers.*

The intent of my dissertation is to further research on Professional Learning Communities to better understand the experiences of teachers learning from other teachers. Interviewing teachers will provide valuable insight into the lived experiences of teachers as they learn from one another in PLCs.

Your part in this study will be handled in a confidential manner. Any reports or publications based on this research will not identify you as being involved with this study. A pseudonym will be used for your name and only I will know that the answers provided during your interviews were provided by you. Nobody else will be able to match your answers to you. Your participation is completely voluntary and you do not have to participate.

Below is a subjectivity statement to let you know the focus of this study is on the lived experiences of the individuals being interviewed:

“Even though the site of this study is where I work as a teacher and PLC Facilitator, and where you work as well, please let it be known that my position during the research is to remain objective. As I interview you, I will do my best to put aside prejudgments and approach the interview with an unbiased, receptive presence while actively listening to your responses.”

If you would like to contact me with any additional questions feel free to do so at [demarco.j@husky.neu.edu](mailto:demarco.j@husky.neu.edu).

If you would like to participate in this study, then please email me at the above address. Once I receive your confirmation I will give you a consent form either in person or in your school mailbox to read and sign to confirm your participation in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

Sincerely,

Jon DeMarco
Ed.D Candidate
Northeastern University
Appendix D: Interview Schedule

The questions and prompts below were used to begin the interview process. Most of the interview time will be spent following up teachers’ responses.

Section I: Biographical/experience questions. (Rationale: to establish the context of the participants’ teaching and learning experiences.)

1. Tell me about your experiences as a high school teacher.
   - How long have you taught at this school?
   - How long have you worked in PLCs?
   - What subject/subjects do you teach?

2. Reflect on a time when you learned something and describe this experience. (to establish the context of the participants learning experiences)
   - Possible follow up questions:
     - What made this learning experience unique?
     - Why were you able to learn?
     - How did you learn from this experience?

3. Do you have any prior experience with PLCs?
   - If yes, describe your experience.
   - What, if any, were your learning opportunities in PLCs.
   - What have been the biggest changes to your teaching since you started working in PLCs?

Section II: Reflect on your experiences in PLCs at RHS (Rational: the teacher will have an opportunity to reflect on their experience in PLCs)

4. What are the positive aspects of working in a PLC?

5. What are any negative aspects of working in a PLC?

6. How would you describe meeting time in your PLC?
   - Follow up:
     - Are there opportunities for teachers to learn from each other?

Section III: Learning experiences in PLCs at RHS: (Rational: to better understand the learning experiences of teacher in PLCs).

7. Reflect back on an experience where you learned with/from others teachers in your PLC at RHS.
   - Describe the experience: What happened? What was that like?

8. Have you experienced obstacles to learning while working in a PLC?
9. Reflect on a time when a teacher modeled a lesson or activity in your PLC and describe it:
   - Were you able to learn?
   - Were there any obstacles to your learning?
Appendix E: Permission to Conduct the Study

Dr. Lourenco Garcia, Principal
Revere High School
101 School St.
Revere, Ma, 02151

Dr. Garcia,

I am completing a dissertation entitled *Examining PLCs in an Urban High School: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Teachers Learning From Other Teachers*. I would like your permission to interview teachers who participate in Professional Learning Communities to gain insight into their learning experiences.

Jon DeMarco, history teacher at Revere High School, is conducting the research study under the supervision of Dr. Sandy Nickel, Senior Fellow at Northeastern University’s Doctor of Education Program. I hope to better understand the experiences teachers have when working in PLCs.

Information collected through participation may be used to complete a dissertation, but it will also provide the district with necessary feedback regarding PLCs.

If this research meets your approval, please sign this letter below and return to me. Thank you in advance your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Jon DeMarco

__________________________________________________________________________

Signature: Date: