TEACHER CONSTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE AND PERCEPTION SURROUNDING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES: ITS EFFECTS ON IMPLEMENTATION AND SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract
Today, educators, administrators, students, and community stakeholders are being asked to receive, implement, and utilize change strategies designed to improve student achievement. One such change strategy currently being utilized is that of the professional learning community. Empirical evidence capturing the voices of the teachers who construct their knowledge and perception surrounding professional learning communities is deficient in the body of literature found today. Using a narrative approach this study examined the following research questions:

*How do teachers describe the purpose of PLCs?* *What are teacher perceptions of PLCs at Ames Elementary?* *How do teacher perceptions of PLCs affect the implementation of PLCs at Ames Elementary?* The findings of this study indicate that administrators need to provide ongoing teacher training opportunities. There must also be support provided for the staff that will ensure their ability to be able to form a strong collaborative PLC culture. The purpose for the implementation of PLCs must be clearly articulated and transparent, and the development of positive teacher leaders within PLCs is key. This paper suggests that these factors are useful in working toward implementing and sustaining a professional learning community.

Key Words: professional learning community, narrative study
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In response to initiatives such as Race to the Top, educators, administrators, students, and community stakeholders are being asked to receive, implement, and utilize change strategies designed to improve student achievement (http://www.doe.k12.de.us). In 2009, President Obama signed into law the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Part of that act included additional funding for education totaling approximately four billion dollars, and funds were allocated to encourage states to create conditions which would reward innovation and reform (http://www.doe.k12.de.us). Conditions predicating the dispersal of that funding to the states included: achieving significant improvement in student outcomes, making substantial gains in student achievement, closing achievement gaps, improving high school graduation rates, and ensuring that students graduating from those schools were college and career ready (http://www.doe.k12.de.us).

In order to receive Race to the Top funds, many states, including the mid-Atlantic state used this study, participated in endeavors designed to support these initiatives. The Mid-Atlantic state in this study was one of the first two states in the nation to receive Race to the Top funding. Part of the state’s comprehensive plan was designed to procure funding to hire data coaches who would facilitate professional learning communities (PLCs). According to the state’s Department of Education, PLCs could be utilized to support deeper conversations about how to use data to improve student outcomes (http://www.doe.k12.de.us).

Background

It was at the time of the grant award that the state mandated the implementation of a 90-minute block of PLCs each week for every school kindergarten through the 12th grade
throughout the state (http://www.doe.k12.de.us). However, there was no statewide plan
developed for how this directive was to be carried out, an each school was expected to create its
own implementation plan.

At Ames Elementary (pseudonym), the workplace of the researcher, the teachers were
informed that the state-required implementation of PLCs would begin during the 2013-14 school
year. Race to the Top funding provided for each school in the district to utilize a data coach
(hired through an outside agency) who acted as a facilitator during the weekly PLC meetings,
and teachers were introduced to the person at the beginning of the school year. There was no
formal training provided for the teachers, and teachers were not given a voice in the decision
process concerning agenda items. Instead, the administrators at the district office planned the
weekly agenda, and disseminated it to the building principals who then passed them on to the
grade level teams. Teachers were also provided with a common block of planning time to devote
to their grade level PLCs.

The data coach held teachers of all grade levels accountable for bringing student
assessments from their language arts curriculum to analyze and then redesigned their instruction
to enhance student achievement. However, because teachers new to the collaborative model had
not informed on the use of the PLCs, they expressed frustration and resentment at having to
relinquish their planning periods for a process that they were not sure would help them grow as
educators or improve student achievement.

I, the researcher and a teacher at the school, witnessed the struggle to implement the
mandated PLC model in my school, and had several questions regarding how teachers perceived
the implementation of the PLC model. The main concern was that my fellow teachers did not
seem to support the use of the PLC model, and therefore did not use it to help drive student
achievement or to refine their instruction to meet the needs of every student.

According to Hattie (as cited in DuFour, 2010), the utilization of the PLC model is
important because one of the essential goals is that, “...teacher reflection about the impact of
instruction must be done collaboratively and it must be based on evidence of the impact of their
teaching on student learning” (p. 9). This reflection, in turn, allows educators to gather evidence
of student learning in order to inform and improve their own professional practice (DuFour,
2010). By improving their practice, educators are able to reach each and every student,
addressing their educational needs, and thus guiding them toward academic success.

**Research Problem**

Since the introduction of the mandatory utilization of the PLC model, teachers at Ames
Elementary have struggled to engage with a process designed to promote student achievement.
For example, during my own previous grade level PLC meetings, my team was quick to voice
their displeasure at what they perceive as a wasteful use of valuable planning time. Our team
rarely brings any type of assessment to the table to analyze for the purpose of improving student
achievement and teacher planning. Other grade level teams have voiced similar concerns during
our bi-monthly faculty meetings, or during lunch when multiple grade level teams dine together.

Teachers often believed that they, not the administration, district, or state, know what the
best practices for instructing their children are. Teachers have worked for years in isolation.
DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker (2008) argue that “Overcoming this traditional norm of teacher
isolation is one of the most formidable barriers to creating a PLC” (DuFour et al., 2008 p. 170).
Overall, teachers resented having to attend the mandatory meetings because they felt it was an
intrusion into their credibility as teaching professionals. As DuFour et al. (2010) stated, teachers
often state “I wish they would just give me my kids, give me my books, give me my room … and leave me alone!” (DuFour et al., 2008 p. 171).

However, ample research has shown that the PLC collaborative model produces positive results for both educators and students (Hord, 1997). PLCs are effective vehicles for the promotion of teacher growth and positive student achievement in the age of school reform, but they require both teacher buy-in and administrator support in order to be effective (Hord, 1997). It was apparent that there was a lack of buy-in from the teachers at Ames Elementary, which is why it was important to examine teachers’ beliefs about PLCs and how teachers constructed their knowledge about them to understand why they were not thriving and what could be done to ensure a successful implementation.

Thus, the purpose of this qualitative study was to identify and then examine how teachers constructed their perception of PLCs and how those experiences articulated by the teachers can help to provide a plan that will ensure the successful implementation of the PLC in the future. By identifying those areas that are problematic for educators, it was my goal to be able to provide administrators, districts, and states with the necessary information to help them plan for the successful implementation of the PLC model.

**Justification for the Research Problem**

Researchers have studied the positive impact of PLCs on student achievement. Studies conducted by Bolam et al. and Marks (as cited in Vesci, Ross, and Adams, 2008) found that higher student achievement was directly linked to schools that had strong professional communities. In addition, Vesci, Ross, and Adams (2008) as well as Mullen and Schunk (2010) demonstrated the importance of school culture and the role of the administrator in the PLC
model. There is also evidence of the correlation between PLCs and positive student achievement as demonstrated by a study conducted by Louis and Marks nearly 20 years ago (1998).

What is not as clear as the relationship between PLCs and student achievement is how teacher perception impacts the PLC process. DuFour (2011) wrote of a reported conspiracy theory that argued “… any effort to embed collaborative processes into the school day represents an administrative ploy to compel teachers to do the bidding of others and demonstrates a lack of commitment to empowering teachers” (p. 58). Similarly, I have heard teachers complain that PLCs are only important to the state, district office, and building administrative teams. Therefore, understanding teachers’ perceptions and beliefs about PLCs and their purpose can help determine how to utilize PLCs for teachers’ benefit.

Deficiencies in the Evidence

Literature on PLCs and teacher perception is limited. There have been studies done to relate student achievement to the PLC (Louis & Marks, 1998), to define and explain the roles of administrators in the PLC process (Mullen & Schunk, 2010), and to show the role that school culture plays in the implementation and sustainability of PLCs (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). What is not heard throughout the literature, however, are the voices of the teachers themselves. It is those voices, explaining how teachers construct their knowledge of PLCs, and explaining their perceptions of the integral components of the PLC process that this study captures.

Relating the Discussion to Audiences

The audience that will benefit from this study is multi-faceted. First and foremost, it is my hope to create a dialogue between the teachers and the administration of my building in which teachers concerns are heard and as a result, changes are initiated to promote positive change in the implementation and utilization of the PLC so that both teacher instruction and
student achievement are positively impacted. Second, I would like to present my findings to the board and superintendent of my district so that a plan can be created to successfully implement PLCs in schools across our district. In order for the PLC to be successful in all schools, teachers need to understand and embrace the process of the model. Harris and Jones (2010) posit that in schools that met the model with resistance, it was because teachers were not familiar with the way that PLCs worked or felt suspicious about the work of the group.

Finally, it is my hope that the findings of this study will benefit the state as it seeks to continue its utilization of the PLC model. Through my findings, it is my hope that the state will use the results of my study to initiate a professional development plan designed to create an understanding of what constitutes an authentic PLC, and how further teacher training can have a positive influence on teacher perception, thereby creating a positive environment for teachers to refine their teaching practices in order to enhance student achievement.

**Significance of the Research Problem**

School reform movements are not new to the education realm. The world has moved from an agricultural society, to an industrial society, to a more technology-based society. According to Darling-Hammond (1997), the knowledge and skill demands of jobs across all sectors of the economy are growing faster than the overall skill levels of the population. As such, it is imperative that we focus on the needs of the educators and their students so that we can produce productive members of society who are able to self-manage, analyze, invent, and problem-solve issues to meet the needs of a global economy (Darling-Hammond, 1997).

PLCs have the potential to positively impact student achievement if the model is introduced in a manner that will cultivate teacher buy-in and investment (Rhoads, 2011). Currently, with the demands of Common Core and national testing protocol, the stakes are even
higher for educators and their students to become academically proficient (Owen, 2013). In order to utilize the PLC model as it was intended and ensure that all students learn and are not just taught to take tests (DuFour, 2010), schools need to develop a collaborative culture and a collective effort. Teachers must also gather student evidence to inform and improve their professional practices.

Students, teachers, and schools overall will not receive the benefits of PLCs if they are not fully implemented. The literature suggests that administrators have an important role in establishing the structure of PLCs (Mullen & Schunk, 2010); however, teachers are responsible for actively engaging and carrying practices from the PLC into their classrooms. If teachers have a different conception of PLCs than what is intended, it is likely that PLCs will not have the intended effect on classroom instruction. Knowing how teachers construct their understanding of PLCs will enable administrators, teacher leaders, and teacher educators to create more intentional learning opportunities to support teachers. If teachers are able to fully utilize the PLCs, research has shown that it will improve classroom instruction and benefit their students.

Positionality Statement

Eight years ago, a former administrator decided to implement PLCs in Ames Elementary in order to improve student achievement. However, the administrator did so without much teacher input or participation. For example, a handful of individuals were selected to attend a PLC conference hosted by the DuFours in New Jersey. Yet all other teachers in the building were not given the opportunity to participate in the training event. The topic of our school participating in PLCs as a way to enhance student achievement and teacher instruction was never broached to the school community. With no teacher buy-in, proper training, or support, the initiative was met with resistance and teachers did not accept the PLC initiative. Although the
majority of the teachers from that time have moved on, the effects of the initial implementation still seemed to have a lingering effect.

I attended the DuFour’s training session in 2008 and was able to see the positive effects that PLCs brought to learning communities. The practical knowledge that I received during that training, through formal instruction and meeting with other school professionals who were in various stages of implementing the PLC model, encouraged me to help implement the model within my own school. At that point, I did not anticipate that there would be resistance to an initiative that could benefit both our teachers and our students. It was my assumption that teachers would welcome the opportunity to leave the realm of isolation in order to work smarter, not harder, with the added benefit of collaborating with their peers.

In order to best understand the implementation of the PLC at Ames Elementary, it was my belief that a study designed around the social construction of PLCs is needed. Understanding how socialization, the process of acquiring skills, knowledge, and dispositions, enables an individual to participate in his or her group in society (Sivan, 1986). Sivan (1986) further states that “This socialization process consists of reciprocal interactions and joint construction of meaning by the individual and others in the social context” (p. 211). Therefore, we cannot ignore the important role that social constructivism plays in the professional lives of the teachers as they engage in the mandated process of implementing PLCs with their peers.

One area of concern in developing this study is that I was one of the few people in our district trained in the PLC model by Richard DuFour and his associates. As part of the cohort who attended the training, I also was able to continue to access the latest materials available to increase my working knowledge of the model, which was only available to those who attended the in-person training.
One of the biases that I brought to the table was the knowledge that the model we are currently using is not what truly constitutes a PLC according to DuFour (2004). It is instead, a scripted plan developed by our district to ensure that we are planning in accordance with Common Core instruction. When referring to the use of the term *professional learning community*, DuFour (2004) himself cautions, “...the term has been used so ubiquitously that it is in danger of losing all meaning” (p. 6).

A clear statement that I would like to make concerning my own personal bias is that I am not at all satisfied with the way my school utilizes the PLC model. It is, as DuFour mentions, being utilized ubiquitously and not as intended, to improve student achievement and enhance teacher instruction. Another bias that I have is the belief that the DuFour model is optimal for teachers. However, it is possible that the model is not perfect and that teachers’ frustration with PLCs may be related to the model itself.

I have worked in the school for ten years, know all of the staff members, and have worked with many of them in one capacity or another. I have established strong relationships with each of them and was careful throughout the study to not be biased as an interviewer/observer. According to Machi and McEvoy (2009), “The inquiring researcher comes to the research with an open mind. This researcher is objective, champions no favorites, and has no predetermined conclusions” (p. 7). For that reason, I recognize that I will have to view the subjects and their data through the objective lens of a researcher.

**Research Questions**

My personal experiences informed my desire to conduct this study on how teachers construct knowledge of PLCs. My research questions were as follows:

1) How do teachers describe the purpose of PLCs?
2) What are teacher perceptions of PLCs at Ames Elementary?

3) How do teacher perceptions of PLCs affect the implementation of PLCs at Ames Elementary?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical model of social constructivism was the lens used for this narrative study. Constructivism is a learning or meaning-making theory that helps explain both how humans learn, as well as how the development of understanding by people relies on individuals to actively engage in making meaning (Ultanir, 2012). To that point, it is integral to the learning process that individuals do not locate knowledge, they construct and internalize their own interpretation of that knowledge.

Historical Context of the Constructivist Approach

John Dewey was a major proponent of progressive education in the United States. According to Ultanir (2012), it was Dewey’s belief that, “...knowledge is never a representation of reality” (p. 199). In other words, individual and social experiences are directly connected to the relationship between knowledge and reality. Knowledge cannot be created in isolation. Although referring to the child and the curriculum of the school, Dewey (1915) reiterated the importance of the experiences of the learner as the learner works to move towards self-realization and understanding.

One must also consider the work of Piaget (1953) when referencing an individual’s ability to construct meaning from their experiences. Piaget’s work recognized the utilization of schemata, vital building blocks for conceptual development and are constantly modified or changed depending on experiences, as a tool for children to make sense of their world. Schemata are also generalized ideas based on either experience or prior knowledge of the learner. In this
manner, individuals are able to create their own understanding of the world around them. It is through this continual acquisition of knowledge that humans are able to solve more complex problems.

According to Armstrong (2015), Vygotsky is noted for recognizing the transformation of knowledge as it occurs between the learner and their environment, also referred to as dialectical constructed learning. Armstrong (2015) also suggests that dialectical learning is a view that is supported by social interaction, collaboration and experiential learning with other individuals.

Vygotsky developed the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in which he looked at a child’s cognitive ability to learn with assistance. As children work to construct their knowledge of new information, the instructor is cognizant of the learner’s current development level as they present new material. According to Armstrong (2015), the learner works to refine their understanding through reciprocal student-teacher and student-peer interactions. Key to the ZPD is the notion that there must be continual interaction and dialogue with others. This social interaction, collaboration, and experiential learning prompts the learner to reflect upon that new knowledge, ask questions, problem solve, and construct new meaning. Armstrong (2015) posits that the key to that new construction is social interaction.

Although much research has been conducted concerning ZPD and the role that it plays in the cognitive development of the child, there are also implications for the adult learner. Warford (2011) looked at the zone of proximal teacher development, which integrates Vygotskyan theory with that of Western teaching models. Warford (2011) suggests that facts are not just transferred to the students, but rather the students take those facts and process them by the utilization of their own cultural tools. In this dynamic theory, Warford (2011) sees teacher knowledge as a static process, being continually reshaped by the dynamic nature of their schools and their classrooms.
In this case, the zone of proximal teacher development plays a part as the teachers strive to construct new knowledge in the different social contexts of which they are a part.

Researchers Nyikos and Hashimoto (1997) conducted a study in which they looked at the role of group ZPD in collaborative learning during teacher education through a constructivist lens. They found that social constructivists maintain that interaction among the group is necessary for self-regulation. Self-regulation enables the learner to problem solve and it is through social interaction within a group that knowledge is constructed and learning occurs. Nyikos and Hashimoto (1997) concur with Vygotsky in their findings of the importance that group members arrive at a mutual understanding of the subject. It is through that mutual understanding that critical thinking and problem solving occurs. To that end, Nyikos and Hashimoto (1997) were able to determine that group ZPD, “…had the potential to promote construction of knowledge and to arrive at an elevated but mutual understanding of a topic” (p. 516). In other words, and as recognized by Vygotsky, the social interaction of the group was an essential element in the process of individuals working to construct new knowledge.

**Teacher Culture and Social Construction**

The culture of teaching itself tends to support a climate of isolation. According to Mullen and Schunk (2010), professional isolation is indeed the norm in many public schools throughout North America. It is that isolation that Mullen and Schunk (2010) see as the greatest hurdle to the PLC process, and it is the workplace culture that must be changed in order to facilitate the dialectical constructed learning that will occur during the PLC process.

Sivan (1986) posited that, in a larger context, social constructivism becomes a means of cognitive development where individuals learn the needs and motives of their group. In turn, the means of how those individuals interact with the people in their group or environment are
determined. Postholm (2012) viewed knowledge as being perceived. According to Postholm (2012), “Within the constructivist paradigm, the social surroundings are seen as decisive for how the individual learns and develops” (p. 406). In other words, it is through those social surroundings that individuals construct their knowledge and learn through their shared experiences with others.

PLC models are fundamentally built on the idea that a group of educators will come together to learn from each other as they work to define best practices designed to enhance teacher effectiveness which in turn will promote positive student achievement (DuFour et al., 2008). It is by the analysis of student data, reflective dialogue, and mutual collaboration that educators learn from each other. Each individual brings their knowledge to the table, and through the collaborative nature of the PLC, constructs their new meaning (DuFour et al., 2008). In this way, PLCs foster the ability of the educators to socially construct knowledge.

By its nature, the PLC model encourages the individual and collective growth of educators as they collaborate, learn from each other, problem solve, and are active engagers rather than passive recipients during their construction of new knowledge. Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky each believed that learning was an active, social process. The experience or background of the learner, collaboration with others, and social interaction of the individual were key to their ability to construct and make sense of new knowledge. Teachers not only construct knowledge related to teaching and learning within the PLC, they also construct knowledge of the PLC that influences their experiences with the PLC.

It is my belief that at Ames Elementary, and in a broader scope in the district and the state, the utilization of social constructivism will allow me the opportunity to understand and make meaning of the teachers’ reality. The reality in this case is the teachers’ perception of the
purpose of the PLC, its impact on their teaching strategies, and its contribution to the academic achievement of their students. By analyzing the data that I collected through the lens of social constructivism, I hope to provide the school, district, and state with the information necessary to help them successfully implement the PLC model.
CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Education reform initiatives are not new in the world of education. Cries for education reform have occurred throughout the ages, with one of the most recent being the Race to the Top initiative (http://www.doe.k12.de.us/domain/87). Each state willing to meet the guidelines set by the federal government was awarded a substantial grant designed to be utilized to improve student achievement (http://www.doe.k12.de.us/domain/87).

As part of its plan and in direct response to the Race To The Top initiative, the mid-Atlantic state that Ames Elementary was located in mandated the implementation of a 90-minute block of time for PLCs each week for every school kindergarten through the 12th grade throughout the state (http://www.doe.k12.de.us/). Based on my experience as an elementary school teacher, there was a limited statewide plan for how this directive was to be carried out. Each school district was left to determine what their plan of action would be for how to implement PLCs. My particular district hired a data coach to assist our school in the PLC process of analyzing data, but their job was primarily to assist us in understand the student data. There was no formal education plan designed to increase teacher understanding of the integral components of the professional learning model.

Challenges arose when there was no set course of action, and teachers’ work was influenced by this lack of planning. Little (1987) studied teachers who had begun to collaborate, and found that, “...we can’t just arrange for teachers to meet and then assume that close scrutiny and productive adjustment of teaching practices will automatically ensue” (p.3). In fact, what Little (1987) described is exactly what happens in many schools attempting to implement and sustain the PLC model without a plan for the process of implementation.
The lack of planning and ensuing frustration is a phenomenon not only related to the implementation of PLCs. DuFour (2007) suggested that school reform in the United States follows a predictable pattern. Each initiative is introduced with great fanfare and enthusiasm only to be followed by confusion, criticism, and complaints. As quickly as they are adopted, the reforms are abandoned and the deep cultural changes that need to occur are replaced by anxiety and objections.

According to DuFour (2007), fear and anxiety are commonplace for teachers as they deal with sweeping changes with little support. Researchers throughout the ages have concluded that change creates discomfort when people are asked to try new things. However, DuFour (2007) states that “We cannot avoid the discomfort, but we can determine how we will respond when the going gets tough” (p. 6). In other words, reforms such as PLCs can be challenging, but it is important for teachers to be able to rise to the challenge.

As such, this study intends to understand teachers’ conceptions of PLCs in order to suggest ways to support the process as they learn together with colleagues in PLCs. This chapter reviewing literature on creating sustainable professional learning communities will focus on the critical role of school culture and the PLC, administrative support, and student achievement in the PLC model and is designed to support the research questions and will discuss the purpose of PLCs and how PLCs can be developed and sustained to meet that purpose.

**Defining PLCs**

PLCs are ongoing meetings of educators who gather on a regular basis to increase their own learning as well as that of their students (Liberman & Miller, 2011). The PLC model is being utilized in elementary, middle, and high schools throughout the United States as an initiative designed to promote student achievement. Each group is characterized by the same
fundamental core beliefs and values: that educators can learn from each other, and that PLCs foster a supportive and collaborative environment designed to increase teacher effectiveness thereby promoting student learning and achievement (Lieberman & Miller, 2011)

**PLC Model Overview**

According to Mullen and Schunk (2010) the PLC initiative did not spread as the result of a grassroots initiative of any school or district. Instead, groups such as The National Association of Elementary Principals and The National Association of Secondary Principals served as the “backbone and catalyst” of the PLC initiative (Mullen & Schunk, 2010, p. 187). Those organizations endorsed the belief that individuals who served in PLCs changed their learning environments for the better (Mullen & Schunk, 2010). There are two scholars who are widely known for their work on PLCs and I will discuss their ideas at length: Shirley Hord and Richard Dufour.

Hord (1997) described several notable attributes of PLCs including: (a) supportive and shared leadership, (b) collective creativity, (c) shared values and vision, (d) supportive conditions, (e) physical conditions, (f) people capacities, and (g) shared personal practice. According to Hord (1997), each of those attributes is key to having an academically successful PLC.

Hord (1997) also believed that it was essential for the principal to participate in the PLC process. Not only must the administrator participate, they must share the leadership role and ask for staff input during the decision making process. According to Hord (1997) a shared vision was another important aspect for the implementation of a successful PLC, and it was essential that all parties develop that vision based on, “...an unswerving commitment on the part of the staff to students’ learning and that is consistently articulated and referenced for the staff’s work” (p.18).
In addition, Hord (1997) posited that collective learning must occur among the staff and that the end results must address each of the students’ needs. Hord (1997) also recommended peer feedback and assistance for PLC members as part of the plan to provide assistance activities to support both the individual and community as a means for systematic improvement. Finally, Hord (1997) reported that there must be a provision in the plan for, “...physical conditions and human capacities that support such an operation” (p. 18). The supportive conditions that Hord (1997) suggested are those conditions that determine when, where, and how the staff regularly comes together to do the work of the PLC.

According to DuFour (2004), PLCs are comprised of three big ideas. The first idea is to ensure that all students learn. DuFour clarified the first idea by pointing out that it is simply not enough to teach children; the focus must be on making sure that children learn. DuFour (2004) suggested that schools find a discrepancy”...between their commitment to ensure learning for all students and their lack of a coordinated strategy to respond when all students do not learn” (p. 8). According to DuFour (2004), the PLC’s response to students who experience difficulty is timely because it is based on intervention rather the remediation, and is also a plan that requires students to devote extra time and receive additional assistance until they have mastered the necessary concepts.

DuFour’s (2004) second big idea was fostering a culture of collaboration. It was his express belief that teachers recognize the fact that they must work together to achieve their collective purpose, learning for all. DuFour (2004) called for the creation of structures that promote a collaborative culture, and recognized that the powerful collaboration of PLCs occurs when teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practice. This collaboration
itself fosters an ongoing cycle of questions designed to promote deep team learning, thus allowing the collaborative cycle or process to lead to higher levels of student achievement.

DuFour (2004) illustrated his point of a collaborative culture by using PLC teams at Boones Mill Elementary School. Teams there created formative assessments which were given before a unit of study began or a new concept was introduced, and were designed to investigate the questions: “Are students learning what they need to learn?” and “Who needs additional time and support to learn?” The key to Boones Mill’s success lies in the fact that they utilize those formative assessments in a proactive manner, rather than relying on the summative assessments given at the end of a unit of study, to guide their instruction.

According to DuFour (2004), teachers are asked to leave their world of isolation and instead collaboratively share their goals, strategies, materials pacing, questions, concerns, and results with one another. The goal of these discussions is to improve the teaching strategies of the individual teacher as well as the collective team.

DuFour’s (2004) third big idea was that there must be a focus on results, and the effectiveness of the PLC must be based on the results of the students. DuFour (2004) is clear when he states, “Every teacher team participates in ongoing process of identifying the current level of student achievement, establishing a goal to improve the current level, working together to achieve that goal and providing evidence of progress” (p. 10). The goals of the team continually shift as the student data is analyzed and the needs of students change. By utilizing common formative assessments, teachers could see how their own students performed, but even more importantly, according to DuFour (2004), “…teachers can call on their team colleagues to help them reflect on areas of concern. Each teacher has access to the ideas, materials, strategies and talents of the entire team” (p. 10).
DuFour (2004) and Hord (1997) both shared a common vision. Both believed that all children should learn, not just be taught, and that it is the responsibility of each of the stakeholders in the education system to create a powerful learning environment. Hord (1997) conducted a thorough analysis of literature to determine the following: (a) the definition of a learning community; (b) what the literature says about what constitutes a learning community; (c) what happens when a school staff studies, works, plans, and takes action collectively to increase student learning; (d) and to reveal what is known about how to create PLCs in schools. Continuing with the direction of her work, DuFour (2004) and others committed to developing and sustaining PLCs continued to explore the factors that will enable others to create and sustain an authentic PLC to promote both teacher and student learning.

Creating Sustainable PLCs

Although it is vital to be clear about what constitutes a PLC, it is equally important to focus on the implementation and sustainability process. In order to illustrate her belief in the importance of the role that all educators play in the sustainability of PLCs, Huffman (2011) utilizing the words of Fullen (2005), reminds us, “Sustainability is the capacity of a system to engage in the complexities of continuous improvement consistent with deep values of human purpose” (p. 334). After describing the characteristics of what constitutes a PLC, two more recurring themes within the literature concern the implementation and sustainability of PLCs: (a) the relationship between school culture and PLCs, and (b) administrative support.

School Culture and PLCs

In order to ensure the successful implementation of the PLC model, school culture is an integral aspect of the process that must be addressed. Fullen (2006) made a powerful statement concerning PLCs and school culture: “...PLCs can be miscast as changing the cultures of
individual schools rather than their deeper meaning that PLCs need to be part and parcel if creating new multiple-school district cultures” (p.2). The idea that the utilization of PLCs can and should impact and transform an entire school district is powerful. According to Fullen (2006), the PLC model “...is a system change that permanently deprivatizes teaching in order to build on continuous improvement” (p.4). For teachers who prefer to work in isolation, the idea of implementing the PLC model can appear threatening if not presented in a transparent, safe, and engaging manner.

Rhoads (2011) identified several obstacles he encountered while on the PLC journey, including the argument that “Teachers’ attitudes to change itself presented challenges. Not all teachers viewed the meetings as productive. Teachers demonstrated resistance to changing operational structure” (p. 25). Another area of concern identified by Rhoads (2011) was, “The emotional and relational aspects of the school culture at times impeded reform. Teachers felt overwhelmed by the effort needed to complete the work. They did not want to expend any more energy or time to take risks or attempt a new activity” (Rhoads, 2011, p. 25).

Harris and Jones (2010) identified similar obstacles as Rhoads (2011). The authors reported that “In all schools, there is a dominant culture that can either support or undermine innovation or change…. In some schools, the professional learning groups met with resistance from teachers who felt suspicious about the work of the group” (p. 178). Harris and Jones (2010) noted that effective teacher leadership was critically important to the success of the process. Once the lead teachers supported and explained the overwhelming benefits of the PLC model, the initial resistance to the change was overcome.

According to Mullen and Schunk (2010), “The problem of professional and personal isolation is the greatest hurdle that PLC initiators often face in creating synergistic collaborative
cultures” (p. 196). In other words, it is vital to the successful implementation of the PLC that teachers feel that their voices are heard and that their input is valued by their administrators. When their concerns, ideas, and suggestions for improving student achievement through a variety of instructional strategies are validated by administrators, teachers take ownership of the process.

Mullen and Schunk (2010) go further to reiterate the importance of validating the work of teachers during the PLC process by stating, “When teachers believe their actions matter, and when they experience a sense of consequentiality propelled by disciplined curiosity, deepened collegiality, and collective power, they tend to feel motivated to collaborate in their many roles as connected leaders, organizational members, cultural moderators, and active learners” (p. 199). In summary, teachers need to be empowered as leaders, thinkers, and have the opportunity to work with like-minded colleagues.

Maloney and Konza (2011) also identified another key factor that influenced a teacher’s level of engagement and contribution during the PLC process. Egalitarianism, or the belief that all people are equal and deserve equal rights and opportunities, is vital to the success of an effective PLC. The authors proposed, “...that professional learning has a better chance of succeeding if teachers contribute as equals to setting the agenda, bringing about change, and ultimately improving their own practice” (p. 85). It is when teachers are actively and equally engaged in the collaborative process of PLCs that these positive changes will occur.

Vescio et al. (2008) reviewed 10 American studies and one English study on the impact of PLCs on teaching practices and student learning. Of specific interest to this literature review is their findings on PLCs and school culture. The authors identified four areas that promoted changes in the school culture: collaboration, a focus on student learning, teacher authority, and
continuous teacher learning. Their research found that us that successful collaborative endeavors include strategies that, “...open practice in ways that encourage sharing, reflecting, and taking the risks necessary to change” (p.84).

Regarding collaboration, Berry et al. (as cited in Vescio et al., 2008) regarding learning communities showed that the practices of the teachers improved by utilizing the following collaborative structures: sharing lessons, using protocols for decision making and relying on systematic note taking for the purpose of informing other colleagues about their work. Similarly, Phillips (as cited in Vescio et al., 2008) noted that middle school teachers were able to collaborate in different ways such as: observing each other in the classroom, videotaping and reviewing lessons, investigating teacher problems, collectively generating new ideas for practice, engaging in literature study circles, and participating in critical friends groups.

Bolam et al. (as cited in Vescio et al., 2008) in which they examined survey data from 393 schools. The school sites chosen represented early childhood, elementary, and secondary schools, and the study utilized interview-based case study data from 16 schools. Both the survey and case study data, “...suggest a positive impact on teaching practice and morale as a result of participation in collaborative activities” (p. 85). As a result, using the collaborative professional learning model represented a significant change in the traditionally isolationist model teaching.

The focus on student learning is key to changing the instructional culture of the school. Of particular interest were two overlapping studies conducted by Supovitz (as cited in Vescio et al., 2008) and Supovitz & Christman (as cited in Vescio et al., 2008). In these studies, the importance of focus in teacher collaboration was key in two schools located in Cincinnati and Philadelphia. Both schools were focused on reform efforts and teachers who participated on teams or in small communities that were clearly focused on instructional practice reported
changes in their instructional practice. According to Vescio et al. (2008), another important observation was that teachers who did not use specific meeting times to focus on teaching practice did not report any changes in the instructional culture.

In summary, school culture is important for the sustainability of PLCs. More specifically it is of the utmost importance to promote an environment of complete transparency when initially implementing a PLC. Teachers must have an understanding of why the PLC is necessary, and for that to happen, teachers must first buy into the change initiative. When teachers gain an understanding of the potential of the PLC to transform and refine both their practices and student achievement, there is a decrease in suspicion, and the initiative is met with less resistance. Finally, administrators must ensure that their teachers know that their voices, concerns, and ideas are heard and valued in order for authentic collaboration to occur.

**Administrative Support**

When addressing the role of the principal in the PLC process, Mullen and Schunk (2010) argued that in order for the PLC to work, the principal in a school utilizing that model must possess and utilize a non-traditional way of thinking and acting. More specifically, Mullen and Schunk (2010) believed that the principal or school leadership teams must create the conditions necessary to enable their colleagues to continually improve upon their collective capacity. By doing so, those principals will ensure that all students acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to achieve academic success. The authors also analyzed the supportive role of those non-traditional administrators in the PLC process, and recognized that if schooling conditions are to change, there has to be room for innovation. By being able act and think in a non-traditional manner, the administrators were modeling the very definition of innovation.
DuFour (2004) maintained that in order for teachers to participate in a PLC, the school must ensure that everyone on the team focuses on student learning. The principals and administrators in all schools are part of the educational team, and Spanneut (2010) suggested that principals have opportunities to establish conditions within which PLCs can flourish. He suggested that they can do this by creating time for dialogue to occur and enhance its effectiveness by purposefully developing and then supporting teachers’ use of collegial conversations within PLCs. Such dialogue occurs as continual open sharing which can promote the growth of trust, an integral component for initiating and sustaining a successful collaborative community (Spanneut, 2010).

Principals should facilitate, not dictate, thoughtful and constructive dialogue as a way to teach participants how to develop and apply new skills as they identify, agree upon, and address specific instructional areas in need of support. Spanneut (2010) stated, “By creating ways for PLCs to engage in and become skillful in the use of such techniques, principals clearly illustrate the differences between providing leadership for teachers and actively promoting the development of teachers as leaders” (p. 103). In other words, by empowering the teachers to communicate and effectively make the decisions necessary to facilitate the work of the PLC, principals create effective teacher-leaders within their own buildings.

Rhoads (2011) made several suggestions designed to assist administrators with the implementation of the professional learning process with their staff. The steps were born as a result of obstacles encountered by Rhoads while implementing PLCs in his own school. According to Rhoads (2011):

Administrators must plan to address the emotional aspects of the change, be cognizant that teachers may experience initiative fatigue, be prepared to make and support
structural changes within the school to sustain the reform, do not attempt to do all of the work alone; increase your leadership capacity, and most importantly, be aware that teachers will only trust you if you commit to the reform and they then see the result of the work in themselves or their students. (p. 24)

In other words, teachers want to see that principals are as committed to the PLC process as they are. They want a leader who is not a micromanager, but instead, trusts them to make informed decisions concerning the PLC process. Teachers also want administrators who don’t just listen to them, but who hear them, and actively respond to them when they communicate their fears as well as their successes.

As the result of a three-year study designed to identify the factors that allowed for the successful implementation of PLCs, Linder, Post, and Calabrese (2012) concluded the following concerning the role of administrators:

Administrators should encourage and support PLCs as a form of professional development that allows teachers to direct the focus of their learning, and they should validate and celebrate the accomplishments of these groups. As a result, administrators develop teachers who are collaborative, self-directed, inquiry minded, and empowered by their work. (p. 21)

In other words, the actions of administrators must reflect their belief in their teachers as effective leaders and problem solvers. When the concerns, whether positive or negative, of teachers are heard and addressed, teachers are empowered to effective collaboration.

The reoccurring theme throughout the literature concerning the role of administrators in the PLC process overwhelmingly supports the leadership style as defined by DuFour. According to Schmoker (2004), DuFour made a simple discovery:
He greatly reduced the time he spent trying, frenetically, to be the consummate, traditional instructional leader…. [He] began to focus on the simple elements of learning communities – ensuring that teams met on a regular schedule and documented their progress on self-made formative assessments. And he honored and celebrated every success at every faculty meeting. (p. 88)

Although seemingly simplistic, DuFour’s self-reflection resulted in the success of the PLC model. His teachers were empowered by their ability to create and analyze student assessments, and as a result, student achievement soared. The success rate on Advanced Placement exams at his school rose by 800 percent (Schmoker, 2004).

In order for administrators to successfully support the PLC process, they themselves must be innovators, able to think in non-traditional ways. Administrators must ensure that conditions in their schools are created to support and sustain the PLC model. It is their job to make sure that all stakeholders in the process know and understand that they are equally valued and important to the success of the PLC. Administrators also need to empower their teachers through a level of trust that fosters the growth and development of teacher leaders. Finally, it is the job of the administrator to hear the concerns of their teachers as well as to celebrate their successes.

**Key Concepts and Challenges in PLCs**

According to DuFour (2004), the first big idea behind the PLC is to ensure that students learn. The shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning has huge implications for the education process. It is not enough to simply create a school mission statement to hang on the wall for all who enter the building to see. If the staff takes ownership of the statement that all students can learn, the motivation to build a solid foundation to enable the success of that endeavor will be present.
The second big idea is concerned with the culture of collaboration. In order to build a PLC, educators must work together to achieve their collective purpose of learning for all. The third big idea deals with the focus on results. Teachers work together to collaboratively improve student achievement by identifying the current level of student achievement, establishing goals, and working together to achieve those goals. It is only by being able to successfully implement each of these ideas that the work of the PLC will be realized. According to Nelson (2008):

It is not sufficient to merely create opportunities within a school day or in addition to teachers’ traditional work for teachers to come together as a professional learning community. Teachers need support for both the process of inquiry and for the creation of an environment that models, nurtures, and embeds an inquiry stance… Targeted support is critical to move teachers past problematic areas: refining ambiguous inquiry questions, developing the trust needed to share student work, making sense of that student work in relation to their inquiry question, and promoting a willingness to wonder and ask critical questions about instructional decisions, classroom practices, and student learning. (p. 579)

Nelson’s (2008) study echoed my interpretation of the literature: A school culture that supports teachers’ work and supportive administrators is important to the successful implementation and sustainability of the PLC process. In other words, it is not just the learning community itself, it is the structures in place around the PLC that contribute to its effectiveness.

Fullan (2006) described three misgivings that he had concerning PLCs. The first was one of superficiality, “…educators simply calling what they are doing professional learning communities without going very deep into learning and without realizing they are not going deep” (p. 1). The second was a concern which is commonly heard with many new initiatives in
the education realm, that it is one innovation among many, “...perhaps the flavor of the year, which means it can be easily discarded once the going gets rough and as other innovations come along the following year” (p. 1). To that end, it is Fullan’s (2006) opinion that a lasting collaborative culture should be developed, one that will focus on continuous improvement, not just that of another program innovation.

The final concern that Fullan (2006) has is that PLCs “...can be miscast as changing the cultures of individual schools rather than their deeper meaning that PLCs need to be part and parcel to creating new multiple-school district cultures” (p.2). In other words, this needs to be a system change so that schools do not operate as autonomous units.

**Student Achievement, School Climate, and Leadership Outcomes**

Two important themes emerged from the empirical studies on PLCs: (a) PLCs as a structure to improve student achievement (Vescio et al., 2008), and (b) support for PLCs by school climate and administration (Mullen & Schunk, 2010). The final section reviews literature on teacher perceptions of PLCs.

**Student Achievement**

Vescio et al. (2008) reported that although limited in number, the collective results of the studies they analyzed report that student learning does, unequivocally, indeed increase when teachers participate in PLCs. Eight of the studies reviewed by Vescio et al. (2008) determined there was a positive relationship between teacher involvement in PLCs and student achievement.

Berry et al. (as cited in Vescio et al, 2008) looked at a rural elementary school over a four-year period and found that students moved from 50% of the student body performing at or slightly above grade level to more than 80% of all students meeting grade level standards. In another study conducted in a middle school, Phillips (as cited in Vescio et al, 2008), report that
scores increased exponentially over a three-year period. Students moved from a 50% acceptable range on standardized tests to over 90% at the conclusion of the study. Louis and Marks (as cited in Vescio et al., 2008) reported that after adjusting for grade level and student background, the researchers reported that student achievement was much higher in schools with the strongest PLCs.

Louis and Marks (1998) examined on the professionally supportive relationships among teachers in eight elementary, eight middle schools, and eight high schools. The study used a multi-level quantitative analysis as well as qualitative analytic methods to study the impact of school professional communities on the intellectual quality of student performance using authentic measures, and on two dimensions of classroom organization. Those two dimensions include the areas of the technical, measured as authentic pedagogy (higher order thinking and the construction of meaning through conversation), and the social, or the social support (the professional community) for achievement. The research questions asked were: “To what extent does professional community influence the social and technical organization of the classroom?” and “What is the relative effect of school professional community and classroom social and technical and technical organization on student achievement?” (Louis & Marks, 1998, p. 540).

The study took place from 1991-1994 and included 910 teachers and 5,943 students representative of nationally selected, restructuring elementary, middle, and high schools. Both teachers and students were surveyed, and classroom observational data was collected on students in 144 mathematics and social study classrooms. 235 assessment tasks were collected at two different points from those teachers, 5,100 samples of student work responding to those assessment tasks was collected, and in-depth case studies of each of the schools were made.
Louis and Marks (1998) found that teachers who worked in an environment that supported teachers working in a professional community helped support the organization of classrooms for learning and academic performance of students. The researchers believed that individual teacher performance in the classroom was critical to promote positive student achievement, but that there needs to be collegial support and extensive external (e.g., physical and structural) support to get the teachers there (Louis & Marks, 1998).

**School Climate and Administrative Leadership**

According to Mullen and Schunk (2010), the workplace culture of professional and personal isolation in today’s schools must be changed, and is the largest hurdle to overcome in the implementation process of the PLC model. It is because of these concerns that it is necessary to consider the conditions necessary to foster the growth of a powerful collaborative culture that will enable educators to leave behind the chains of isolation.

Mullen and Schunk (2010) identified three models of leadership: instructional, transformational, and transactional. They defined instructional leaders as those who focused on school goals, the curriculum, instruction, and school environment. The transformational leader, restructured the school environment by improving the working conditions. The transactional leader placed an emphasis clear goal setting, aligning goals with actions, and using rewards/punishments to achieve their stated objectives. Mullen and Schunk (2010) believed that a good leader should develop all three characteristics and be able to move between them in order to enact collective mentorship.

Mullen and Schunk (2010) defined collaborative mentoring as a process that, “...promotes democratic accountability through a life-long learning, school-wide inclusiveness in reciprocal learning, collaborative practices and shared governance” (p. 191). During the process
of collective mentoring, collaborative mentors seek to promote equality and diversity, bring, traditionally, women, minorities, new teachers, and students into an environment designed to promote equality and diversity. Mullen and Schunk (2010) suggested that it is here that leaders must trust that both teachers and students can govern themselves through a constructive dialogue while respecting each other’s similarities and differences. The researchers found that when teachers are provided the time to work together, they can develop new or improved instructional strategies, design effective lessons, focus on student achievement, expand their understanding of subject-area content, and address other problematic issues related to teaching their students (Mullen & Schunk 2010).

Huffman and Jacobson (2003) conducted a study based on the idea that “The leaders of successful organizations create a climate where people work together and where changes and creativity are enhanced through collective visioning and collaborative work” (p. 243). In other words, great leaders create positive, energetic work environments where creativity through collaboration is encouraged. In order to examine school climate more thoroughly, Huffman and Jacobson (2003) examined perceptions and beliefs about how well the leadership in the school learning communities organized and institutionalized changes to achieve desired results. They also examined the core processes of PLCs in order to determine their perceived relationship to school effectiveness and to the leadership style of the principal. Huffman and Jacobson (2003) identified the following principles as being key elements in the building and sustaining of a strong collaborative culture: capability, commitment, contribution, continuity, collaboration, and conscience. One of the essential components of the PLC known and detailed by Hord (1997), DuFour (2004), and others is the ability to become a strong, supportive, collaborative community.
The quantitative study by Huffman and Jacobson (2003) utilized the following research questions: “What is the perception of the participants of the level of organizational development of their schools as professional learning communities?” “What is the perception of the participants of the importance of core processes of learning communities” and “Is there a difference between the leadership styles of principals as related to core processes of learning communities?” (p. 243).

The participants were a convenience sample of 83 educators enrolled in Masters-level courses in Educational Administration at a Texas university. Huffman and Jacobson (2003) developed a survey instrument that was a questionnaire of 30 items, and distributed the questionnaires during the 1998 summer and fall semesters. The administration of the questionnaire occurred during the Instructional Leadership class and took approximately 10 to 15 minutes. Huffman and Jacobson (2003) made it clear that the questionnaire was not a required class activity. The study found that 91.6% of the participants heard about PLCs through their own course work, and that they had also heard about them through inservice training, professional conferences, and/or their school leaders, as well as through their own experiences.

A significant result of this study was that the greatest number of participants strongly believed that their schools provided a safe environment for diverse ideas, beliefs, and strategies (contributions), and that their schools were democratic organizations guided by positive principles, ethics, and values (conscience). The findings of Huffman and Jacobson (2003) also indicated that participants believed that those leaders who exhibit the characteristics of a collaborative leadership or transformational style had a greater chance of success in developing a PLC. According to Huffman and Jacobson (2003) the results emphasized that “…the need for developing an inclusive democratic leadership partnership in schools that is collaborative creates
a respectful environment, and directly addresses school effectiveness” (p. 248). In other words, the administration in a school must empower all stakeholders in the PLC process to trust, collaborate and move towards defining best practices that will encourage both educator and student growth.

Implications for practice identified by Huffman and Jacobson (2003) were the following: by taking the first step, visionary leaders and administrators who incorporate the PLC model in their school should define commonalities of the participants as well as their concerns to lead to common strategies and processes to improve the culture of the workplace. Huffman and Jacobson (2003) believed that by doing so, the PLC model would give stakeholders the opportunity to engage collaboratively in dialogue and planning for the purpose of continual school improvement and positive student achievement.

In summary, once administrators defined, explained, and modeled a course of action regarding the implementation of PLCs in their schools, validated what their teachers were saying, and provided structures to empower and encourage teacher-leaders, the culture within the school would change, and the collaborative PLC model would have the potential to promote both educator and student learning.

Teacher Perceptions of PLCs

In their search for answers to determine if PLCs were achieving the desired improvement in student learning outcomes, Nadelson, Croft, Ennis, Harm, McClay, and Winslow (2012) recognized that there were few empirical studies that documented the relationship between teachers’ engagement in PLCs and their student’s achievement. In fact, only five relevant studies in three countries could be located (Lomos et al. 2011). As a result of the analysis of the data from Lomos et al., the direction of the study of Nadelson and his colleagues became clear.
The goal of the Nadelson et al. (2012) research was to determine how school-based PLCs were structured, how the teachers interacted in the PLCs, and if there was a relationship between the PLCs and student achievement. The questions that guided their research were: “What were the primary topics of focus or emphasis of the participants’ PLCs?” “What were our participants’ perceptions and attitudes toward their PLCs?” “Was there a duration and frequency of educators’ engagement in PLCs, years of experience, grade level taught, and their perceptions and attitudes toward their PLCs?” “Was there a relationship between educators’ attitudes and perceptions of PLCs and their students’ performance on statewide achievement tests?” (Nadelson et al., 2010, p. 407).

The quantitative study utilized a cross-sectional design surveying teachers from multiple schools in order to answer their research questions. The research team was particularly focused on teachers working with fifth and eighth grade because they participated in statewide achievement testing, and both grade levels represented the end of elementary and middle school respectively. Nadelson et al. (2012) attempted to recruit hundreds of K-12 teachers for their study, but only 145 teachers completed their surveys. The participants who responded were given a link to an online web-based survey site. Because the researchers could not find a pre-made survey, they created their own with seven items designed to answer their research questions. To answer their research question concerning student achievement, the researchers utilized state-level achievement tests designed to measure student achievement.

The first result from Nadelson et al. (2012) pointed to the participant’s wide range of foci for their PLCs, suggesting that they are being used to address a variety of educational issues. The researchers also determined that PLCs were a vehicle to ensure that teachers were following best practices in order to enable all students to be successful. The second finding caught the
researchers’ attention: Some of the participants indicated that they did not know the focus of the PLCs (Nadelson et al., 2012). They found that highly problematic in that not knowing the focus could jeopardize the productivity of the PLC. This lack of understanding pointed to the need for supportive leadership and strong collaboration among all stakeholders.

Of interest for future researchers was the Nadelson et al. (2012) analysis of participants’ perceptions and attitudes towards PLCs correlated with years of teaching, educational level, and PLC duration and frequency. The researchers found that those characteristics were unrelated to PLC perceptions, which led them to believe “…that a number of other personal characteristics may be associated with perceptions of PLCs, and we think this is an excellent direction for future research” (Nadelson et al., 2012, p. 415). In addition, their findings pointed to a positive correlation between duration and frequency of PLCs and PLC perception. The researchers found that the more time a collaborative team spent together, the more likely they were to develop a collegial and supportive professional relationship.

The research of Nadelson et al. (2012) failed to find a strong relationship between perceptions of PLCs or PLC duration and student performance on the state achievement tests. It was the belief of the researchers that teachers’ perception of PLCs may be captured by other measurements of student data besides statewide achievement tests. Nadelson et al. (2012) further stated that, “…there is a need to continue to investigate the diversity of issues and influence associated with PLCs” (p.417).

**Conclusion**

Throughout this literature review, there were explanations and examples about what key aspects characterize a successful PLC, as well as what the goals of the PLC should be. Each of the studies were in agreement when describing the goals of an effective PLC: PLCs must ensure
that all students can learn, there must be a culture of collaboration, and there must be a focus on results in order to ensure that teams develop and pursue measurable goals that align with their district’s standards of learning (DuFour, et al., 2006). Those goals assist educators as they strive to positively impact student learning.

Vescio et al. (2008) found a correlation that student learning increased when educators participated regularly in strong PLCs. However, PLCs must have effective administrative support as noted by Mullen and Schunk (2010). Principals must provide a safe and supportive environment for educators to collaborate and refine their practices in order to effectively increase positive student achievement. In addition, the utilization of the PLC model deprivatizes teaching and therefore changes the cultural landscape of teaching (Fullen, 2006). For those teachers who prefer to work in isolation, the idea of implementing the PLC model can appear threatening if not presented in a transparent, safe, and engaging manner, so principals must work to be transparent and engaging.

The main goal of the PLC is to create a strong collaborative team that comes together to focus on a cycle of continuous learning for both the educators and their students. It is important that there be continued research on PLCs to better understand the components that not only help with their implementation but also their sustainability. One aspect of sustainability that the proposed study will focus on is teachers’ perceptions of PLCs. In order for teacher professional development to be useful to teachers, they must be “owners” (Wagner, 2001) of the process.

**Future Research**

In reviewing the literature related to my proposed research study, I found the current literature on PLCs and teacher perception to be very limited. Thus, it was my goal to take the research of Nadelson et al. (2012) to the next level and investigate the “...diversity of issues and
influence associated with PLCs” (p. 417). My research utilized a narrative study methodology to tell the stories of teachers concerning their construction of knowledge and perceptions of PLCs. It is my hope that through the analysis of their stories, I will add to the current literature and contribute to future research about what is needed to implement and sustain a successful PLC.
CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

The cultural agenda for PLCs is to transform schools into communities that will enhance learning for both students and teachers (Mullen & Schunk, 2010). Through the utilization of narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), I identified how teacher perceptions and experiences of the PLC model can affect its implementation. It was my goal to provide administrators, districts, and states with the necessary information to help them plan for the successful implementation of the PLC model. The research questions were as follows:

- How do teachers describe the purpose of PLCs?
- What are teacher perceptions of PLCs at Ames Elementary?
- How do teacher perceptions of PLCs affect PLCs at Ames Elementary?

Qualitative Methodology

Because this study was exploratory and examined how teachers construct knowledge of PLCs, it was appropriate to use a methodology that allows for in-depth conversations and examination of artifacts. According to Creswell (2009), qualitative studies are a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups attribute to a social or human problem. Creswell (2013) recommends a qualitative study when a complex or detailed understanding of a specific event is warranted. In addition, the qualitative approach is utilized when the researcher wishes to empower individuals by allowing them to share their stories on a deeper level. It is at this deeper level that the researcher can better understand the larger context of the problem being studied.

As such, qualitative methodology worked well for this study because it allowed me to look for the meaning that individual teachers make through their perception of the purpose of
PLCs and how those perceptions affect the incorporation of PLCs at Ames Elementary. By empowering teachers to share their stories at a deeper level and then analyzing those interviews for commonalities, I was able to understand the larger context of the difficulties experienced in implementing and sustaining PLCs at Ames Elementary.

**Paradigm.** This qualitative study was approached from a constructivist research paradigm (Creswell, 2012). In the PLC model, each person brings to the table his or her reality, adding to the acquisition of knowledge. Thus, the utilization of the constructivist paradigm for the research will allow the researcher to present the case from participants’ multiple perspectives and meanings (Yin, 2014). By utilizing the constructivism paradigm, I was able to reflect on the researcher-participant dialogue and better understand the reality constructed by the actor, as suggested by Sciarra (1999). The constructivist paradigm also provided a way for my voice and experiences as a scholar-practitioner who has worked on-site to be included.

**Role of the Researcher**

According to Creswell (2013) the role of the researcher is that of a key instrument. Since I conducted this study collecting the data and interviewing the teachers within the school that I currently teach in, I was the key instrument (Creswell, 2014). It was my role to design the open-ended instruments necessary to gather the essential information for this research study, and as the researcher, I was well-informed, had a good grasp of the issues at hand, and was able to ask good questions that provided me with the rich evidence needed for analysis (Yin, 2014). Equally essential was the skill of being a good listener. I was a quiet observer who could capture and absorb the data to be analyzed. Yet, it was necessary to remain adaptive when unexpected turns occur in the course of the research process (Yin, 2014).
Because I conducted this study at my current place of employment and because I have been involved with PLCs since their inception at the school, I have many opinions about PLCs at the school. Therefore, it was impossible for me to approach this study objectively due to my experiences. Instead, because this is a constructivist study (Yin, 2014), I will explain and describe my biases and experiences so that the audience can understand how my perspectives differ from those of the participants.

**Research Approach**

A narrative inquiry approach was utilized for this study because it enabled me to bring the voices of the teachers themselves to life through a rich narrative discussion (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Quantitative research has shown the statistical success of PLCs (Vescio et al., 2008), but the objective of my research was to ask teachers at Ames Elementary about their perspectives of PLCs and allow their voices to be heard to answer the research questions in this qualitative study.

According to Creswell (2012), there are seven characteristics important to the narrative research method: (a) individual experiences, (b) chronology of the experience, (c) collecting individual stories, (d) restorying, (e) coding for themes, (f) context or setting, and (g) collaborating with participants. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) believed that the experiences within narrative inquiry are personal in relationship to what the individual experiences but are also related to the social aspect of what occurs when the individual interacted with others (Creswell, 2012). Because PLCs rely on social interaction through collaboration, narrative research enabled me to gather field texts to form into themes or categories that will describe the experiences of teachers at Ames Elementary (Creswell, 2012).

Using a narrative inquiry approach allowed me to study how teachers experience PLCs at
Ames Elementary (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The narrative inquiry approach enabled me to analyze the construction and reconstruction of the personal and social stories of the research participants (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). By analyzing those stories, I was able to write rich descriptive narratives to answer the research questions.

Participants

The school that the participants were chosen from is located in a school district within a mid-Atlantic state and is located in a suburban setting. It serves approximately 700 students and there are 47 teachers currently on staff. Teachers from Ames Elementary were identified at the research site as the participants for this study based on their involvement in the initial implementation of the PLC model in education which started before the Race to the Top initiative.

The sampling strategy utilized was purposeful sampling so that I could select specific individuals in order to understand the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The sample size was narrowed by having one representative from each grade level with between two to 15 years of service. Some teachers in the population may not have been at Ames at the initial implementation of the PLC, but they will have had both exposure and experience if they fall within that range. The population that I addressed in this research study included teachers who work in a first through fifth grade elementary school and the current principal.

Another factor that influenced the decision to include only experienced teachers is the fact that the first few years of a teacher’s experience are used to learn the actual process of teaching their students, as well as getting used to the parameters of working in a new position. As Bauml (2015) suggests, “Novice teachers (i.e., those in the first three years of their teaching careers) naturally want to establish themselves as capable professionals within the school
community; they want their colleagues to accept and respect them” (p. 392). In other words, new teachers often feel the added weight of the pressure to be just as capable as their peers who have been teaching much longer. Teachers new to the profession are concerned with learning the culture of their school, the new curriculum, the expectations of their administrators, and the duties new to them in the first few years of their teaching profession.

**Context: PLCs at Ames Elementary**

In the fall of 2015, as a result of a union/labor dispute, Ames’ school district ceased all mandated PLCs. Principals were told to play no part in the process. Teachers were told that their participation in PLCs was voluntary and if conducted, were to be held at a time and place of the grade level team's choosing. The PLC’s at Ames Elementary prior to the union dispute consisted of a 90-minute period of time broken up into two 45-minute blocks and met on two separate days of the week as designated by the building principals.

The PLC meetings included all teachers in the building and were organized by grade level. The one exception to the grade level rule was related to our teachers in art, music, physical education, the library, and the school counselor. They met together as a related arts team rather than as a specific grade level. Prior to the union dispute, when PLCs were conducted there were no formal PLC leaders unless a member of the administration was present, and then they fulfilled that role for that particular meeting.

**Recruitment and Access**

Permission to conduct this research study was accessed through the necessary channels as prescribed by Northeastern University Internal Review Board protocol. Per district policy, I gained access to ask the principal of the school to approve this study by requesting a meeting with the school superintendent at the district office that the school is located in. At that time, I
presented him with a letter (see Appendix A) that provided an overview of my study, research questions and goals, and answered his questions regarding my intent. He approved the study with no reservations and, the next step was to obtain approval from the building principal, or gatekeeper. A meeting was arranged with her and she was provided with a letter (see Appendix B) that explained my intent, research overview, and research questions and goals. I asked for and was given permission to interview her teachers.

After receiving the principal’s approval, I explained the intent of this research study to the staff at the end of a faculty meeting when the administration was no longer present (see Appendix C). An electronic survey was sent to staff to determine if they were interested in being interviewed (see appendix D). After identifying teachers who wished to participate in the survey, they each signed an informed consent form (see Appendix E). Additionally, as an incentive, a $10 WaWa gift card was given to each participant who agreed to participate in the research project.

**Data Collection**

Data collection consisted of face-to-face interviews. I interviewed each subject using a one-on-one approach with open ended questions (Creswell, 2013). Each subject was interviewed twice at a time and place of their choosing. I utilized inductive reasoning to begin with specific observations and measures to then analyze and find patterns and regularities. The first interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was designed to build rapport, gain background information on the subjects, and concluded with the subject’s assessment of how they perceive school culture in relation to PLCs (see Appendix F).

The second interview focused on the three primary research questions: How do teachers describe the purpose of PLCs? What are teacher perceptions of PLCs at Ames Elementary? How
do teacher perceptions of PLCs affect the implementation of PLCs at Ames Elementary? The information from each of these interviews was analyzed solely by me as I looked to understand the phenomenon being observed. I also contacted the principal at Ames to request an interview with her (see Appendix G). She signed a consent form (see Appendix H) and was interviewed to gain context and a deeper understanding of PLCs at Ames Elementary (see Appendix I).

Each interview was recorded with a digital recording device, and the transcriptions were transcribed by me. All data recordings were uploaded to a separate hard drive that is locked in the desk drawer and I am the only individual with access to the materials.

Data Analysis

According to Creswell (2013), qualitative researchers must build their patterns, categories, and themes from the bottom up, using the inductive technique. By utilizing the research questions in the study and analyzing the interviews, I was able to utilize the inductive method to organize categories into a framework that summarized the raw data and conveyed key themes and processes. According to Thomas (2006), the inductive analysis approach should establish clear links between the research objectives and summary findings derived from the raw data. Thomas (2006) also recognized the need of the researcher to develop a model or theory about the underlying structure of experiences or processes evident in the text.

The analysis process began with multiple readings of the transcribed interviews in order to define the themes and categories (Thomas, 2006). As the transcripts were coded and recoded, emerging themes developed and were added to the initial body of work in order to produce a more authentic view of the data (Thomas, 2006). The first step that I took was to organize the data. Transcriptions of the interviews and the field notes were converted to page documents
which were uploaded to my private external hard drive. Any electronic trails of uploaded documents were deleted so that there was no risk to the privacy of participants.

After the initial reading of the interviews and field notes, there were several more to enable me to catch any subtle nuances found within the text. According to Thomas (1996), by utilizing coding in inductive analysis, the researcher is then able to come up with a category label, category description, text or data associated with each category, links based on commonalities in meanings between categories or assumed causal relationships, and finally, a framework or model in which the category is embedded. As themes emerged, I sought to find links within the literature that others have developed.

Creswell (2009) recognized the importance of collecting open-ended data and developing the analysis from the information supplied by the participants. The first round of coding was done with that of initial coding. According to Saldana (2013), initial coding is often referred to as open coding, and was used to break down qualitative data into discreet parts. I then closely examined each piece of the interview, comparing my findings for similarities and differences. By utilizing the initial coding process, it was my intent to find leads that provided me with a direction for further exploration within my study.

The second round of coding utilized was provisional. When using provisional coding, Saldana (2013) points to the need for the researcher to begin with a start list of researcher generated codes. Start codes in this study included: (a) ideal perception of PLC teacher training, (b) reality of PLCs, (c) enhanced growth as educators, (d) increased student achievement at Ames, (e) team views of PLC process at Ames, (f) utilization of PLC model to support school reform goal; positives/negatives, (g) Administrative support, (h) Collaborative mentoring, (i) and PLC alignment with Mullen’s (2005) definition of collaborative mentoring.
Saldana (2013) recognized that codes can be revised, modified, deleted, or expanded as needed to include the new codes generated by the research. The next step in the analysis process is that of categorizing the codes and then reflecting on their collective meaning, interaction and interplay. After sorting and identifying the categories of my observations, I began to craft the narratives using codeweaving. According to Saldana (2013), “Codeweaving is the actual integration of key code words into narrative form to see how the puzzle pieces fit together” (p. 248).

Finally, the findings were presented through a narrative discussion, which is when the researcher summarizes, in detail, their findings from the data analysis process Creswell (2012). Creswell provided the following suggestions for what to include in this narrative: dialogue that provides support for the themes, metaphors and analogies, quotes from interview data or observations of individuals, vivid detail, and tensions and contradictions in individual experiences. After crafting each individual narrative, I analyzed the findings to draw my final conclusions, first of individual, and then of the collective group of teachers.

Trustworthiness

According to Yin (2003), qualitative researchers should take steps to document the procedures of their case studies, as well as documenting all of the procedures and steps of the procedures in order to check if their approaches are consistent and reliable. Yin (2003) also recommended setting up a detailed case study protocol and database.

The four validity strategies that researcher used to ensure trustworthiness, authenticity, and credibility in this study were: (a) triangulation, (b) member checking, (c) rich thick description, and (d) clarification of the bias (Creswell, 2009). Triangulating different data sources and analyzing evidence from each of the sources allowed me to build a clear justification
for the themes. Member checking allowed me to determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings by taking the final report back to the interviewees to see if they feel they are representative of their views (Creswell, 2009). I scheduled a follow-up interview to provide participants with an opportunity to comment on my analysis and presentation of the data (Creswell, 2009). However, no participants requested any changes to the transcriptions I had prepared.

I used Creswell’s (2009) suggestion to include rich thick description to take the readers to the setting and give them the feeling of shared experiences. Ultimately it is the responsibility of the researcher to clarify the bias by through self-reflection (Creswell, 2009). While remaining adaptive and not rigid, I created an honest and aimed to create an open narrative that resonated with the readers. Finally, the true test of trustworthiness is that the study can be replicated in its entirety by another researcher.

Thomas (2006) lists stakeholder or member checks as a way to enhance the credibility of the findings in the study. In this process, the stakeholder has the ability at the end of the interview to correct any errors or challenge the interpretations of the researcher. If not done immediately after the first interview, stakeholders can be asked to verify the interpretations and/or data gathered in subsequent interviews.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

According to Rubin and Rubin (2011), it is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that no harm comes to the interviewee as a result of the research. Because all participants in this study were independent adults, the main ethical concerns involved were informed consent and full disclosure.
The information from all data collection activities was analyzed solely by the researcher who looked to understand the phenomenon being observed. The respondents were fully informed of the nature of the research study and the fact that information obtained from the interviews, questionnaires, and observations would be analyzed with the hope that the results would benefit them in the long term. The validity of the study depends largely on the respondents’ consent to participate in this study. The respondents were informed that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time, regardless of having given their consent and having started the interview process.

All promises made to honor the confidentiality of the respondents were honored. Each participant was informed that their interviews would be reported anonymously, and that they would only be identified by numbers and pseudonyms during the study. There was nothing done on the part of the researcher that could connect their responses with their names. All information is being kept by me for one year after the conclusion of the study, and only I will have access to the materials. After the one year has passed, all data incurred during the study will be destroyed by shredding it.
CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

The purpose of this narrative study was to discover and describe factors that lead to how teachers construct their perceptions of PLCs, and how their experiences can help to develop a plan to successfully implement and sustain PLCs in the future. This chapter is divided into three parts: (a) the context of PLCs past and present; (b) principal and teachers’ narratives, respectively; and (c) lessons learned from each participant. It is important to note that as a scholar practitioner at Northeastern University and the researcher for this study, I have been a part of the PLC process at Ames Elementary since its implementation. As such, I will share my knowledge and insight of the PLC process at Ames in order to provide a broader perspective throughout this chapter in conjunction with that of the participants. The conclusion of this chapter will speak to the findings as they relate to all participants included in this study.

Context of the PLC at Ames Elementary

PLCs Past and Present

PLCs at Ames Elementary began in 2008 under a former administrator. At that time, the principal and assistant principal randomly selected seven people to participate in a training conference on PLCs conducted by DuFour and colleagues in New Jersey. Those teachers and administrators were charged with bringing the PLC model back to Ames to help enhance student achievement. It is important to note that there was no formal training conducted for the rest of the teachers at Ames; the staff who participated in the New Jersey training provided training for them during bimonthly faculty meetings.

In 2012, the mid-Atlantic state where Ames Elementary is located was one of the first two states to receive federal funding from the Race to the Top grant. The state wrote a plan of
action in order to qualify for those funds, and part of their plan included the mandated utilization of state- and district-wide PLCs for all public schools grades K-12. As previously mentioned, Ames began their PLCs in 2009, ahead of the mandate from the state. Race to the Top funding allowed Ames’s school district to hire data coaches to facilitate PLCs at each of their schools. The administration and staff at Ames, as well as myself, believe that the use of the PLC model, data coach, and hard work by the staff led to our student’s standardized test scores being high enough that year to qualify Ames for recognition as a National Blue Ribbon school.

Although PLC funding ran out for the districts after the Race to the Top funding ended in 2014, Ames’s district chose to keep their PLC in place. However, because of the lack of funding, data coaches were no longer included and the district designed the same agenda for all schools to use, which did not address the real-time issues faced by each grade-level PLC team. For example, if a team needed to focus on a math assessment during data review, the district agenda might have stated that the topic of discussion for that meeting needed to be related to language arts. Because PLCs were not being utilized as intended, teachers did not find them useful and their support began to deteriorate.

In the fall of the 2015-16 school year, teachers who were disgruntled with the mandatory PLC schedules in their school went to their union representatives. The complaint was that, as a result of PLCs, teachers were not receiving their uninterrupted planning period as prescribed by their contracts. As a result, on October 12, 2015, the school superintendent relegated PLCs to the practice of voluntary planning time for which recertification clock hours could be recorded. Because they were no longer required, some teams decided to forgo PLCs while other teams continued to meet. This backdrop is important because it is vital to note, that although the district dissolved mandatory PLCs and administrators were told to not be involved in any part of the
process, the principal at Ames still recognized the value of PLCs and encouraged her staff to continue to utilize them if they wished. This study looked at PLCs through the lens of voluntary staff participation versus that of mandatory staff participation in PLCs.

The participant interviews will be displayed on the following pages begin with that of Kasey, the principal. The principal's interview was important to this study because her interview provided context for each of the teacher participant's interviews. A cross analysis of Kasey’s interview and that of the teachers provided additional context for this study. The categories listed in each of the interviews resulted from the two rounds of coding conducted to find common themes in the participant interviews. Those themes were then analyzed to answer the research questions.

Principal and Teachers’ Narratives

Kasey: The Principal

Kasey was hired as a new teacher at Ames Elementary 10 years ago, and was also one of the original trainees at the PLC conference in New Jersey. She taught as part of the 2nd through 5th grade teams there, and is qualified in both regular and special education. Kasey describes herself as a person who loves to learn and has two Master degrees, one in instruction and one in educational leadership. She left the classroom to become the achievement liaison teacher, followed by becoming the assistant principal and is now the principal at Ames.

Kasey views herself as, “a leader who inspires others.” Regarding her leadership style, Kasey states:

I provide strategies and support to support teachers in any capacity, whether it’s working with parents, collaborating with other teachers, or collaborating with students. My ultimate goal is to inspire them [teachers] to do what they do best. I’m not a
micromanager. I’m not a person who will tell you exactly what to do and how to do it. With that being said, my philosophy is I work hard day in and day out, and, as do many teachers. It’s what I expect of them. I don’t think that we have any teachers here for any of the wrong reasons. At the end of the day, everyone likes to be here and likes the kids. If they’re doing that and being genuine and providing instruction, I support that, and if they’re not, I have private conversations to help that teacher improve.

Kasey is thoughtful in her responses and takes pride in the fact that she is supportive in encouraging her teachers to collaborate with each other, their students’ families, and their students. Kasey puts in many hours long after the end of the school day to ensure that her school runs smoothly and that all of her stakeholders receive the things that they need to be successful.

**Principal’s perspective of the PLC model.** Kasey states that the purpose of the PLC is: “…to increase student achievement…for each individual child. We ultimately want all of our students meeting the standard, but that’s not possible for every single child. However, every single child does have a certain amount of growth that he or she can achieve.” Kasey is passionate about wanting each of the students in her school to be able to achieve their own personal success and works hard to ensure that she provides her staff and students with the materials that they need to be successful.

**Collaboration, student focus, and teacher leadership.** Kasey emphasized the importance of collaboration in supporting students’ needs as an aim for the “ideal” PLC. “The ideal PLC is where everybody is contributing, everybody has a voice. [Teachers are] looking at student data, …multiple sources of data, and determining what are strengths and weaknesses [for the students]. From that, …[teachers] develop a plan that meets those specific needs...for
students.” It is clear that Kasey recognizes the importance of analyzing student data in order to help teachers plan and drive student instruction.

Kacey emphasized the importance of teacher leadership, as opposed to administrative leadership in PLCs. When she was the achievement liaison teacher, Kasey was responsible for heading the PLC meetings at Ames. She remembers the following from that time:

When we had PLCs, I was in many meetings as an ALT. For some teams it almost became ...[a period of time that] they looked to ...[the administration] to facilitate it and run ...[the PLC]. It would be ideal for teachers to take that leadership and recognize here’s what ...[they] need and here’s what our students need, and then… run it on their own.

Kasey wants her teachers to take ownership of the PLC process.

**PLC process at Ames.** PLC implementation at Ames has shifted over time. In the past, Kasey reported that the year that they utilized them, after analyzing data with the assistance of a data coach, their scores were the highest that they had ever been. The year that there was a data coach present at each of Ames’s PLCs, there was instruction provided to the teachers regarding the PLC process and there was an agenda for each PLC as well as an emphasis placed on the analysis of student data during each session. At the conclusion of each session, teachers were asked to develop an action plan for the next week’s session based on their needs and the needs of their students. Teachers would be held accountable for bringing the materials necessary to facilitate the next meeting.

According to Kasey, the present structure of PLCs is more fluid. She explained:

Now that we don’t have a set PLC time I think grade levels meet. Are they as focused as previously? I would say no they are not. There are some grade levels that I get agendas from, and some grade-levels I don’t get anything from. I don’t think that means they
aren’t meeting, it just means that they are not meeting in an organized manner to get a common product.

To summarize, there are no specific requirements for PLC meetings at Ames and Kasey receives varying documentation regarding grade-level collaborative meetings. Kasey believes that all teams are meeting at some point, but the content and focus of the meeting fluctuates. It is important to note here that these are Kasey’s assumptions based on the documents she does or does not receive. Beyond receiving documentation from some grade levels, Kasey is not involved in PLC or grade-level meetings.

Even though meetings are inconsistent, teachers receive “clock hours”, or those hours necessary for ongoing teacher license renewal, for participating in grade-level meetings. When the district gave up conducting PLCs after their discussion with the teacher’s union, the school principals were told by the superintendent that PLCs were to be teacher-driven and that they were to have no role in the PLC process. Kasey told her teachers that she was available to come to their meetings if they asked her to, but that she was unable to facilitate any of the meetings. As a result, some teams at Ames chose to not to continue to participate in PLCs and her involvement has decreased.

According to Kasey, instead of meetings focusing on student achievement, the actual purpose of PLCs (DuFour, 1994), grade level meetings focus on what is more immediately important for teacher work. She said,

I think for some grade levels, [traditional PLC meetings are] too much for them at this point, and they are meeting, but their discussions are more aligned with what [they] are teaching, what … [they] still need to teach, what is coming up, what is coming for Smarter Balanced [testing].
In other words, as Kasey puts it, “Teachers are focusing more on planning versus looking at [student] data, and what are we doing to fix those areas of need.”

**Ideal PLCs from an administrator’s perspective.** Kasey believes PLCs should be a valuable experience for the teacher with useful outcomes for students. She would like to see teachers be able to collaborate with their peers in order to develop those strategies that would, in turn, enable their students to become successful learners. Given that PLCs have a specific purpose and specific protocols (DuFour, 1994), it would seem important that teachers would receive professional development to support their learning and implementation of PLCs.

Currently at Ames, there is no professional development for teachers involved in PLCs. Kasey said, “I would say...[there is no professional development] because we were told not to; however that is something that I think we can indirectly tie into and give them professional development to kind of get everyone back on the PLC track next school year.” So even though participation and professional development is not required, Kasey recognizes the importance of the PLC model, its implications for positive student achievement, and would like to bring the model back into practice at Ames during the 2016-17 school year.

**Lessons Learned from Kasey**

When looking at the different aspects of the PLC model through the lens of an administrator, it is clear that Kasey recognizes the importance of the process. Kasey views the PLC model as a collaborative process where teachers focus on best practices, the analysis of student data, formative and summative assessments, etc., all designed to enhance student achievement. Kasey also wants her teachers to take the leadership role upon them so that PLCs are less administratively driven. Her ideal PLC is one that is a valuable experience for teachers and facilitates positive outcomes for the students.
Despite the lack of district and building support, she has faith in her staff to continue to want to meet in PLCs because they are beneficial for educator growth as well as the growth of their students. What is less clear is Kasey’s recognition of the fact that teacher buy-in, increased teacher training, and a scheduled time and space is necessary for teacher collaboration to be successful at the building level. Kasey’s narrative was important to share because it added to the context to this study. This narrative provides context that can be used to paint a clearer picture of the dichotomy of the relationship between the teachers and the PLCs at Ames.

A section of the literature review in this study was devoted to the importance of administrative support in relationship to successfully implementing and sustaining PLCs. By adding Kasey's narrative to this study, the reader is able to recognize and compare how both the principal and teacher participants view PLCs as they are currently utilized at Ames. It is this understanding that assisted me in identifying common themes in all of the interviews and enabled me to then draw my conclusions.

The next section of this chapter will describe the experiences of Myra, Tony, Bobby, Darcy, and Danny who are teacher participants at Ames Elementary in first through fifth grade teams. Following a brief background on each teacher, the voices of the teachers themselves will be heard as they express their views on the areas of workplace culture, teacher perceptions of the PLC model, administrative support, student achievement, and collaborative mentoring as they pertain to PLCs. At the end of each interview will be a “lessons learned” section highlighting the key information that will form the conclusion of this chapter. In the “lessons learned” sections, I will include three common questions that emerged from all participants regarding where to go with PLCs in the present climate of voluntary PLCs. The three questions were asked of all five
participants: (a) What is/does a PLC look like now? (b) How do I conduct PLCs now? and (c) Who can help me in my efforts to utilize PLCs today?

**Myra: A Teacher at Ames Elementary**

**Background**

Myra, currently serves as a special education teacher on the fifth grade team at Ames Elementary. Myra, hired as a new teacher, has been teaching at the school for the last seven years. Myra is not from the area but has now made this area her home and has ties within the community. She decided to become a teacher after she applied for an assistant teaching position in a middle school while attending college. As an assistant teacher, she experienced the joy of helping children learn. As she put it, “As soon as I helped this child find his first light bulb moment, I was hooked!” After identifying her passion for teaching and teaching for the first few years as a regular education teacher, Myra became certified as a special education teacher and now teaches in tandem with a regular education teacher to meet the needs of her students.

Myra describes herself as a proactive teacher who constantly monitors her students in order to identify areas where students are struggling so that she can assist them before those areas of concern become a detriment to them in their ability to learn. Myra also shows her determination by stating that she does not give up on her attempt to educate all of her students. She said,

> If there is a battle, I don’t give up on it. [I] do everything [I] can to help the student become successful, whether it’s a small success, or it may not be the success that the rest of the class is going for. [I] try… to find… success for that student so that they want to go forward; you don’t want them to be left behind so they can succeed.
Student academic success is important for Myra, and she does everything she can to help her students achieve their goals.

**Myra’s Perspective of the PLC Model**

**Workplace culture.** Myra described the meaning of workplace culture as the overall morale of the workplace, how teachers greet one another, and how they perceive others as well as themselves. When asked about the workplace culture at Ames Elementary, Myra felt that there was a very good culture in the building and is one of the main reasons that she has stayed at Ames for seven years despite having to commute to work each day. She said:

I think we have a very good culture in our building. People aren’t just coworkers, they are friends. They’re there for the good stuff that happens in school; they’re there for the stuff that happens out of school. On the flip side, they’re for the hard stuff that happens in school…. That’s one of the main reasons that I’ve chosen not to leave this school.

Myra appreciates the relationships that staff have within the school. Relationships are important for Myra both personally and professionally. The interconnectedness enables her to comfortably collaborate with her peers as she strives to meet the needs of her students. Myra believes that the culture of the workplace, specifically strong peer relationships, is key to a strong PLC model. She said:

I think that if you don’t have a relationship with your peers, the PLC model is not going to work. If you don’t have a good culture within the building, the sharing of your ideas can be very difficult, so if you don’t have that culture, PLCs are not going to be productive or as beneficial as they could be.

The strong peer relationships within the workplace enable Myra and her colleagues to develop the trusting environment that is key to successful collaboration. It is that collaborative...
atmosphere that enables the PLCs to be both productive and beneficial to both the educators and their students.

**PLCs as teacher-led professional development.** Myra defined a PLC as a time to sit down with her peers in order to discuss current educational philosophies, theories, and ways to best teach current content. She also identified it as a time to reflect on what was done well and what was not done well, as well as to analyze data to determine what instruction works best in order to ensure that their students are successful.

DuFour et al (2006) described PLCs as “...an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for children they serve” (p. 11). Myra believed that her team is aligned with this PLC model. Although she specified the fact that there is no longer a specific time given for PLCs any longer at Ames Elementary, Myra felt that her team continued practice the reflective process of teaching on a daily basis whether they were with their peers or not.

After being asked how she became aware of the PLC model Myra stated, “[I] was kind of thrown into it in my second year of teaching”. Feelings of trepidation were obvious when she said:

I just kind of sat back and looked at what everyone’s roles were, what the rest of my team was doing and [what they were] bringing to the table to make sure that I was comfortable and [that I was] able to be a contributing member of the team.

She said that she had never had any formal training regarding the PLC model, although she had had some informal training during in-service days or professional development days regarding what the different roles within the PLC model were, and what each of those roles entailed. The lack of any training concerning the utilization of the PLC model made Myra uneasy
during initial PLC sessions until she found her role in the process. She relied heavily on her peers to show her how the model worked and what their expectations for her role in the process should be.

Myra spoke to the purpose of PLCs by saying “…[I believe the purpose] is to evaluate teacher strategies, evaluate assessment strategies, evaluate learning in the classroom, best practices, and to be able to implement best practices so that students are able to learn.” Myra concluded that by evaluating those criteria listed above, she would then be able to do what was best for her students when planning for their curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Regarding her thoughts on what constituted an ideal PLC, Myra felt strongly that PLCs should not be forced, that there should be time made available within the day for teachers to collaborate with the necessary data so that they could really debrief “…the understanding of what it is that students are learning.” It was through that debriefing that Myra felt that her team could identify the areas that their students were struggling with and therefore identify a direction to guide them with interventions as they worked to close the learning gaps within their students.

Myra identified the purpose of PLCs at Ames elementary by stating, “I would like to say it’s to enhance the learning of all students, but at times, I don’t necessarily feel like that’s the role it takes because I feel like there is not as much guidance with our PLCs here as there used to be.” In referring to the lack of guidance, Myra is specifically referring to the lack of administrative support designed to ensure that PLCs are effective within Ames Elementary. It is that lack of support that Myra identifies as a reason why “Teachers go off on tangents.” Myra finds that without structure, teachers utilize PLCs for purposes other than they are intended for such as discussing their personal lives, planning upcoming field trips, or other topics not related to enhancing student/educator growth. Currently, Myra says, “[I] believe that the purpose of the
PLC is to share strategies, make sure grade levels are on the same page with [the] content they are teaching and I guess, the ways in which they are teaching it. [It’s] not so data-driven anymore.” It is clear by her statement that she does not believe that PLCs are being utilized in the manner in which they were designed.

Another insight into the way that PLCs are currently viewed at Ames Elementary is the belief by Myra that her team perceived PLCs as a waste of their time. This is illustrated by the following response: “I think they feel it is, um, not very productive.” Over all, the team felt that they did not gain anything from the PLC time that they were given, and they currently do not meet as a team now that PLCs are no longer mandated at the district/school level.

Administrative support of educators. When Myra reflected upon the implementation of the PLC model to determine whether or not the administration supported and fostered a trusting and caring collaborative community at Ames Elementary, she felt that they were supportive, but concluded the following: “[I think that the administration] at times, has a little too much faith in the Staff here at Ames.” By that statement, Myra was reflecting on the fact that PLCs were no longer mandated and the administration trusted teachers to continue to meet on their own time, without a set time or agenda. Myra also believed that if PLCs were mandated with agendas, they would be more beneficial to both the staff and the students.

Increased student achievement through PLCs. Myra described the relationship between PLCs and increased student achievement at Ames Elementary by reflecting on the way PLCs were utilized in the past: “I think that [PLCs] did [increase student achievement].” This again is indicative of the fact that currently, PLCs are no longer mandated, and there is no specific timeframe or agenda for those teams that do continue to meet. When PLCs were initially mandated by the state under the Race to the Top guidelines, Myra’s district hired facilitators to
guide teams through the data analysis portion of the PLC process. When reflecting upon that
time period, Myra stated,

    We looked at the data almost too much, I feel like. But [at] that time, that was the year
    that our test scores were the greatest that they have ever been. There [were] a lot of
different types of teaching strategies going on, a lot of regrouping of students across
grade levels, not just within the classroom.

    Myra was able to directly correlate positive student achievement with the utilization of
the PLC model. When looking at student achievement this year, Myra felt that there was still an
increase in student achievement without the PLC model, but says, “[It is] not the jump we have
seen in the past.”

    Myra viewed several problematic issues when reflecting upon the utilization of the PLC
model as supporting the school reform goal of positively increasing student achievement at
Ames Elementary. She believes that the lack of a designated time is problematic. Myra states,

    Teachers are doing everything that they can within their classrooms to increase student
achievement, but there isn’t much going on. I know in the grade levels [that] I teach,
there isn’t much going on outside of the four walls of the classroom. I believe that in
order for student achievement to be at its greatest, you need to utilize your other
teammates. You need to utilize the classes and utilize the strengths of the other teachers
that you work with.

    It was evident from this statement that Myra feels strongly that if they were able to utilize
PLCs more, the collaboration among teachers would enable them to develop strategies that
would lead to an increase in positive student achievement as well as to decrease the isolation of
the teachers within the four walls of their classrooms.
**Collaborative mentoring.** In continuing with the theme of collaboration, Myra was asked to reflect on what she thought was the definition of collaborative mentoring. She viewed collaborative mentoring as a time when a small team of teachers met with both veteran and new teachers to discuss strategies both old and new. By sharing those strategies, Myra felt that though collaboration, teachers could work together to implement or alter their strategies in order to help promote positive student growth.

Myra agreed with Mullen (2005) when she said a PLC “is a professional collegiate partnership that contributes to the growth of all partners,” (p. 187) and added that it was only a partnership that contributes growth, “if everyone bought into the idea of a PLC.” She felt that teacher buy-in was critical to PLC support and that buy-in needed to be built upon to develop a trusting relationship in which every member of the PLC was heard. Myra found that teachers needed the freedom to share and implement each other’s ideas. Once those ideas were utilized, teachers would then indeed see that the PLC model was useful.

Myra explained her view on the PLC model and its relationship to educator growth: “I absolutely think [the model] does if [it is] used properly.” By utilizing a strict agenda that was adhered to during the PLC, and being able to collaborate with her peers, Myra felt like it did, indeed, increase her growth as an educator.

**Lessons Learned from Myra**

When reflecting upon the areas of workplace culture, teacher perception, administrative support, student achievement and collaborative mentoring in relationship to the PLC model, several findings became clear from my interview with Myra. Workplace culture and its importance to the staff could not be ignored as a factor that played an important role in the effectiveness and success of the PLC model. Without a culture that fostered a trusting
community in which teachers could successfully collaborate, Myra felt that the PLC would not be as effective. Teacher perception, collaborative mentoring, and student achievement also played an important role, because according to Myra, if teachers do not buy into the concept and find them useful, PLCs would not positively affect their growth as educators or that of their students.

Although not formally trained in the use of the PLC model, through her strong cultural connections, Myra was able to be an involved member of her PLC team during the time period that they were mandated. Now that they are no longer mandated and PLC time is voluntary, it has become difficult for Myra to utilize the collaborative strengths of her entire team. Based on seeing positive results in the past, Myra realizes the benefits of successful PLCs and is looking to the administration for their guidance once again in order to find a way to implement the PLC model as a tool to encourage educator collaboration and improve student achievement at Ames Elementary.

**Tony: A Teacher at Ames Elementary**

**Background.**

The second interviewee, Tony, is currently a teacher on the fourth grade team at Ames Elementary. Tony has been in the teaching profession for 15 years, having taught in both the public and private sectors. Like Myra, Tony is not from the area, but has now made it her home and has strong ties within the community. Her children all graduated from schools affiliated with Ames’s district and Tony has been a strong supporter and advocate of the district’s school system. Tony came from a large family of children where her oldest sister is a teacher. When deciding on a profession, Tony reflected on her love for both education and nursing; with her sister’s profession being the deciding factor, Tony chose education as her vocation of choice.
Tony describes herself as an educator of all subjects: “I’ve pretty much taught every elementary grade level including being a paraprofessional for a while.” Tony struggled with comprehension as a child and works hard to hit each of the different learning modalities of her students. Being aware of how she learns best helps her to assist her children in their search to identify their own learning style. It is very important to Tony that each of her students is successful in their own learning endeavor, and as an educator, and she strives to ensure that each of her students finds academic success within her classroom.

**Tony’s Perspective of the PLC Model**

**Workplace culture.** Tony described the meaning of workplace culture as the feeling that you get when you come into the building and you are around your peers and students. She goes further to describe workplace culture as, “...the vibe of the building. If it’s good you know it’s good and if it’s not [good] you know it’s not.” Tony also felt that the vibe of the building, Ames Elementary, is produced by the administration as illustrated by her statement, “[It’s] how we are respected as teachers and educators.” When asked about the workplace culture at Ames Elementary, Tony felt that it was currently positive, but at times, that had not always been the case. When reflecting on the past, Tony stated, “We have been through times where it has been horrible. The administration comes and goes and we continue to sail on, but now I think we have a very positive environment.”

Tony appreciates the support of the administration and its contribution to the positive culture within the school. In her words, “Our administration treats us as educated professionals, not just somebody in a classroom. They respect our opinions and what we know, and I think that that feeling of respect goes a very long way in the [positive] atmosphere of the building.” Clearly, the validation of the administration in its support of the ability of each and every one of
its teachers to successfully educate their students is important to Tony’s perception of the positive culture at Ames Elementary.

Tony believes that the culture of the workplace, specifically being treated as educational professionals by the administration, is key to a strong PLC model. She said:

I personally think that PLCs are a vital tool to the school environment. In some places teachers are...pitted against each other, who can outdo the other one, and I think having a PLC eliminates that. We are treated as educational professionals in a PLC; it embraces the fact that everybody brings something new to the table, and even though we all have a common curriculum, we all do ...[things] very differently.

Tony believes that PLCs enable teachers to become stronger educators when individuals are willing to grow and learn from each other, leaving the culture of isolation behind. A positive school culture lends itself to teachers being able to display their willingness to trust in each other as they work towards being a part of the bigger picture which is the PLC model.

**PLCs as teacher-led professional development.** Tony defined a PLC as a time when teachers on a team work collaboratively to plan, look at data, and then decide what direction to take in planning their curriculum and instruction for each of their students. She also saw it as a time to share ideas with each other of what was and was not working for their students in order to gather new strategies from team members.

DuFour et al. (2006) described PLCs as, “...an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for children they serve” (p. 11). When asked about her perception of that definition, Tony’s response was concise: “I definitely agree with it 100%.” Although she agreed with the
definition, she had no further comment concerning its relationship with her current involvement in the PLC process.

Tony stated, “[It] was introduced to us by the administration about 5 or 6 years ago; that’s a guess [concerning the time frame]” after being asked how she became aware of the PLC model. Tony was part of the initial mandatory implementation of the PLC model by a previous administrator. She stated that she had never had any formal training regarding the PLC model, although she did have some informal training during in-service days or professional development days regarding what the different roles were within the PLC model, and what each of those roles entailed. Tony also spoke of an outside company that was contracted by the district, “...to help us to facilitate the process of the PLC and what direction that we that we should be going in, what we were doing, and what we were supposed to be doing.” The independent company hired by her district was hired through the Race to the Top funding granted to the state by the federal government in order to facilitate PLCs throughout the school district.

Tony speaks to the purpose of PLCs as the following:

I believe it helps to hold teachers accountable for help[ing] [each of their] students. It helps teachers ... to talk professionally, develop strategies, and also helps us to be accountable for data, to look at that data on a regular basis, and to use that data to help us design instruction to meet student goals.

Tony has an awareness of the basic premise of the PLC model, and over the years has watched it evolve and change to meet the needs of the current administration and teachers at Ames Elementary after its initial introduction.

Regarding her thoughts on what constituted an ideal PLC, Tony had to stop and think for a moment to formulate her response. “It should drive instruction and it should make you reflect
on best practices. It should make you develop into a more productive teacher, meaning meeting the need of all learners and working with your team. It’s a team effort.” It was evident through her response that Tony felt that the team effort aspect of the PLC was an important component to the model’s successful implementation.

Tony spoke of the current purpose of PLCs at Ames elementary by stating:

At first we didn’t buy into [PLCs]. I think at first it was kind of thrown at us with no direction, but as we did ... [PLCs] more and ... [they] became more natural to us I thought it was extremely productive, and beneficial. It actually forced us to meet as a team once a week which was a good thing. We don’t do ... [PLCs] now. The district mandated no more PLCs; we have the option to do it. Our intent was to meet once a week, but to be perfectly honest with you, carving out that required time for five people was difficult to do.

Tony felt that educator buy-in was a critical factor in the successful implementation of the PLC model. Her trepidation of the initial implementation was eventually overcome after the process became more natural to the staff at Ames and the model evolved to meet their needs. Although individual team members speak with each other regarding upcoming units of curriculum or summative assessments, given the option, Tony’s team does not meet on a regular basis at this time.

Another insight into the way that PLCs are currently viewed at Ames Elementary is the belief by Tony that her team is united in their support of the PLC model. Despite the fact that they do not meet, Tony believes that her team feels the same way that she does; that PLCs are very productive when utilized. This belief seems at odds with the fact that her team does not meet on a regular basis to discuss student progress. She insists that although there are strong
personalities on her team that, “I feel like we hear each other ... [when] we carve out snippets of time where we gather together.” Clearly, the fact that her team doesn’t meet regularly to review student data in order to make informed decisions on how to drive their instruction, does not support the DuFour et al. (2006) definition of what constitutes an effective PLC.

Administrative support of educators. When Tony reflected upon the implementation of the PLC model to determine whether or not the administration supported and fostered a trusting and caring collaborative community at Ames, she felt that they were supportive. While PLCs were still mandated at the beginning of the school year, Tony felt as though when the administration was a part of the PLC model, they were there to guide the process, not to tell the teachers what to do. According to Tony, “They are listening and trusting our professional responsibility, and then guiding where needed. That whole atmosphere of trust and professionalism really makes it a very positive thing.” The recurring theme throughout Tony’s interview was about the importance of her being valued as an educator and the administration trusting her as an educator to do what was best for her students.

Increased student achievement through PLCs. Tony had a difficult time describing the relationship between PLCs and increased student achievement at Ames Elementary as illustrated by her comment, “I can’t say 100% absolutely, but in some cases, it really does.” In another comment, Tony stated, “...a lot of times when we collaborate as a group, others think of things that I haven’t [thought of], so I feel like that was a productive part [of the PLC process] and it increased student scores and achievement.” Tony had no concrete examples of instances that scores and achievement rose as a direct result of the utilization of PLCs, but she felt that the collaborative efforts of those teachers participating in the PLC did have the possibility of making a positive impact on increasing student achievement.
When reflecting upon the utilization of the PLC model as supporting the school reform goal of positively increasing student achievement at Ames Elementary, Tony described the education profession as being very data-driven. She believes that the utilization of the PLC model forces educators to look at and analyze that data in order to create a plan that will positively impact student achievement. According to Tony,

Teachers kind of get in their classrooms and focus on the learning part. They are not as concerned about the data driven part, so it forces us to take the time to review the [student] data that we actually have and to do something with it.

Tony viewed several problematic issues when reflecting upon the utilization of the PLC model as supporting the school reform goal of positively increasing student achievement at Ames Elementary. She believes that the fact that not everyone in the school is on the same page, as far as the utilization of PLCs is concerned, is problematic. Tony states,

Sometimes the responsibility [of those members involved in the PLC] doesn't get split evenly and it falls back on certain people in the group. That is frustrating because we are all in this together. That kind of hinders [the team] from developing those good plans and ways to do things. That would be a downside to ...[the PLC model] individual goals and wants as opposed to team [goals and wants].

Again, although Tony says that her team is united in its support of the PLC model, there does not seem to be a collaborative common interest or goal for increasing positive student achievement identified by the fourth grade PLC team. While each of the teachers on the team is a strong educator, they appear to prefer to work as individuals within the isolation of their own classrooms instead of as part of a collaborative PLC team.
Collaborative mentoring. In continuing with the theme of collaboration, Tony was asked to reflect on what she thought was the definition of collaborative mentoring. She viewed collaborative mentoring as a time when teachers mentored each other through a collaborative process. Her point is illustrated by the following: “Mentoring to me is helping; the administration does it with us as well as the team members on the collaborative team.” Tony sees the roles throughout the process as interchangeable with all parties participating in the giving and taking of knowledge.

After being given Mullen’s (2005) definition of what constitutes a collaborative community, “...it is a professional collegiate partnership that contributes to the growth of all partners” (p. 187), Tony agreed that this definition aligned with her beliefs, but that she wasn’t sure about the “growth of all partners” piece. She felt strongly that personal growth had a lot to do with one’s openness and desire to change as well as the individual’s willingness to continue to learn and change what they needed to change [in order to promote that growth]. Again, Tony’s responses raise the theme of teacher isolation. On one hand, Tony mentions that her team is united in their support of PLCs, but the overall tone of her interview concerning her team suggests that they prefer to work alone as individuals instead of working together as a collaborative or PLC team.

Lessons Learned from Tony

When reflecting upon the areas of workplace culture, teacher perception, administrative support, student achievement and collaborative mentoring in relationship to the PLC model, several findings became clear from my interview with Tony. A positive workplace culture, strong administrative support, professional validation and the commitment of a scheduled time for the PLC process to occur for all stakeholders were each important to Tony. To her, without
each of those things, the PLC model would not be successfully utilized to promote educator
growth and positive student achievement at Ames Elementary.

Unlike Myra, Tony was at Ames during the initial implementation of the PLC model. Like Myra, Tony had no formal PLC training, but she was part of the professional development sessions that were conducted during the initial implementation of the PLC. Like Myra, Tony found her role in the process and became an integral part of the PLC process, and was part of the educator team the year that Ames was awarded National Blue Ribbon recognition for academic excellence. Tony also recognized that when the administration was present and supportive of the PLC process that it was successful. Of interest in Tony’s interview was the fact that she did not seem to be supportive of bringing back weekly PLCs despite being able to point out a correlation between PLCs and positive student achievement. Given the isolationist climate of her team, I am left to wonder if Tony, too, prefers to work alone instead of collaborating with her team.

**Bobby: A Teacher at Ames Elementary**

**Background**

Bobby currently serves as a Chinese immersion teacher on the second grade team at Ames Elementary. She teaches a total of 35 students divided between A.M. and P.M. classes. It is her sole responsibility to teach English language arts to both classes. Bobby was hired as a new teacher, and has been teaching at the school for the last 10 years. She is not from the area, but has now made it her home and has ties within the community. Bobby decided to become a teacher after she became involved with various schools as part of community outreach program during her college years. She found that she enjoyed going to schools and reading with the students. The bond that she made with them quickly developed into a passion for educating
young children. Bobby has taught both second and third grade in her 10 years at Ames Elementary.

Bobby describes herself as a teacher who is continually growing as an educator. Her goal is to become an experienced educator and feels that she is well on her way to achieving that goal. She prides herself on being able to grow and change as an educator to continue to meet the needs of her students. It is apparent that that continual evolution of growth is important to Bobby as illustrated by her comment, “I’m a learner that has to be engaged. I need to be doing something, seeing something; I need it to be constantly changing.” By recognizing her abilities as a learner, she is able to assess and address the needs of her own students in order to promote positive student achievement. Bobby also reported that she enjoys learning and utilizing new strategies with her colleagues as well.

**Bobby’s Perspective of the PLC Model**

**Workplace culture.** Bobby described the meaning of workplace culture as the general perception of the staff and their satisfaction with their job, their administrators and their students, and how their day was going. When asked about the workplace culture at Ames Elementary, Bobby felt happy with the culture at Ames. She reported that at this time, “I feel like I am very supported by my team and [by] a very supportive administration. I feel that way probably 95% of the time.” She related that during her career, she had not always felt that way because, “…every year brings about different changes; it depends on a lot of factors, which, in turn affect how you are feeling.”

Bobby appreciates the relationships with the staff and the supportive environment that they share within school. Relationships are important for Bobby both personally and
professionally. The interconnectedness enables her to comfortably collaborate with her peers as she strives to meet the needs of her students.

Bobby believes that the culture of the workplace, specifically the ability to work well together, is key to a strong PLC model. She said, “If your team works closely together and supports one another, they are going to come to PLC ready to share and ready to work with one another and motivate students.” Bobby also felt that experience and preparedness were key to conducting a successful PLC. If members came together unprepared to share, or were not knowledgeable about their roles in the process, it could be difficult to achieve positive results. Another factor mentioned by Bobby as key to the relationship between school culture and PLCs was,

I think it depends a lot on your team and on [your] administration and how much emphasis they put on PLC; if they set clear guidelines of what it should look like, then I think that effects how PLC’s ...are going to be run and [what] happens within each grade level.

The ability for Bobby to work with her peers in an organized, trusting, and supportive environment is key for successful collaboration to occur. It is that collaborative atmosphere that enables the PLCs to be both productive and beneficial to both the educators and their students.

**PLCs as teacher-led professional development.** Bobby defined a PLC as, “...when a group of educators and administrators get together to figure out how best to meet the needs of students. That can be looking at data, curriculum, and assessments. [It’s] people coming together to figure out how best to teach the kids.”

DuFour et al (2006) describes PLCs as, “…an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better
results for children they serve” (p. 11). Bobby felt that this definition, “...pretty much sums up PLCs” and aligned with her own, particularly the part where PLCs are constantly looking at data.

When asked about how she became aware of the PLC model, Bobby said, ...we had an administrator who brought the idea of PLCs to us and implemented them with goals. They were called CLCs [Collaborative Learning Communities] then. It was something that was mandated by him. We had a very specific format that we followed every single time and it was something that we did every week. The administrator sat in on [them] so that’s kind of where it started and our school has kind of adjusted [its PLCs] in order to meet our students’ needs.

The Collaborative Learning Communities that originated at Ames Elementary under the mandated implementation of the former administrator evolved into what the school today recognizes as PLCs.

Bobby related that she had never had any formal training regarding the PLC model, although she had had some informal training during inservice days or professional development days regarding what the different roles were within the PLC model, and what each of those roles entailed. The lack of any training concerning the utilization of the PLC model did not seem to affect Bobby’s opinion of the roles that PLCs played during her tenure at Ames either positively or negatively.

Bobby spoke to the purpose of why educators utilize PLCs by stating, “...I think the purpose [of PLCs] is to focus on lower performing students in order to increase test scores.” Regarding her thoughts on what constituted an ideal PLC, Bobby was clear that she felt as though the PLCs that she had been a part of were focused primarily on what could be done to assist the lower ability students. Instead, she would like PLCs to, “...see what can be done for the
teacher to help them to better teach the students.” Bobby felt that many times the students who were meeting or exceeding the standards were being overlooked in the school’s pursuit to raise the test scores of lower achieving students. In her words, “I wish that we had time to just kind of step away from the kids who are struggling the most and figure out how to best serve everyone.” It is clear that in her idea of an ideal PLC, Bobby would like to see the PLC model expanded to meet the needs of educators and all of their students.

Bobby identified the purpose of PLCs at Ames elementary by stating the following:

To make sure that we are meeting the student’s needs, because in our situation [Chinese immersion] we know our students and we also have teachers that are brand new to teaching, as well as those teachers brand new to teaching Chinese in this school. We just help them think of ideas to teach what they need to teach on their end. We also try to help the teachers figure out how to bridge in between the Chinese side and the English side in order to meet all the students needs in both languages for all concepts on both sides.

Bobby’s situation is unique in that the Chinese immersion is a relatively new program at Ames, and although she has been a part of the program since its initial implementation three years ago, there has been quite a large turnover rate among the other teachers in the program.

Bobby pointed out that because teachers at Ames Elementary weren’t mandated to conduct PLCs at this time, there was no specific definition or purpose of PLCs, but that she felt it was still necessary to meet in order to ensure that the needs of both the teachers and their students were met.

Another insight into the way that PLCs are currently viewed at Ames Elementary is the belief by Bobby that some of the people on her team felt that they were being forced to meet and that their time could be better spent making copies, or other things that they needed to do to
prepare for the day. Other members of her team wanted to be there and felt as though they grew as teachers through their collaborative efforts. Bobby feels as though the split among her team is a direct result of, “...the perception that PLCs school wide are not really defined right now because they are not mandated.” Here too, as with Tony and Myra, the theme of teacher isolation among her team is present. It is clear, however, that Bobby values the importance of the ability to collaborate with her peers and would like to see school wide PLCs return to Ames Elementary.

**Administrative support of educators.** When Bobby reflected on the implementation of the PLC model to determine whether or not the administration supported and fostered a trusting and caring collaborative community at Ames Elementary, she felt that they were indeed supportive. Bobby appreciated that when PLCs were implemented, there was a set time, format and agenda prescribed by the administration that was followed by all parties. She reported that, “...as a team, we had a focus on what you needed to get done. There was an outline but you were given choices.” During a previous administration, Bobby felt that PLCs were micromanaged to the point that there were items placed on the agenda that had no ties to anything that would benefit the educators or their students.

**Increased student achievement through PLCs.** Bobby discussed the relationship between PLCs and increased student achievement at Ames Elementary by stating that when teachers come together and collaborate, it creates a positive learning environment for the students. It is her belief that by collaborating with her peers, she is able to utilize new strategies that will enable her students to be successful, thereby creating a positive learning environment. Reflecting on whether or not PLCs at Ames now promote student achievement, Bobby said, “Right now with the PLC model, some people are doing it, some people aren’t; some people are there for the right reasons and some aren’t. So, I don’t think that PLCs are helping all students.”
As she finished her response to this question, Bobby reiterated the need for there to be a specific format for PLCs so that they are more productive and better serve everyone.

Bobby was able to directly correlate positive student achievement with the utilization of the PLC model when it was mandated in the past. She felt that taking the time to meet and participating in the collaborative PLC process encouraged teachers to look at their students and reflect on student work. By doing so, teachers were then able to determine what the individual needs of each student were and how best to meet them.

**Collaborative mentoring.** Continuing the theme of collaboration, Bobby was asked to reflect on what she thought was the definition of collaborative mentoring. She viewed collaborative mentoring as “... a time when experienced teachers and teachers who do things well work with teachers who aren’t as experienced or need work in a certain area.” Bobby related her thoughts on collaborative mentoring to the mentoring program in her district that all new teachers, hired without a continuing license, must attend when they are granted employment.

After being given Mullen’s (2005) definition of what constitutes a collaborative community, “...it is a professional collegiate partnership that contributes to the growth of all partners” (p. 187), Bobby responded, “I think it depends on what team you are working with.” She felt that some teams at Ames did align with Mullen’s definition, but that when there were strong personalities on a team, or strong voices that needed to be heard, it is hard for the growth of all partners that Mullen speaks of to occur.

Bobby explained her view on the PLC model and its relationship to educator growth:

Yes, I do [believe it helps me grow as an educator] because I believe when I go to PLCs I get new ideas from other teachers. It’s just nice to have educators there [to ask] what more can I do to help these students? What can I do with my high kids who need an
extension? It’s just always nice to talk to other teachers and hear their ideas. When it [the
PLC model] is done correctly, yes, it helps me grow as an educator.

By utilizing an agenda and format that was adhered to during the PLC, and being able to
collaborate with her peers, Bobby felt like it did, indeed, increase her growth as an educator.

**Lessons Learned from Bobby**

When reflecting on the common themes of workplace culture, teacher perception,
administrative support, student achievement and collaborative mentoring in relationship to the
PLC model, several findings became clear. Workplace culture and its importance to the staff
could not be ignored as a factor that played an important role in the effectiveness and success of
the PLC model. Without a culture that fostered a trusting community in which teachers could
successfully collaborate, Bobby felt that the PLC would not be as effective. Having participated
in PLCs when there was an air of negativity surrounding the administration and PLCs were
“micromanaged”, Bobby did not feel as though they were effective.

Teacher perception, collaborative mentoring, and student achievement also played an
important role, because if teachers did not buy into the concept and find them useful, Bobby
believed that PLCs would not positively affect their growth as educators or that of their students.
Bobby also suggested that there needs to be a unified PLC format prescribed by the
administration for all grade levels. When left to their own devices as to whether or not to
participate in PLCs, some teachers in her grade level chose to leave the collaborative
environment and return to the isolation of their classrooms to plan for their students.

Like Tony, Bobby was part of the staff when the original implementation of the PLC
model took place. She too, was not part of the team sent to New Jersey, but attended the same
teacher-driven professional development sessions designed to train teachers on the utilization of
the PLC model. Bobby recognizes and values the importance of PLCs and their connection to both educator growth and positive student achievement. Bobby would like to see PLCs return to Ames Elementary, and like Myra, looks to the administration to provide a set time, place, and agenda for those meetings to occur. She recognizes that unless there is administrative guidance and support for school wide PLCs, they are unlikely to continue.

**Darcy: A Teacher at Ames Elementary**

**Background**

One of the newest members of the teaching staff, Darcy currently serves as a teacher on the first grade team, and has been teaching at Ames for the last two years. She is from the area and has children in Ames’s school district, and one of her children will attend Ames Elementary in the 2016-2017 school year.

As a teenager, Darcy enjoyed working with youth at a local skating rink as part of an after-school program and quickly developed a rapport with the young people she mentored. As a result of those positive experiences, Darcy decided to continue to work with children as an elementary school teacher once she graduated from college.

Darcy describes herself as a teacher with an authoritative style, and she has a certain way that she likes to have things done. Darcy feels that her expectations for her students are high but reasonable as well. She admits to having a playful side that she will share with her students, but it is clear that positive student achievement is a top priority in her classroom.

**Darcy’s Perspective of the PLC Model**

**Workplace Culture.** Darcy described the meaning of workplace culture as the environment within her workplace. More specifically, she views that environment as “...the trends of the staff and administration. It’s the way our workplace works and how we work within
it.” When asked about the workplace culture at Ames Elementary, Darcy felt that it was friendly enough, but that “…there is some segregation among grade levels and the understanding of student ability and [child] development.” Darcy feels that, as a teacher with an early childhood background, she looks at the developmentally appropriate part of the education process as her students move through the curriculum. Since it is only her second year at Ames, Darcy does not feel as though she knows many of her colleagues well enough on a personal level to enjoy a feeling of camaraderie that many of her peers who have worked at longer Ames report. She goes on further to say:

I guess, for the most part, it is professional, but at times it can be distant because we don't know each other, we have an upstairs and downstairs. There are so many members on our staff that I don’t even see. That is neither of our faults, but it’s the way the culture is in this building. It’s how we are set up and we don’t get that many opportunities to get together on a get to know one another basis.

As a newer staff member, it is clear that Darcy does not feel as connected to her peers as the first three interviewees do. In reference to school culture and its relationship to the PLC model, Darcy reports:

I don’t know that it does [have a relationship]. I feel that are PLCs are a little scattered; there is no true agenda that we have to meet; the administration had a hard time getting on their feet last year, so there was not a lot of follow up or follow through. I understand the reasons behind that and this year they have kind of disintegrated. It’s a free for all, [and as] it relates to school culture, workplace culture, I don’t know that they do really. Last year, Ames started the year with a new principal. The assistant principal’s position had not yet been filled at the start of the 2015-2016 school year, and the Principal was
single handedly running the school. The assistant principal was not hired until late November. At that time, they then had to be brought up to speed on the day-to-day operations of the building.

In the quote above, Darcy believes the new administration had a difficult time getting on their feet. The “free for all” refers to the fact that some teams still meet in PLCs, while others do not. Darcy makes it clear that for her, the feeling of connectedness and being the part of a collaborative culture with her peers is not there. Since the collaborative effort is a strong component of the PLC model, this factor makes effective utilization of the PLC model difficult.

**PLCs as teacher-led professional development.** Darcy defined a PLC as “...a gathering or meeting of professionals in our field, teaching, to plan how we should drive our instruction.” It is her belief that educators should collaborate together in order to define the best practices designed to increase student achievement.

DuFour et al. (2006) described PLCs as, “...an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for children they serve” (p. XX). Darcy felt that because there was no clear PLC model to follow at Ames, it would not be feasible for her team to do all of the things mentioned in DuFour et al.’s definition. According to Darcy, she is really not even sure what she is supposed to be doing regarding PLCs because of the lack of a concrete model from which to work.

Darcy stated, “While I was student teaching, I attended several [PLCs], but not too many,” after being asked how she became aware of the PLC model. She also shared that she was aware of PLCs from information that she received from her child’s school, although they are run differently according to several of her conversations with the principal of that school. She has
never been a part of those PLCs, and her knowledge comes only from what she was told by the principal.

Darcy related that she had never had any formal training regarding the PLC model, except for her experiences during student teaching. She sat in on the PLC meetings but did not feel as though she could add anything meaningful to the conversation as a scholar practitioner. Darcy also related that, other than sitting and watching what others do during PLCs, she hadn’t received any training or professional development designed to help her feel prepared to participate with her peers in a meaningful collaborative endeavor. Her unfamiliarity with the PLC model and process makes it difficult, at best, to work within an effective collaborative PLC. Darcy’s frustration with the lack of preparedness on her part was evident during the interview as illustrated by a simple statement: “I am not sure what we are supposed to be doing at this time.”

Darcy spoke to what she thinks the purpose of PLCs is in a brief statement: “I believe the purpose is to better serve our students and to drive our instruction”. She did not elaborate on any particular strategies that would enable her to do those things, but when asked about her thoughts on what constituted an ideal PLC, she was a little more specific:

[Ideally] I believe a PLC should be educators who come together...from the same grade level or something [else] that brings them together with a common interest. They [then] facilitate meetings where, professionally, ...[we] are meant to better ourselves and better the students. That [might] mean grading each other’s student work so that we are on the same page with a rubric.” It is clear from her response, that Darcy has an inkling of what a collaborative team might do to better their instruction and help their students, but without training, guidelines and support from her peers, Darcy will continue to be frustrated and at a loss concerning the process and the goals of the PLC model.
Darcy identified the purpose of PLCs at Ames elementary by stating:

At this given moment, they are not mandated and we don’t do them. As a grade level, we are given the option to continue PLCs, but because it is not required, not everybody from the grade level comes together when we meet. Therefore, ...[with just] two teachers doing ...[the PLC], we can’t truly establish or confirm anything for our peers anyway. I’m not sure it is worthwhile.

Darcy likes meeting with individual members of her team from time to time, but they discuss topics such as field trips or supplemental materials for the curriculum that she feels do not fulfill the purpose of the PLC. Because the PLC is no longer required, Darcy feels as though her team is falling short of the goal of meeting regularly as a collaborative grade-level team.

Darcy’s grade level had three new teachers this year, all of whom had no formal experience with the PLC process at Ames. Darcy stated:

Obviously, we were looking for a little bit of direction from veteran teachers. You have to understand, we had a large grade [level] at that time [with] many students. There were so many hands in the pot, with so many different viewpoints. Like I said before, there was no model to follow or any benefits of the process [shared with us]. Half of the people were all new to [PLCs] so, we didn’t know what to bring to the table; we didn’t know what to discuss, and no one else brought any initiative to the table. [Things] just really got off track.

As a result, PLCs have not occurred often at all among the first grade team this year. Even when they have tried to meet, they have been unclear on what direction to take, and their efforts have not produced the desired results of a successful PLC.
**Administrative support of educators.** When Darcy reflected on the implementation of the PLC model to determine whether or not the administration supported and fostered a trusting and caring collaborative community at Ames, she responded with feeling when she said:

I like our administration, but they didn’t come to those meetings so I can’t say that they made me comfortable or nurtured. They didn't give [my team] any feedback as far as I’m concerned. Also, they weren’t there [at the meetings], so I don’t know how you can create the [collaborative] environment if you’re not there to do so.

Her statement was quite revealing in that she felt administrative support was the key to implementing and sustaining a successful PLC. Darcy pointed out that she believed if she asked them to come to a PLC, they would, but to her it does not seem to be a top priority with our current administration.

**Increased student achievement through PLCs.** Darcy described the relationship between PLCs and increased student achievement at Ames Elementary by reflecting on the way PLCs are presently utilized:

[It did not work] the way we were doing it. We didn’t really talk about students and how we could provide any differentiation [in instruction] or what are we going to do for the...[struggling students]. I mean, we never made a plan. Nothing got done, so I don’t think it did anything for our students. It was a chit chat session. While I would have liked [our PLCs] to be something more, I hope they would do it a different way because it was a waste of my time. I don’t mean to be rude but it just didn’t benefit me or ...[my students]. I can’t see it that it benefitted our grade level.

Although Darcy does not agree that PLCs, as utilized in their current state, have a positive effect on student achievement, it is evident that she believes that PLCs used in an
effective, collaborative, and supportive manner would be beneficial to both educators and their students as a tool to help positively increase student achievement.

**Collaborative mentoring.** In continuing the theme of what constituted supportive and effective collaboration, Darcy was asked to reflect on what she thought was the definition of collaborative mentoring. She stated that it made her think of educators coming together collaboratively in order to share ideas with each other; trying to provide guidance to one another by sharing both experience and resources. Something that she added at the end of her response illustrated Darcy’s desire for collaboration. “Collaborative to me means more than one, a lot of us working together.” Clearly Darcy understands the meaning of collaboration and if given the option to collaborate with her peers, would rather do so then maintain the culture of isolation that she is a part of now.

After being given Mullen’s (2005) definition of what constitutes a collaborative community, “...it is a professional collegiate partnership that contributes to the growth of all partners” (p. 187), Darcy said, “We don’t currently have a model for our PLCs, so therefore, we don’t follow the definition.” She explained further that she liked the quote and felt it was something that Ames should strive for in its PLCs. Darcy explained that the collective whole of Ames should benefit from PLCs, and she expressed the desire that the administration should also be an integral part of the PLC process as well. It was her hope that they would be there to provide guidance as well as to learn from their teachers.

Darcy explained her view on the PLC model and its relationship to educator growth: “I do not think that it enhanced my growth as an educator. No one knew what they were doing, what we were supposed to talk about, and there was no leader in our group.” According to
Darcy, the PLC itself dissolved into a time for teachers to talk about what was going on in other parts of the building, their home lives, and other things not related to the PLC process.

**Lessons Learned from Darcy**

When reflecting on workplace culture, teacher perception, administrative support, student achievement and collaborative mentoring in relationship to the PLC model, several findings became clear. Darcy believed that a lack of teacher training and administrative support played a key role in the failure of the PLC model for the first grade team. Clearly, new teachers like Darcy and her colleagues, would benefit from training designed to show them how to utilize the PLC model as it is intended to produce the desired effects of educator growth and positive student achievement fostered by a strong collaborative community. In addition, the staff needs to see that their administration is committed to the PLC model as well, and that it has their full support. Darcy’s desire for the administrative team to not only serve as guides during the PLC process, but to learn from their teachers, is a request that should not be ignored.

As a new staff member, Darcy does not have any concept of what a successful PLC model looks like or how it should function. She is receptive to any form of training that would alleviate her frustration resulting from that lack of knowledge. Darcy repeatedly commented on the fact that there is no model for PLCs at Ames now, but also reported that she believed that the teachers and students at Ames would benefit from the utilization of PLCs. Through her responses, it is clear that Darcy looks to the administration to be an active and supportive part of the process if PLCs are to be active, beneficial, and sustained at Ames Elementary.
Danny: A Teacher at Ames Elementary

Background

One of the newer teacher participants, Danny currently serves as the regular education teacher in a Team Approach to Mastery room with a special education teacher on the third grade team that I am also a part of at Ames Elementary. Danny was hired as a novice teacher, and has been teaching at the school for three years. He is not originally from the area, but has now made it his home and he has strong ties within the community. Both of his children attend schools within Ames’s school district. He decided to become a teacher after a stint in the military and serving time as a youth pastor. After identifying his passion for teaching as a regular education teacher, Danny continues to further his education by pursuing a second Master’s degree in special education. It is his hope to continue to work in a special education capacity with an at-risk population.

Danny describes himself as a teacher who likes to have the curriculum come to life. His passion for his students is evident in his comment, “I love my kids no matter who they are. I will always believe that each and every student has the ability to learn no matter the issue.” Student academic success is important for Danny, and he does everything he can to help his students achieve their goals.

Danny’s Perspective of the PLC Model

Workplace culture. Danny described the meaning of workplace culture as how one feels when they walk into the workplace. He further elaborated by saying, “...the culture is an all-inclusive environment, one that includes everybody.” Danny feels strongly that the environment should include everyone regardless of whether or not they are professionally tied to the field of education.
In reference to how Danny would compare the culture at Ames with his description of workplace culture, he said, “The culture here, at times, is not all-inclusive.” Danny believes there are visible differences between the staff and the administration, and voiced those differences by stating:

I think there are some people that feel that they are in an elite group and really don’t give the time of day to certain [ones] of us that don’t feel that way. I do think the culture here is definitely changing. I’ve been here, this is the third year, and the culture is becoming more inclusive, or so it seems.

Danny has seen a lack of cohesiveness among the staff and their administration in the past, but reports now that the recent changes in the administrative staff are enabling the entire staff at Ames to be more inclusive and accepting of all of its members.

In relating the school culture to the PLC model, Danny reported that the PLC model at Ames is contingent upon what the administration would like teachers to have. In other words, Danny says, “I think the PLC model is almost too structured sometimes and I think the culture relates in that there seems to be at times a micromanagement by certain individuals in other grade levels.” He does not feel that his grade-level’s PLC is run that way at all. After PLCs were no longer mandated and teachers were given the option to meet or not, the third grade team continued to meet on a weekly basis until just recently due to state testing constraints. Danny states that, “...ours is a better PLC, a better representation of what the school should be.”

His feelings are a direct result of the fact that the current third grade team is a close-knit group who allows all voices to be heard and honored within their PLCs. The closeness of the group has fostered a feeling of trust and support, thereby creating a strong collaborative environment that is essential to the success of the PLC model.
**PLCs as teacher-led professional development.** Danny defined a PLC as, “...a group of professionals that can collaborate ensuring that each person’s perspective is taken into account.” He went on further to state:

> It’s when everybody's perspective is heard by the overall community. The PLC needs to be set up with a set of norms just to understand one another from, but there also needs to be a freedom to be able to share and express a feeling about a certain issue. It’s everyone’s responsibility to make sure the child comes first during a professional learning community meeting.

Again, Danny feels strongly that the inclusive piece of the PLC model is important. It is his belief that everyone can be a valuable contributor when educators are looking for ways to help all students achieve academic success. Danny also sees the value in having a safe and supportive environment for all stakeholders during the PLC process. It is that environment which allows for strong collaboration to occur.

DuFour et al. (2006) described PLCs as, “...an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for children they serve” (p. 11). Danny believed that his team was aligned with this PLC model. Although he mentioned that there is no longer a specific time given for PLCs at Ames Elementary due to employee/union issues, Danny reported that his team continued practice the reflective process of PLCs on a weekly basis. As a by-product of that weekly collaboration, Danny believed that mutual collaboration led to educators being able to fill in gaps of knowledge between themselves as well as their students.

Danny took part in PLCs in his first year of teaching in another state. He was overwhelmed and struggling to meet the needs of his students when his school decided to adopt
the PLC model. He shared that there was no formal training at his previous school, but that his administrator had read a book about them and decide to try to implement them as a way to promote positive student achievement. Danny shared that the awareness that he was not the only one that was struggling with all the demands of teaching was a powerful bi-product of the PLC process in his former school.

At Ames, Danny reported that he has been at a number of trainings on in-service and professional development days, and had taken part in a training conducted by me at the beginning of the 2015-2016 school year. The training was designed to refresh those teachers familiar with the PLC model, and to introduce the concept to those teachers new to the PLC process. It was supposed to be the first of a cycle of trainings that would take place during faculty meetings and it occurred before PLCs were no longer mandated in Ames’s district. Once PLCs were no longer mandated, Ames stopped all training sessions.

Danny explained the purpose of PLCs by saying “…[I believe the purpose] is to make sure that we all have the same goals to ensure that we do what is best for the child.” Danny felt strongly that it was important to recognize the developmental abilities of each student and that as educators, teachers collaborate and plan according to each student’s needs. By working together in a collaborative manner during PLCs, it is possible to address teacher’s strengths and weaknesses as well as those of their students.

Regarding his thoughts on what constituted an ideal PLC, Danny once again felt that the goal of doing what is best for the child should be established by the PLC team, but that members should also, “...come [to the table] with common knowledge but at the same time recognize that there’s new knowledge to be learned from each other.” In other words, Danny recognized the
need to come prepared to share data, teaching strategies, etc. so all members are able to learn from their peers.

Danny identified the ambiguity of the current purpose of PLCs at Ames elementary by stating “We really want to meet as a grade level, but it doesn’t always lend itself to it time wise because it’s not respected by the teacher’s union. I know that because I’m a union rep.” Danny is referring to the fact that the teacher’s union became involved in a dispute over the contractual obligations of teachers involved in PLCs. Teachers complained that they were not given their uninterrupted 50 minutes per day of planning time because of the inclusion of the prescribed PLCs. By late fall, the district was no longer mandating PLCs over fears that lawsuits would ensue from teachers.

**Administrative support of educators.** When Danny reflected on the implementation of the PLC model to determine whether or not the administration supported and fostered a trusting and caring collaborative community at Ames Elementary, he felt they were not supportive, and stated the following:

They really haven’t [been supportive]. I don’t think that overall, there is a trusting relationship because there is such a varying level of respect between the administration and various professionals within the school. I can say that I’m definitely respected, but I know colleagues of mine that are not, and it has to do a lot with their lack of self confidence in what they do.

Even though Danny feels respected in the Ames community, he recognizes that some of his colleagues do not. When there is no effort towards the administrative facilitation of trust and support of their staff and the PLC model, it is very difficult to form the strong collaborative community that is the backbone of the PLC process.
**Increased student achievement through PLCs.** Danny described the relationship between PLCs and increased student achievement at Ames Elementary by stating that, “I do believe that if it were utilized more throughout all grade levels, there would be more student growth.” Even though Danny currently works on the third grade team, he is well aware that other grade levels do not participate regularly, if at all, in the PLC process. It was evident through that statement Danny feels that if the school were able to utilize PLCs more, the collaboration among teachers would enable them to develop strategies that would lead to an increase in positive student achievement as well as to decrease the isolation of the teachers.

**Collaborative mentoring.** In continuing the theme of collaboration, Danny was asked to reflect on what he thought was the definition of collaborative mentoring. He viewed collaborative mentoring as when “…an unbiased leader can enable the willingness [to learn] and [the] growth of an understudy.” Danny also felt that collaborative mentorship was a twofold relationship where the roles would be interchangeable.

After being given Mullen’s (2005) definition of what constitutes a collaborative community, “…it is a professional collegiate partnership that contributes to the growth of all partners” (p. 187), Danny agreed with his definition and reiterated that the mentoring process was a two-way street. In other words, educators would benefit from the collaborative process in different ways at different times, depending on their roles. Danny summed up his view on the PLC model and its relationship to both educator and student growth by saying:

I feel like it has helped me to become a better professional. I think collaboration is the basis of teacher growth but is also the basis of student growth. I really do feel that collaborative communities are where it’s at. It should be implemented on a regular basis. I definitely think…[PLCs are] researched based and they do impact student growth
Clearly, Danny agrees that the research behind the PLC model and feels that the implementation and sustainability of the PLC model at Ames would encourage both educator and student growth.

**Lessons Learned from Danny**

When reflecting on the themes of workplace culture, teacher perception, administrative support, student achievement and collaborative mentoring in relationship to the PLC model, several findings became clear from my interview with Danny. Workplace culture and its importance to the staff could not be ignored as a factor that played an important role in the effectiveness and success of the PLC model. Without a culture that fostered a trusting community in which teachers could successfully collaborate, Danny felt that the PLC would not be as effective. Teacher perception, collaborative mentoring, and student achievement also played an important role because if the teachers, the teacher’s union, and the administration did not support the PLC model, the effort would fail and would therefore not have a positive effect on the growth of the educators at Ames or their students.

Danny, like Darcy, is a newer staff member. Although he was not present at the implementation of the model at Ames, Danny has some working knowledge of the PLC process from prior work experience. He clearly values the benefits derived from the PLC model, and also recognizes the fact that if it were a school-wide initiative, both educators and students would benefit from the collaborative effort. Again, as with Myra, Bobby, and Darcy, Danny looks to the administration to lead the efforts in implementing and sustaining the PLC process at Ames Elementary.
Conclusion

Several themes emerged during the coding and analysis process. The importance of workplace culture, teacher perception of the PLC model, administrative support, collaborative mentoring and educator growth were key areas of interest as I sought to answer the following research questions: (a) How do teachers describe the purpose of PLCs? (b) What are teacher perceptions of PLCs at Ames Elementary? (c) How do teacher perceptions of PLCs affect the implementation of PLCs at Ames Elementary?

Darcy and Danny were the newest teachers interviewed, and neither was present during the initial implementation of the PLC model. It was clear that both teachers needed and wanted more administrative support, as well as a dedicated PLC time with administrators being an active part of the process. Darcy felt as though she was clueless as to how to be an integral part of a successful PLC and desperately wanted some form of training to assist her. Danny had been involved in a PLC in another school that attempted some form of the PLC model, but recognized the importance of the administration’s support. Another factor that emerged from my interviews with the newer staff members was the fact that they both felt as though the workplace culture, while not necessarily negative, was not conducive to collaboration among peers.

Myra, Bobby, and Tony are teachers with at least seven years of experience at the school, and also wanted increased administrative support. They felt that there needed to be a designated time, place, and agenda for the PLCs to occur that was supported and implemented by the administration. All three felt that the workplace culture was positive, and lent itself to their teams being able to collaborate in a trusting and supportive environment. Tony was alone in her desire for professional validation from the administration.
All five teachers recognized the need for and benefits of collaborative mentoring and realized that it was a strong benefit of the PLC model. Each teacher felt that by listening to others, they could improve or refine their own practices in order to meet the needs of their students and continue to grow as educators.

Regarding research question one, all five participants described the purpose of a PLC in a way that aligned with the literature (DuFour, 2004; Mullen, 2005). Their answers appeared to be informed by their level of experience and/or exposure. The newest member of the team, Darcy, was the least trained and had had no exposure to PLCs except through her student teaching.

Without having a cohesive definition and model of what is expected of the teachers at Ames during PLCs, it will make it difficult for teams to utilize PLCs to foster collaboration, communication, and student achievement because they do not understand what is expected of them. Without knowing the expectations of the PLC, the teachers are faced with an uncomfortable situation in which they are not sure of their role in the process or how a successful PLC should work. In turn, the discomfort that the teachers feel will foster a lack of willingness to collaborate and communicate with their peers in order to work towards their own growth as educators and the academic growth of their students.

The answers to research questions two and three are an integral part of this study. The second research question examining teacher perception, or how the teachers at Ames view the utilization of PLCs at Ames elementary right now, is key to understanding why the model has neither thrived nor been sustained. None of the teacher participants in this study had a clear perception of what a PLC currently looks like at Ames due to the district mandate that PLCs were to be conducted on a voluntary basis and that the administration was not to be a part of the
PLC meetings if they occurred. Some teams utilized them as planning periods, discussing field trips and upcoming events. Other teams did not meet at all.

The third research question looked at how teacher perceptions of PLCs affect the implementation of PLCs at Ames. The ambiguity of whether or not PLCs should be conducted combined with the lack of knowledge concerning what constitutes a PLC is clearly affecting the way that teachers perceive PLCs at Ames. As a result of the forced lack of administrative involvement, new teachers are not being trained, seasoned teachers who often prefer to work in isolation are doing so, and teachers who believe PLCs are a waste of their time are all hindering a school-wide approach to the utilization of PLCs.
CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion and Conclusions

In today’s ever-changing and globally competitive society, politicians, states, school districts, and educators are searching for ways to increase student academic achievement. One research-based approach to staff development is that of the Professional Learning Community (PLC) (DuFour, 2004). The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify and then examine how teachers construct their perception of PLCs and how their experiences can provide a plan that will ensure the successful implementation of PLCs in the future. By identifying areas that are problematic for educators, it was my goal to provide administrators, districts, and states with the necessary information to help them plan for the successful implementation of the PLC model.

Participants and Research Questions

In this study, in-depth interviews conducted with five teachers and the principal of an elementary school in a mid-Atlantic state nicknamed “Ames Elementary”. The teachers ranged in experience from two to 15 years, and all five grade levels within the elementary school were represented in this sample. The information from each interview was analyzed and coded to find themes that emerged to answer the following research questions:

1) How do teachers describe the purpose of PLCs?

2) What are teacher perceptions of PLCs at Ames Elementary?

3) How do teacher perceptions of PLCs affect the implementation of PLCs at Ames Elementary?

Limitations of the Study

There were some potential limitations to this study which may have impacted the outcome. First, I have worked at Ames with all of the participants and therefore cannot be
regarded as completely without bias, as would someone who had no ties to the school or district. Several safeguards were put in place to minimize any chance of bias in this study. For example, all stakeholders in this process were informed of my research project, and those who did participate were clearly informed of the nature and goals of this research study. Before the coding process, member checking was utilized to be sure of the accuracy of the transcripts. During the coding process, multiple coding sessions occurred as well as the triangulation of data. Finally, thick, rich descriptions were utilized to craft this narrative.

Second, the sample is small and from only one school in the district. However, the purpose of this study was to truly listen to the voices of the participants in order to craft a narrative that would answer the research questions and provide others with useful information as they sought to implement and sustain a PLC. By having a small sample size, I was able to analyze each interview in-depth and glean the data necessary to do so. This chapter will discuss the findings of each research question in relation to the literature and theoretical framework used to interpret and report the data.

**Research Questions and Discussion**

1) **How do teachers describe the purpose of PLCs?**

   Despite the fact that PLCs are no longer mandated at Ames, all five teachers were able to describe the purpose of PLCs. Their answers, however, were informed by their years of service. Those teachers whose years of service began at the inception of PLCs at Ames or shortly thereafter when the model was fully utilized throughout the school came closer to the definitions provided by Mullen (2005) and DuFour (2006). The newest teacher, Darcy, had received no training on the PLC model and was unsure of both the process and her role within PLCs. As a result, she expressed discomfort and dissatisfaction because she did not see how the time spent
benefited her as an educator or her students as learners. This is similar to Nadelson et al. (2012) who found it problematic that administrators did not know that their teachers did not know the focus of the PLCs, and not knowing the process would then negatively impact the productivity of the PLC. Due to the increased number of new teachers at Ames, there is a need for teacher training on the purpose and utilization of the PLC model.

In order for a PLC to be implemented and thrive, it is essential for teachers to display a consistent understanding of the fundamental processes of the PLC model (DuFour, 2004). The findings of this study suggest that the teachers at Ames are unable to clearly articulate their knowledge of the PLC process and as a result, without having the supportive structures in place to assist them in their efforts, the teachers will be unable to successfully form an engaged and collaborative culture (DuFour, 2004). In addition, without that collaborative culture during PLCs at Ames, teachers will not grow as educators, and their students will not reap the benefits that foster positive student achievement. Specific supportive structures that will address the deficit of knowledge concerning PLCs at Ames will be discussed further in the following sections.

2) What are teacher perceptions of PLCs at Ames Elementary?

It emerged in this study that there is a lack of common structure to the PLCs at Ames. None of the teacher participants in this study had a clear perception of what a PLC currently looked like at Ames due to the district mandate that PLCs were to be conducted on a voluntary basis and that the administration was not to be a part of the PLC meetings if they occurred. Some teams utilized them as planning periods, discussing field trips and upcoming events. Other teams did not meet at all. The fact that teachers were unable to clearly describe what current PLCs look like adds to the confusion concerning whether or not teachers should utilize PLCs. What is clear is that the administrators at Ames cannot assume that their teachers are meeting and actively
engaged in the work of PLCs. They must arrange for their teachers to meet with supportive structures in place that will help foster successful collaboration (Little, 1987). It is then that the teachers will grow from collaborating with their peers as they work to enhance student achievement.

This data from this study also reflected a lack of administrative support for PLCs at Ames. The literature on administrative support suggests that the leadership team of the school must create a climate in which teachers who are actively involved in PLCs can collaborate successfully (Mullen & Schunk, 2010). Teachers want to see that principals are as invested in the process as they are. It is when the teachers see that investment, and collaboration occurs, that they will also see the benefits of PLCs in their students’ academic achievement and teacher buy-in to the PLC process will occur. Another way in which principals can facilitate the PLC process is to develop and then model the use of collegial conversations during PLCs (Spanneut, 2010). By modeling those conversations, principals are preparing teacher leaders within the building to facilitate their own PLCs (Spanneut, 2010).

Although the focus of this study was teachers, the administrator must play a key role in the PLC process in order for it to thrive and be beneficial to both the educators and the students. As such, it is important to report Kasey’s perspectives in order to add context to this research study. Kasey, the principal at Ames expressed her desire to bring back weekly PLCs during the 2016-2017 school year, and to be meaningful and beneficial to both her staff and her students. Kasey also recognized the importance of PLCs as a vehicle that would help promote growth in her educators as well as positive student achievement at Ames. Kasey’s drive to develop teacher leaders within her building to facilitate the process of weekly PLCs is supported by the literature. By empowering her teachers to communicate effectively and make decisions, Kasey is
acknowledging and validating their ownership of the decision-making process in PLCs (Spanneut, 2010).

During her interview, Kasey stated that she was sure the grade level teams were meeting, although she felt that their discussions were not as focused as they might have been during the timeframe when PLCs were part of a district mandate. The literature is clear here when it addresses the definition of a PLC. Liberman and Miller (2011) defined PLCs as ongoing meetings of educators who gather on a regular basis to increase their own learning as well as that of their students. In contrast, at Ames, grade levels were meeting infrequently, or not meeting at all.

It is clear that more needs to be done to educate teachers concerning PLCs. There needs to be both principal involvement and support from the administration to the PLC teams at Ames elementary, and there needs to be accountability for the educators involved to ensure that PLCs are being utilized to their fullest potential. It is my belief, based on data, that with adherence to these steps, productive PLCs can be brought back to Ames Elementary.

3) How do teacher perceptions of PLCs affect the implementation of PLCs at Ames Elementary?

The ambiguity of whether PLCs should or should not be conducted and the lack of knowledge concerning what constitutes a PLC is clearly affecting the way that teachers at Ames perceive PLCs. New teachers who are not familiar with the PLC model are not comfortable with participating in the process, seasoned teachers who prefer to work in isolation are doing so, and teachers who see PLCs as a waste of their time are creating a culture that undermines the goals of successful PLCs.
Rhoads (2011) is a principal who is familiar with obstacles encountered on the PLC journey. He introduced PLCs to his own teachers, and has written of the obstacles that encountered along the way. One of the first things Rhoads (2011) noticed was the attitudes of the teachers themselves. His teachers demonstrated a resistance to change, and to that end, Rhoads (2011) recognizes that both the emotional and relational aspects of the school culture must be considered when attempting to introduce a change such as the PLC model. DuFour (2007) also found that fear and anxiety were commonplace for teachers as they dealt with changes with little support.

Both of these ideas are applicable to the teachers at Ames. Teachers who have not bought into the idea of PLCs are not willing to devote their time and effort to meet with their teams. Harris and Jones (2010) reported that there is a dominant culture that can either support or undermine a change initiative like PLCs. A notable result of that study is that once lead teachers supported and explained the benefits of PLCs, initial resistance to change was overcome. This idea also aligns with Kasey’s vision of what she would like to achieve with the teacher leaders at Ames. Teacher leaders who are knowledgeable and positive about the benefits of the PLC model would be able support those teachers who need their support, and explain the benefits of PLCs to those still wary of change.

Teacher isolation is another aspect of the resistance to PLCs that administrators must address. Tony, a fourth grade teacher participant, spoke of individual goals during her interview, and the fact that her fourth grade team generally preferred to work on their own. The problem of professional isolation among educators is found throughout schools across the United States and directly impacts the successful implementation of the PLC model (Mullen & Schunk, 2010).
In some cases, if the implementation of PLCs is not transparent and teachers do not understand the benefits of PLCs, they can appear threatening (Fullen, 2006). As a teacher present at the implementation of PLCs at Ames, I observed there was not that level of transparency projected by the administration and teachers did feel threatened by the mandatory introduction of PLCs. This another concern for Kasey as she works to renew the work of PLCs at Ames Elementary. When addressing her staff, she must be clear in her purpose and expectations for PLCs, engaging the help of those teachers within the building that will help build a positive consensus among the rest of the staff.

One of the major tenets of the PLC model is that teachers must work together to achieve their collaborative goal, which is for learning to occur for both the educators and their students (DuFour, 2004). In order to achieve this, the wall of professional isolation must be broken. The collaborative team effort of the PLC is key to the growth of all stakeholders in the education process. Tony also spoke of the need for administrator validation during the PLC process. When administrators validate the work of their teachers by listening to them and valuing their input, the teachers feel that their actions matter and in turn, feel the motivation to collaborate (Mullen & Schunk, 2010). It is this collaboration that will encourage both educator growth and positive student achievement.

**Theoretical Framework**

In order to analyze and interpret the information from the interviews, I utilized the theoretical model of social constructivism. Constructivism is the manner in which people learn or make sense of the world and the reality that they are a part of (Ultanir, 2012). Knowledge cannot be created in isolation, and that creation of knowledge comes from the social interaction of humans as active participants within their reality as they work to create new meaning. Piaget
(1953) believed that individuals use schemata as building blocks to create an understanding of the world around them, and those building blocks then form a continual acquisition of knowledge that enables humans to solve more complex problems.

Given that knowledge is contextual and dependent on interaction with others, the same logic can be applied to teachers’ learning process within and about PLCs. Instead of collective, collaborative learning among teachers, professional isolation is the norm in many public schools throughout North America today, and is the greatest obstacle to the facilitation of PLCs (Mullen & Schunk, 2010). To understand why the culture of isolation that exists at Ames must be overcome for PLCs to thrive, the importance of Vygotsky’s (1986) social constructivist theory is essential to understanding how the teachers, through social contact, negotiate meaning to construct their knowledge and understanding of PLCs.

The framework in Figure 1, which illustrates Vygotsky’s theory that learning is cognitive development through social interaction, can be used to show how the teacher participants in this study constructed their knowledge of PLCs. I will then describe the teacher participants and their progression through the model as it applies to them as learners of the PLC model.

**The Individual as a Learner**

In the first interview, participants were asked to describe themselves as learners. Each of the participants was well aware of their learning styles and described themselves as active learners who preferred to learn by doing. Four out of the five participants stated that they liked to take notes throughout professional development sessions that they were involved in, in order to help them assimilate the new knowledge being presented. Darcy reported that she knew she was a very kinesthetic or active learner, and that she often used songs with her students to help them learn new material. The implications from the data suggest that in order for each of these teachers to learn, they must be actively engaged within the PLC process for learning to occur.

**Individual Skill Range**

Each of the teacher participants in this study came to the table with a varying levels of teaching experience, and it is important to recognize those levels of experience to understand
where each participant was in their understanding of the PLC model. Three of the teachers had between seven and 15 years of experience, and the two newest teachers had between two and five years of experience. Tony and Bobby, the veteran teachers in the study, were part of the initial implementation of PLCs at Ames Elementary and had the most experience with the PLC model. They were able to clearly articulate the purpose of the PLC and had personally seen the benefits of its utilization to promote educator growth and positive student achievement in the past.

Although Myra was not involved in the implementation of the PLC model at Ames, she too, was able to articulate its purpose and reported that, through the observation of and collaboration with her more experienced peers during PLC meetings, she was able to determine her role in the process. Those social experiences helped her to construct the knowledge necessary to become an active member of her grade-level’s collaborative PLC.

Danny and Darcy were the newest teacher participants in this study. Danny had a limited amount of experience concerning PLCs from teaching in a previous school, and Darcy had only experienced PLCs through her student teaching in which she took no part in their proceedings. Looking at the individual skill level of each teacher regarding PLCs, one consideration for the administration at Ames would be continuation of training opportunities for both new and veteran teachers.

**Zone of Proximal Development**

When Vygotsky (1986) developed the Zone of Proximal Development, he was looking at a child’s cognitive ability to learn with help from others. As such, it was important for instructors to observe the children as they worked to construct their knowledge of new information. As the instructors observed the children, they were aware of the current level of the learners during their
dissemination of new material. This ties in directly with the differences between the teachers’
experiences and training in PLCs at Ames. It is the responsibility of the administrators or teacher
leaders to be aware of where each of their teachers are in the learning process concerning PLCs
so they can determine what training opportunities would best suit their needs.

**Potential Skill Range as a Result of Social Interaction**

Understanding Vygotsky’s (1986) belief that interactions with others and their cultural
environment contributes to their cognitive development is another necessity for understanding
the dynamics of the PLC in relationship with how each teacher learns their role in that
collaborative culture. The very nature of the social, collaborative culture that is the PLC lends
itself to peers being able to provide material and new ways of understanding to all parties
concerned. It is this mutual transmission of knowledge that enables the teachers to grow as
educators thereby providing them with strategies designed to promote positive student
achievement. The teachers at Ames rely on the range of skills that each member brings to the
table as they work to achieve their common collaborative goal of positive student achievement. It
is here that administrators can begin to educate the teachers to recognize and value the skills of
each of the members of their PLC teams.

**Social Interaction and the Instructor**

This piece of Vygotsky’s model is critical to the implementation and success of the PLC
model. It encompasses each of the stages previously discussed and in order for the PLC model to
thrive, each of these elements must occur. There needs to be social interaction among those
teachers involved in their grade-level PLCs for any type of collaboration to occur, and it is the
responsibility of the instructors, either teacher leaders or administrators, to recognize the learning
level of the PLC’s members.
By its nature, the PLC model requires elements of social interaction from each of its members for the collective whole to reach their common goals. Currently at Ames, there are few, if any, PLCs meeting on a regular basis. Each of the teachers in this study voiced their frustration with the lack of any structure to the PLC process at Ames, and as a result, the beneficial social interaction and that Vygotsky speaks of is not occurring. Another frustration expressed by the participants was the lack of guidance, specifically from the administration, during PLCs. The implication drawn from the data in this study is that there needs to be commitment, willingness to support, investment, and participation in PLCs by administrators at Ames.

The theoretical framework of social constructivism allowed me to gain a better understanding of the data that I collected from the participants, thereby allowing me to draw the conclusions necessary to ensure the successful implementation of PLCs in the future. It both supported and informed my understanding of how these participants, who were actively involved in the PLC process, were able to construct and internalize their own interpretations of that knowledge regarding the PLC model.

Some of the teachers at Ames Elementary are working together to create new knowledge within their PLC teams. Those individuals with strong team members strive to understand the purpose of the PLC by observing the stronger teachers within the group. It is through that observation that teachers who are unfamiliar with the PLC model are able to make sense of what their role is as part of a collaborative team. Those teachers in a weaker PLC team are the teachers who are struggling the most with their understanding of their role within the collaborative process, and that struggle is a source of frustration that the new teachers expressed during their interviews. As a result of looking through the lens of social constructivism, I was able to recognize the teachers’ inability to understand and learn their individual roles in PLCs. That
understanding and creation of knowledge is crucial for the teachers at Ames Elementary to be comfortable with, and able to successfully participate in, effective PLCs.

**Application of the Research Study**

The findings from this study coupled with the literature yielded implications for practice, research, and specific next steps I plan to personally take as a teacher leader (see Table 1). As a teacher leader, I can assist with the planning and development of professional learning opportunities for both new and veteran staff to meet them where they are as learners with the PLC model.

**Table 1. Alignment of Data, Implications, and Action**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conclusions from Data</th>
<th>Support from the Literature</th>
<th>Implications for Practice</th>
<th>Implications for Research</th>
<th>Action Plan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of teacher knowledge/training</td>
<td>Vescio et al. (2008)</td>
<td>Development plan for professional development</td>
<td>Evaluation of development plan</td>
<td>Professional development opportunities designed to serve teachers where they are in the PLC learning process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>concerning PLCs</td>
<td>Nadelson (2012)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for supportive structures for PLCs to occur</td>
<td>DuFour (2004)</td>
<td>Action plan that includes time, dates, organized agendas, format, principal support</td>
<td>What makes it difficult for some schools to provide those supportive structures?</td>
<td>Development of an action plan that includes the supportive structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transparent Implementation</td>
<td>Harris and Jones (2010)</td>
<td>Implementation for teacher buy in that helps teachers to understand the benefits of PLCs</td>
<td>Why are educational reforms/changes continuously enacted/mandated without teacher buy-in?</td>
<td>Involvement, modeling of administration teams; creation of teacher leaders to overcome resistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration needs to be committed to the process</td>
<td>Hord (1997)</td>
<td>Part of the action plan; must be a supportive presence during PLCs</td>
<td>What is it that keeps the administrators from being an active part of the PLC process? Job/Mindset?</td>
<td>Unbroken time allotment allocated to PLCs by administrator’s/ Development of teacher leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher isolation present</td>
<td>Fullen (2006)</td>
<td>Develop a stronger collaborative culture through empowering teachers and creating teacher leaders to help overcome resistance</td>
<td>Why is there a prevalent culture of isolation among teachers? What perpetuates that culture?</td>
<td>Transparent implication of PLCs; development of teacher leaders to help increase buy-in and overcome resistance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I plan to create a survey to administer to the staff at the beginning of the 2016-2017 school year that will help me to determine where the staff is in the learning process. Another area of concern that I can help address is that of providing supportive structures for PLCs to occur. Due to the size of Ames Elementary, scheduling a consistent time frame for PLCs to occur is challenging at best, but as shown in the past, can be done. I hope to assist the administrative team in creating a schedule and an agenda that will serve the needs of the PLC teams. Another important consideration is that of the transparent implementation of the PLC model by the administration.

As a teacher leader, I hope to be part of the process by networking with my peers and trying to allay teachers’ concerns about the PLC model in order to increase teacher buy-in, as well as implementing professional development sessions to increase understanding of the PLC model. Finally, with the help of the administrative team, it is my hope to increase the number of teacher leaders involved in PLCs to foster a stronger collaborative community. It is my hope that the stronger collaborative culture will work towards ending the culture of isolation currently present at Ames. As a teacher leader, it is my role to assist my school in its endeavor to successfully implement PLCs. What is equally important to note is that these changes will also need to be addressed by the principals and district staff in order to achieve a positive outcome.

**Implications for Future Practice**

The overall goal of this research was to better understand how teacher perceptions and experiences of the PLC model affected its implementation at Ames Elementary. It was my goal to provide administrators, districts, and states with the necessary information to help them plan for the successful implementation of the PLC model. Most of the research conducted on PLCs in the past looked at the correlation and utilization of PLCs and their effects on positive student
achievement. Very little research has been conducted that listens to the voices of educators and explains their experiences as they implement and participate in PLCs. This study sought to understand the failure of the implementation and subsequent sustainability of the PLC model at Ames Elementary by listening to the voices of its teachers.

**Development plan.** As a result of the data gathered from this study, it is recommended that the administrative team at Ames develop a clear plan of action that includes ongoing teacher training for both experienced and new staff members. This can be conducted through professional development sessions where both the administration and staff are present through the use of PLC book studies, guest speakers versed in the utilization PLC model, or teacher leaders sharing strategies for the utilization of PLCs. It is of utmost importance that the administration be involved and invested in this process, along with the educators in the building, to ensure that teachers see that the administrative team is invested in PLC process.

**Supportive structures.** Another recommendation for Ames based on the data from this study is the need for PLC supportive structures to be put into place before the implementation process begins. Teachers reported that the lack of a specific time, date, agenda and format made meeting in PLCs very difficult. The administrative team needs to have an action plan that ensures that these supports are in place in order for their teachers to be able to meet effectively.

**Transparent implementation.** The data gathered during this study showed that there was a climate of cultural isolation among some of the teachers at Ames. As a result, it is recommended that there be complete transparency by the administration when PLCs are reintroduced at Ames. To overcome the culture of isolation, teachers must not only understand the purpose of the PLC, but must feel as though they are a part of the implementation process in order to be invested in PLCs. They must be assured that their voices will be heard, that they will
receive the necessary supports, and that their collaborative efforts will occur in a safe and trusting environment.

When evaluating the data in this study, it was clear that the teacher participants believed in the value of conducting and utilizing PLCs at Ames Elementary. It was also clear that, given the supports necessary to facilitate the PLC model at Ames, teachers would be willing to continue to utilize PLCs to encourage their own growth as educators, as well as the academic growth of their students.

**Implications for Future Research**

As a direct result of the first recommendation, I would suggest that a program development study be conducted to evaluate the success or failure of the development plan. It is imperative to validate the claim that both new and veteran teachers, as well as the administration, need ongoing training to be able to have the necessary skills that will allow them to form a strong collaborative and effective professional learning community. A study examining the success of the development plan would be helpful to individuals looking to implement effective PLCs.

Because the field of education is in a constant state of change as one reform initiative after another comes along, another implication for research would be to look at how the culture of isolation affects not only the implementation of PLCs, but other change initiatives that take place in schools as well. Researchers would do well to look at what perpetuates the culture of isolation among educators.

Another implication for research would include the administrators themselves. Even when PLCs were conducted at Ames, there was rarely an administrator present. With the literature and teachers in this study demonstrating the importance of administrators being part of
the PLC process, what are the duties that preclude them from being active participants in the process, and how can those needs be prioritized to balance the needs of the PLC members?

Finally, although achieving this researcher’s purpose, the limited size of this study lends itself to the need for a larger study. A larger qualitative study reporting similar findings from multiple schools which were attempting to implement the PLC model would lend credibility to the belief that those wishing to implement PLCs need to utilize the recommendations mentioned in this study as they seek to do.

**Action Plan**

It is my plan to first present this data to the principal at Ames. Because she believes that PLCs benefit both her educators and her students, Kasey has stated that she wishes to bring PLCs back to Ames in the 2016-2017 school year. As a teacher leader at Ames Elementary, I believe that the information below will assist her, myself, and other teacher leaders with the implementation process, and I also believe they may enable Ames to work towards sustaining effective PLCs in the future. These are actions that I believe should be taken based on my data:

- Provide ongoing teacher training opportunities for all new teachers and ongoing professional opportunities for veteran teachers
- Provide supports for the staff that will ensure their ability to be able to form a strong collaborative PLC culture that includes: agendas, dedicated time frames for PLC meetings to occur, and an administrative presence to show that they are invested in PLCs as well
- The purpose for the implementation of PLCs must be clearly articulated and transparent in order for teachers to understand and buy into the PLC model.
• The development of positive teacher leaders within PLCs will also work to facilitate acceptance among any wary staff members resisting working as part of the collaborative culture that is a PLC.

I also hope to schedule a meeting with our district superintendent to discuss my findings with him. Although my study was conducted at Ames Elementary, I do not believe that our situation is unique. Other schools in my district may face the same difficulties that the staff at Ames does, and the findings and recommendations are applicable for any school or district looking to implement PLCs.

Finally, I will make my study available to the State Department of Education. Should they, or any of the state’s administrators, desire to incorporate the use of PLCs in their schools, it is my hope that my research will assist them as they work to implement them successfully.

**Conclusion**

As a student practitioner at Northeastern University, my eyes were opened to the power of research and the ability of that research to transform thought, establish facts, and reach new conclusions. The origins of this research began in my first class, Introduction to Doctoral Studies, here at Northeastern. As an individual, I have always loved to learn, and more importantly, I have a quest for increased knowledge when I have questions about projects that I am invested in. I have been involved in PLCs for many years, first as a student of them, and then as a teacher trying to put them into practice. I have witnessed the power of collaboration among educators and its positive effects on student achievement. By conducting this research, I believe that I have developed a plan to share with those interested in successfully implementing and sustaining PLCs in their schools, districts, and states.

There are always unanticipated outcomes with research, and this study was no different.
The findings concerning the climate of the workplace culture at Ames Elementary were surprising to me for two reasons. First, as one of the senior staff members and teacher mentors at Ames, I was surprised at the disparity between the old and new staff members concerning the perception of workplace culture. It is now clear to me that more needs to be done to help new staff members feel more of a part of the school culture. Second, I was surprised at the level of teacher isolation in the building. Ames Elementary has a school motto: “One Team, One Goal, No Limits”. That motto implies a high level of teamwork and effort in the collaborative work of the educators at Ames as they strive to meet the needs of their students. Yet, I was surprised at the number of teachers, as reported by the teacher participants, who preferred to work alone which is perpetuating a culture of isolation.

By hearing and, more importantly, listening to the voices of the teachers and the principal as they express their views, it is my conclusion that the building principal needs district support to find a way to successfully implement and sustain school wide PLCs. Each of the participants, veteran and new, recognized the value of the PLC model and spoke to the need of having administrative support in order for it to be successful. It is imperative that the district officials, building administrators, and teacher’s union leaders work together to find a way for PLCs to succeed in schools without infringing on the rights of teachers. Only then can PLCs function effectively and thrive as educators work to grow as professionals and to increase positive student achievement.
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Appendix A
Superintendent Letter

August 5, 2015

Dear ________,

I am currently a teacher at Ames Elementary School and have worked there as a teacher for 10 years. I also am a graduate student in Northeastern University’s Doctor of Education program, and I am currently in the early stages of my dissertation work. Dissertations in the Ed.D. program are based on active, relevant problems of practice. Dissertations frequently occur at a research site in which the researcher is currently working.

I have identified Ames as a potential research site because I was a part of the initial implementation of the PLC model there and have watched its evolution since its infancy, before the Race to the Top initiative. I am asking for your permission to conduct this qualitative, case study at the school.

The study will be guided by the following research questions: How do teachers describe the purpose of professional learning communities? What are teacher perceptions of professional learning communities at Ames Elementary? How do teacher perceptions of professional learning communities affect the implementation of PLCs at Ames Elementary? I intend to interview (5-7) teachers from Ames Elementary to gather their perspectives and experiences concerning the current PLC model at that school. I will also conduct observations of PLCs and collect related artifacts and documents.

Permission and Recruitment Procedures
In September, I will meet with Principal __________, to describe the study procedures and to gain her approval to conduct the study. At that time, I will also ask for a list of teacher email addresses. I will email all teachers at Ames, asking them to participate. I will accept between 5-7 teachers to participate in the study. It is my hope to include one teacher per grade level. After teachers have been selected, I will email teachers to set up a private place of their choosing for the initial interview and to sign the consent form (Appendix A).

Data Collection Procedures
The first interview (Appendix B) will focus on building rapport, gaining background information on the subjects, and concluding with their assessment of how they perceive school culture in relation to PLCs. This interview will last for no longer than one hour. The second interview (Appendix C) will focus on the primary research questions listed in this letter. Once I identify common themes across the data after my initial analysis, a written survey, based on those themes, will be administered in order to glean a more precise picture of the teachers as I strive to draw final conclusions. I will also, with the teachers permission, observe a PLC meeting during real time as it occurs, making note of my observations with field notes.

I will collect any pertinent artifacts and documents related to PLCs from Principal __________ throughout the duration of this study. The documents will be an additional source of data that is utilized to provide a complete picture of the PLC process at Ames Elementary.
I will have teachers sign the consent form at the first interview. Interviews would take place in the late fall, early winter and would be conducted at a time and place most convenient to each participant. The interviews will in no way disrupt the education of students. I plan to share the results of the study with the teachers, the principal and yourself upon its completion.

Protection of Human Subjects
The information from all data collection activities will be analyzed solely by the researcher looking to understand the phenomenon being observed. The respondents will be fully informed of the nature of the research study and the fact that information obtained from the interviews, questionnaires, and observations will be utilized in a study which can and will benefit them in the long term. The validity of the study depends largely on the respondents’ consent to participate in this study. The respondents will also be informed that they are free to withdraw from the study at any time, regardless of having given their consent and having started the interview process. All promises made to the respondents will be honored. Each respondent will be informed that their interviews will be reported anonymously. Each respondent will be identified by numbers, letters, or symbols during the study. There will be nothing utilized by the researcher that will connect their responses with their names. Each of the respondents will be informed of this practice. All information will be kept by the researcher for one year after the conclusion of the study, and only the researcher will have access to that material. After the one year timeline has passed, the researcher will destroy all data incurred during the study by shredding it.

If you have questions or concerns regarding my study, please contact me at smith.lori@husky.neu.edu. If you are willing for teachers in your district to participate in my study, please indicate by signing below or please write a letter of support. Thanks for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Lori A. Smith
Appendix B
Principal Letter

Dear Principal __________,

As you know, I am currently a teacher at your school, Ames Elementary, and have worked there with you as a teacher for 10 years. I also am a graduate student in Northeastern University’s Doctor of Education program, and I am currently in the early stages of my dissertation work. Dissertations in the Ed.D. program are based on active, relevant problems of practice. Dissertations frequently occur at a research site in which the researcher is currently working. I have identified Ames as a potential research site because I was a part of the initial implementation of the PLC model there and have watched its evolution since its infancy, before the Race to the Top initiative. I am asking for your permission to conduct this qualitative, case study at your school.

The study will be guided by the following research questions: How do teachers describe the purpose of professional learning communities? What are teacher perceptions of professional learning communities at Ames Elementary? How do teacher perceptions of professional learning communities affect the implementation of PLCs at Ames Elementary? I intend to interview (5-7) teachers from Ames Elementary to gather their perspectives and experiences concerning the current PLC model at that school. I will also conduct observations of PLCs and collect related artifacts and documents.

Permission and Recruitment Procedures
On August 5, 2015, I met with our Superintendent to describe the study procedures and to gain his approval to conduct the study. He gave me his formal permission to proceed with my study after your approval. After IRB approval, I would like to meet with you, to gain your approval to conduct my study at Ames. With your approval, I will also ask for a list of teacher email addresses. After one of our faculty meetings, with your approval, I would like to give a brief scripted speech alerting the teachers to the fact that I will be sending out a recruitment email on (date to be determined). I will then email all teachers at Ames, asking them to participate. I will accept between 5-7 teachers to participate in the study. It is my hope to include one teacher per grade level. After teachers have been selected, I will email teachers to set up a private place of their choosing for the initial interview and to sign the consent form (Appendix E).

Data Collection Procedures
The first interview (Appendix F) will focus on building rapport, gaining background information on the subjects, and concluding with their assessment of how they perceive school culture in relation to PLCs. This interview will last for no longer than one hour. The second interview (Appendix F) will focus on the primary research questions listed in this letter. Once I identify common themes across the data after my initial analysis, a written survey, based on those themes, will be administered in order to glean a more precise picture of the teachers as I strive to draw final conclusions. I will also, with the teachers permission, observe a PLC meeting during real time as it occurs, making note of my observations with field notes.
I will collect any pertinent artifacts and documents related to PLCs from you throughout the duration of this study. The documents will be an additional source of data that is utilized to provide a complete picture of the PLC process at Ames Elementary.

I will have teachers sign the consent form at the first interview. Interviews would take place in the late fall, early winter and would be conducted at a time and place most convenient to each participant. The interviews will in no way disrupt the education of students. I plan to share the results of the study with the teachers, the superintendent and yourself upon its completion.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

The information from all data collection activities will be analyzed solely by the researcher looking to understand the phenomenon being observed. The respondents will be fully informed of the nature of the research study and the fact that information obtained from the interviews, questionnaires, and observations will be utilized in a study which can and will benefit them in the long term. The validity of the study depends largely on the respondents’ consent to participate in this study. The respondents will also be informed that they are free to withdraw from the study at any time, regardless of having given their consent and having started the interview process. All promises made to the respondents will be honored. Each respondent will be informed that their interviews will be reported anonymously. Each respondent will be identified by numbers, letters, or symbols during the study. There will be nothing utilized by the researcher that will connect their responses with their names. Each of the respondents will be informed of this practice. All information will be kept by the researcher for one year after the conclusion of the study, and only the researcher will have access to that material. After the one year timeline has passed, the researcher will destroy all data incurred during the study by shredding it.

If you have questions or concerns regarding my study, please contact me at smith.lori@husky.neu.edu. If you are willing for teachers in your school to participate in my study, please indicate by signing below or please write a letter of support. Thanks for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Lori A. Smith
Appendix C
Teacher Recruitment Speech

This speech is designed to make teachers aware of an email from me concerning the recruitment of teachers for this study. The necessity of this speech is dictated by the large volume of emails that teachers in the school receive on a daily basis. Many teachers delete emails that they deem unnecessary without opening them. I want to ensure that teachers are aware that a recruitment email will be coming directly from me. This speech will be given at one of our bimonthly faculty meetings after I gain IRB approval to move forward with my research.

The researcher will state:

Good afternoon. My name is Lori Smith and I am currently a scholar practitioner at Northeastern University. I have been working on my doctoral degree in education and am currently beginning the research phase of my dissertation. I want to let you know that I will be sending out an email on, (date to be determined) in order to request teacher participation in my study, and to explain the purpose of the study as well as the details of what the study entails regarding your participation. I would greatly appreciate any assistance that you could give me in this study. Thank you for your time.
Appendix D
Teacher Recruitment Letter (E-mail)

Dear Colleagues:

My name is Lori Smith and I am a doctoral candidate in the College of Professional Studies at Northeastern University as well as a third grade teacher here at our school. As part of my dissertation research, I am conducting a study about how teachers construct their perception of professional learning communities and how those experiences are articulated by, you, the teachers. It is my hope, by utilizing your insight, to develop a plan that will ensure the successful implementation of the professional learning community in the future.

In order to gather data concerning this research, I am inviting you to participate in my study. As educators, I am inviting you to provide vital insight as to how you have constructed your perception of the professional learning community here at our school. At this time, I am simply looking for those individuals who are interested in participating in this study. Please be aware that agreeing or not agreeing to this study will have absolutely no reflection upon your work in this school, or as a teacher within this district whatsoever. Your participation in this study will be completely confidential. No names or any other personal information will be used in this study. Only the researchers in this study will see the information about you. Northeastern's Institutional Review Board will be privy to the information about you, but only to ensure that your rights within the study are being followed. You may withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences.

If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to take part in two interviews that will be approximately 45-60 minutes long. In the first interview I will get to know you and learn how you perceive the school culture in relation to PLCs. The second interview will consist of questions designed to focus on teacher perception of PLCs. There will also be a brief written follow-up survey electronically delivered to you after the second interview. It should take approximately 15-20 minutes to complete. In addition, I may observe your team during a regularly scheduled PLC meeting one to two times for the 45 minute duration of the meeting. The team will not be privy to the fact that you are part of this study.

Please respond via email to smith.lori@husky.neu.edu if you are interested or have any other questions. Thank you in advance for you assistance in this matter.

Sincerely,

Lori A. Smith
Appendix E
Consent Form for Teachers

1 Format for Signed Informed Consent Document-Teachers

Northeastern University, Department
Name of Investigator(s): [Dr. Corliss Brown Thompson, principal investigator, and Lori Smith, researcher]
Title of Project: Professional Learning Communities and Teacher Perception: Understanding the Effects Teacher Perception on the Implementation Process

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

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
We are asking you to be in this study because you are a teacher at Ames Elementary who currently participates in a professional learning community.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this qualitative study is to identify and then examine how teachers construct their perception of professional learning communities and how those experiences articulated by the teachers can help to provide a plan that will ensure the successful implementation of the professional learning community in the future. By identifying those areas that are problematic for educators, it is my, Lori Smith, student researcher’s, goal to be able to provide administrators, districts, and states with the necessary information to help them plan for the successful implementation of the professional learning community model.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to take part in two interviews that will be approximately 45-60 minutes long. In the first interview I will get to know you and learn how you perceive the school culture in relation to PLCs. The second interview will consist of questions designed to focus on teacher perception of PLCs. There will also be a brief written follow-up survey electronically delivered to you after the second interview. It should take approximately 15-20 minutes to complete.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
The interviews can take place, somewhere private and quiet, wherever you feel most comfortable, on or off site. The two interviews will take no longer than 45-60 minutes. The electronic survey will take 15-20 minutes. Your completed participation in the study will take no longer than 3 hours.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
Because this study will be conducted at the school where you are teaching, you may feel uncomfortable discussing issues related to PLCs. In order to minimize discomfort, the principal will not know that you are participating in the study, and you may choose to stop your participation at any time.
Will I benefit by being in this research?
There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in this study. However, the information learned from this study may help the administrators, district, and state. They could, however, utilize the thoughts and feelings that the teachers expressed in this thesis to inform their decisions as they seek to implement and sustain PLCs.

Who will see the information about me?
Your part in this study will be completely confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. The Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board will also be privy to the information but this is only to ensure that your rights within the study are being followed. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being part of this project. The school and participants will only be labeled by using pseudonyms.

If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?
There are no other options if you do not want to participate in the interviews.

What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?
No harm is possible in this study.

Can I stop my participation in this study?
Participation in the interview and survey is entirely voluntary and there are no known or anticipated risks to participation in this study. You may decline to answer any of the questions you do not wish to answer. Further, you may decline to withdraw from this study at any time, without any negative consequences, simply by letting me know your decision.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact the person mainly responsible for the research, Lori Smith. You can reach her by email at smith.lori@husky.neu.edu or by telephone at 302-983-3582. You can also contact the principal investigator, Dr. Corliss Brown Thompson through email at co.brown@neu.edu or call 857.303.9486.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?
You will receive a ten dollar gift certificate to WaWa for your time.

Will it cost me anything to participate?
There is no cost to you to participate in this study.

Is there anything else I need to know?
There is no other information that you need to know.

I agree to [have my child] take part in this research.

Signature of person [parent] agreeing to take part  Date

Printed name of person above
Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent ____________________________

Date

Printed name of person above

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Appendix F
Teacher Interview Guides
First Interview Guide

Demographic Information

Name______________________________   Grade level/subject___________
# of years teaching ________      Age range ___20-34 ___35-49 __50+
Gender_______         Pseudonym ________________

Introduction/Background (Researcher States the following):
Hello and thank you so much for agreeing to be a part of this research study. The purpose of this study is to identify and then examine how teachers construct their perception of professional learning communities and how those experiences articulated by the teachers can help to provide a plan that will ensure the successful implementation of the professional learning community in the future. In this first interview, I will ask you several questions that will allow me to get to know you better and then I will ask you questions designed to help me understand how you perceive school culture in relation to PLCs. I will be using this audio recording device to capture your thoughts if that is okay with you. Do you have any questions? Are you ready to begin?

1. Can you tell me a little bit about how you decided to get into the teaching profession?
2. Can you tell me a little bit about who you are as a teacher?
3. How would you best describe your learning style?
4. When I mention the topic of workplace culture, what does that mean to you?
5. How would you describe the culture here?
6. How, if at all, does the school culture relate to the PLC model?

We are now at the end of the first interview. I would like to thank you for your time. Your thoughts and comments are appreciated. You will be provided with a rough draft of this transcript and you are welcome to review it and add anything else that you feel necessary.
Second Interview Guide

Demographic Information

Name______________________________   Grade level/subject___________
# of years teaching ________      Age range ___20-34 ___35-49 __50+
Gender_______         Pseudonym ________________

Introduction (Researcher States the following):
Hello and thank you so much for agreeing to be a part of this research study. The purpose of this study is to identify and then examine how teachers construct their perception of professional learning communities and how those experiences articulated by the teachers can help to provide a plan that will ensure the successful implementation of the professional learning community in the future. In this interview, I will ask you several questions that will allow me to gather the information I need for my research study. I will be using this audio recording device to capture your thoughts if that is okay with you. Do you have any questions? Are you ready to begin?

RQ 1: How do teachers describe the purpose of professional learning communities?

1. In your own words, can you please tell me what a professional learning community is?
   Follow-up: I will confirm their response by giving DuFour’s definition of what a constitutes a professional learning community,”...it is an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for children they serve” (DuFour et al., 2006). What is your perspective on this definition?

2. How did you first become aware of the professional learning community model?
   Follow-up: Can you tell me about any training/professional development that you have been a part of that was designed to increase your understanding of the professional learning community model?

3. Have you ever been part of a professional learning community in any other school before your employment at Ames Elementary? If so, can you please describe your experience.

4. In your own words, what do you believe the purpose of the professional learning community is?

5. Ideally, what should the purpose of a professional learning community be?

RQ 2: What are teacher perceptions of professional learning communities at Ames Elementary?
1. In your own words, what do you believe is the purpose of professional learning communities here at Ames Elementary?

2. As a part of the professional learning community process, do you feel that the utilization of the professional learning community enhances your growth as an educator? Why or why not? Do you believe that the PLC process increases student achievement at Ames Elementary? Why or why not?

3. When reflecting on your experience as part of a grade-level team that participates weekly in the professional learning community process, what is your perception of the way that your team views the professional learning community process?

4. How you feel that the utilization of the PLC model supports the school reform goal of positively increasing student achievement? What are its strengths and what are its weaknesses?

5. When reflecting upon the implementation of PLCs, do you think that the administration supports and fosters a trusting, caring collaborative community here at Ames Elementary? Why or why not?

6. When I mention the phrase collaborative mentoring, what does it mean to you?

   Follow-up: I will confirm their response by giving Mullen’s (2005) definition of what a constitutes a collaborative community, “…it is a professional collegiate partnership that contributes to the growth of all partners” (p. 187).

   How, if at all, do you think that the PLC model at Ames aligns with Mullen’s definition?

We are now at the end of the interview. I would like to thank you for your time. Your thoughts and comments are appreciated. You will be provided with a rough draft of this transcript and you are welcome to review it and add anything else that you feel necessary.

********************************************************************************

RQ3: How do teacher perceptions of professional learning communities affect professional learning communities at Ames Elementary?
Appendix G
Administrator Recruitment Letter

Dear Principal ____________:

My name is Lori Smith and I am a doctoral candidate in the College of Professional Studies at Northeastern University as well as a third grade teacher here at our school. As part of my dissertation research, I am conducting a study about how teachers construct their perception of professional learning communities and how those experiences are articulated by, you, the teachers. It is my hope, that by also utilizing your insight, to develop a plan that will ensure the successful implementation of the professional learning community in the future.

In order to gather data concerning this research, I am inviting you to participate in my study. As educators, I am inviting you to provide vital insight as to how you have constructed your perception of the professional learning community here at our school. Please be aware that agreeing or not agreeing to this study will have absolutely no reflection upon your work in this school, or as a principal within this district whatsoever. Your participation in this study will be completely confidential. No names or any other personal information will be used in this study. Only the researchers in this study will see the information about you. Northeastern’s Institutional Review Board will be privy to the information about you, but only to ensure that your rights within the study are being followed. You may withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences.

If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to take part in one interview that will be approximately 60 minutes long. In the first interview I will get to know you and learn how you perceive PLCs are utilized at your school. There will also be questions designed to focus on how you intend for your teachers to perceive PLCs. Your teachers will not be privy to the fact that you are part of this study.

Please respond via email to smith.lori@husky.neu.edu if you are interested or have any other questions. Thank you in advance for your assistance in this matter.

Sincerely,

Lori A. Smith
Appendix H
Consent Form for the Administrator

Northeastern University, Department
Name of Investigator(s): [Dr. Corliss Brown Thompson, principal investigator, and Lori Smith, researcher]
Title of Project: Professional Learning Communities and Teacher Perception: Understanding the Effects Teacher Perception on the Implementation Process

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

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
We are asking you to be in this study because you are an administrator at Ames Elementary who currently participates in a professional learning community.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this qualitative study is to identify and then examine how teachers construct their perception of professional learning communities and how those experiences articulated by the teachers can help to provide a plan that will ensure the successful implementation of the professional learning community in the future. By identifying those areas that are problematic for educators, it is my, Lori Smith, student researcher’s, goal to be able to provide administrators, districts, and states with the necessary information to help them plan for the successful implementation of the professional learning community model.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to take part in a single interview that will be approximately 60 minutes long. During the first part of the interview I will get to know you as the administrator of Ames Elementary. The second part of the interview will consist of questions designed to focus on your perception of PLCs and your role as the administrator of a school that utilizes PLCs.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
The interview can take place, somewhere private and quiet, wherever you feel most comfortable, on or off site. The interview will take no longer than 60 minutes. Your completed participation in the study will take no longer than 1 hour.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
Because this study will be conducted at the school where you are the administrator, you may feel uncomfortable discussing issues related to PLCs. In order to minimize discomfort, the staff will not know that you are participating in the study, and you may choose to stop your participation at any time.

Will I benefit by being in this research?
There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in this study. However, the information learned from this study may help the administrators, district, and state. They could, however, utilize the thoughts and feelings that you and the teachers expressed in this thesis to inform their decisions as they seek to implement and sustain PLCs.

Who will see the information about me?
Your part in this study will be completely confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. The Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board will also be privy to the information but this is only to ensure that your rights within the study are being followed. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being part of this project. The school and participants will only be labeled by using pseudonyms.

If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?
There are no other options if you do not want to participate in the interviews.

What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?
No harm is possible in this study.

Can I stop my participation in this study?
Participation in the interview and survey is entirely voluntary and there are no known or anticipated risks to participation in this study. You may decline to answer any of the questions you do not wish to answer. Further, you may decline to withdraw from this study at any time, without any negative consequences, simply by letting me know your decision.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact the person mainly responsible for the research, Lori Smith. You can reach e by email at smith.lori@husky.neu.edu or by telephone at 302-983-3582. You can also contact the principal investigator, Dr. Corliss Brown Thompson through email at co.brown@neu.edu or call 857.303.9486.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?
You will receive a ten dollar gift certificate to WaWa for your time.

Will it cost me anything to participate?
There is no cost to you to participate in this study.

Is there anything else I need to know?
There is no other information that you need to know.

I agree to [have my child] take part in this research.

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Appendix I
Principal Interview Guide

Demographic Information

Name______________________________   Educator Role _________________

# of years ________         Age range ___20-34 ___35-49 __50+

Gender_______                 Pseudonym ___________ _____

Introduction/Background (Researcher States the following):

Hello and thank you so much for agreeing to be a part of this research study. The purpose of this study is to identify and then examine how teachers construct their perception of professional learning communities and how those experiences articulated by the teachers can help to provide a plan that will ensure the successful implementation of the professional learning community in the future. As part of this study, your role in the PLC process will also enable me to gather a deeper understanding of that teacher perception. During this interview, I will ask you several questions that will allow me to get to know you better and then I will ask you questions designed to help me understand how you perceive school culture in relation to PLCs. I will be using this audio recording device to capture your thoughts if that is okay with you. Do you have any questions? Are you ready to begin?

1. Can you tell me a little bit about how you decided to get into the education profession?
2. Can you tell me a little bit about who you are as a principal?
3. How long have you been part of the administrative team at Ames Elementary?
4. From your perspective, describe the ideal professional development/support for teachers.
5. From your perspective, describe the ideal PLC.
6. What do you believe the purpose is of PLCs?
7. Why do you believe this is the purpose/how did you come to your thoughts on PLCs and professional development for teachers?
8. What training, if any, have you had concerning the implementation and sustainability of PLCs?
9. What is your perception of how PLCs are used at Ames Elementary?
10. What is your role as the administrator in the PLC process?
11. What are your expectations for the implementation of the PLC model?
   Follow-up: What are your expectations for the sustaining the PLC model at Ames Elementary?
12. How you feel that the utilization of the PLC model supports the school reform goal of positively increasing student achievement? What are its strengths and what are its weaknesses?
13. When I mention the phrase collaborative mentoring, what does it mean to you?
Follow-up: I will confirm their response by giving Mullen’s (2005) definition of what constitutes a collaborative community, “…it is a professional collegiate partnership that contributes to the growth of all partners” (p. 187).

How, if at all, do you think that the PLC model at Ames aligns with Mullen’s definition?

14. How do you intend for your teachers to perceive PLCs? What do you hope they take-away from the experience?

15. How do you support new teachers when they enter the school?

Follow-up: Do you offer continued professional development around the utilization of PLCs for your current staff?

We are now at the end of the interview. I would like to thank you for your time. Your thoughts and comments are appreciated. You will be provided with a rough draft of this transcript and you are welcome to review it and add anything else that you feel necessary.