THE PRINCIPAL'S ROLE IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY COMPONENTS IN SELECTED MISSOURI EXEMPLARY PLC SCHOOLS

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MISSOURI EXEMPLARY PLC SCHOOLS

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DEDICATION

I would like to thank my wife, Patty Pottorff, and my children, Stacia and Thomas, for keeping me on track and ensuring I completed this dissertation. You have been so understanding of my time needed to complete the work. I know this has been a long journey, but I hope you will find the wait was worth it.

I would also like to dedicate this to the memory of my parents. They always believed that we, their children, could do anything we set our minds to. I know they would have been supportive of this endeavor and would have been proud of my accomplishments.
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain understanding of the extent to which schools designated as exemplary by the Missouri Professional Learning Communities Program have implemented the components of a PLC as presented in the literature. Purposeful sampling was utilized to select five schools whose principals participated in individual interviews and whose PLC leadership teams participated in focus group interviews. Interview questions were open-ended to allow for more detailed input and for additional insights from participants.

The research questions focused on the extent to which the schools had implemented the components of PLCs, what the principal’s role was in that implementation, and the extent the principal utilized transformational leadership in leading the PLC program. The findings included data from interviews with five principals and the leadership teams of their buildings. The principals and leadership teams indicated that the components of the PLC process were implemented in each school, though at varying degrees, and that the principal played an important role in the implementation of the PLC program in each building. Finally, data suggested transformational leadership played an important role in the leadership styles of the principals of the study.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

School improvement initiatives have taken many forms since the beginnings of K-12 public education in the United States. Professional leaning communities (PLCs) found their start during the 1990s and have become a popular answer to increased student achievement and faculty satisfaction (Bullough, 2007; DuFour, 2004; Padwad & Dixit, 2008; Servage, 2009; Thompson, Gregg, & Niska, 2004). The PLC movement has grown exponentially since its beginnings and has produced such impressive results that Schmoker (2005) concluded, “The use of PLCs is the best, least expensive, most professionally rewarding way to improve schools” (p. 137).

The PLC movement can trace its beginnings to Senge’s work during the 1990s in regard to the learning organization in business and later in schools (Hipp, & Huffman, 2003; Hipp et al., 2003; Hord, Meehan, Orletsky, & Satte, 1999; Huffman, & Hipp, 2000; Hughes, & Kritsonis, 2006; Meehan, Olentsky, & Satte, 1997; Senge, 2006). Senge encouraged work places where teams of employees worked collaboratively with the same vision and goals in mind, producing better products (Hord et al., 1999).

DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour (2005b) posited “students would be better served if educators embraced learning rather than teaching as the mission of their school” (p. 5). This concept of focusing on learning is the foundation of all other work done in PLCs, but the learning is applied to all levels of the school, including teachers and administrators (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker., 2008; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Eaker &
Professional learning communities, when fully implemented, have several components that come together to complete the work needed to ensure learning by all students. Some of the most important components of a PLC include: shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application of learning, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice (Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Hipp et al., 2003; Hord, 1997; Hord et al., 1999, Huffman & Hipp, 2000; Huffman, 2001; Meehan et al., 1997; Morrissey, 2000), and ensuring students learn, creating a culture of collaboration, and focusing on results (DuFour, 2004; DuFour, 2007; DuFour et al., 2008; DuFour and Eaker, 1998; Hughes & Kritsonis, 2006). Additionally, celebrations of big and small successes (Hord & Sommers, 2008) and sustainability of the PLC (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008; Roberts & Pruitt, 2009) are important for the success of the learning community.

While shared leadership is an extremely important component of any PLC, the role of the principal is vital for success (Cranston, 2009; DuFour et al, 2008; DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Hord and Sommers (2008) argued “one of the roles of the principal is that of the change agent” (p. 38) and “the principal is the key to whether and if a school develops a community of learning professionals” (p. 39). The principal must be a cheerleader at times to keep morale up during the arduous work of forming a PLC, must be a task-master at times to keep focus where it needs to be, and must be a model for her
staff and faculty of how the PLC should work for better learning for all stakeholders (DuFour & Eaker; Eaker & Keating, 2012; Hord & Sommers).

Sustainability of the PLC in any school is vital because school administrators and teachers leave and the PLC must survive beyond their tenure with the school (DuFour et al., 2008; Roberts & Pruitt, 2009). Hampton (2010) posited leaders must use transformational leadership to ensure the PLC continues after he is gone. The theory of transformational leadership is based on the premise that a leader should help others in his organization develop leadership skills for the benefit of the employee and the larger organization (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Crowley, 2011; Gumusluoglu & Ilsev, 2009; Kendrick, 2011). The transformational leader encourages employees to be innovative in thought (Gumusluoglu & Ilsev; Kendrick), makes celebration a regular part of the day (Crowley), and encourages shared vision and goals for the betterment of the entire organization (Bass & Steidlmeier).

Statement of the Problem

In the over twenty years since the inception of professional learning communities, a great deal of research has surfaced in regards to the effectiveness of the concept. Researchers such as Hord (1997) and DuFour (2004 & 2007) have completed extensive studies throughout the United States; however, as of 2014 the Missouri Professional Learning Communities program has only been in existence for a little over ten years. While some researchers have conducted studies of the Missouri program, the majority of research has been centered on the effectiveness of the Missouri program in regards to student achievement and school effectiveness.
The purpose of this study was to determine to what extent Missouri Exemplary Schools implemented the components of the PLC movement and what the role of the principal or building level administrator was in regards to the implementation of the PLC program. Much of the research of PLCs has emphasized the principal in the PLC setting, but recent research has emphasized the importance even more. Turner, Barling, Epitropaki, Butcher, and Milner (2002) concluded “transformational leaders communicate a collective vision and inspire followers to look beyond their self-interests for the good of the group” (p. 305). The purpose of this study was also to determine the extent to which the principals of the exemplary schools operated as transformational leaders in the context of the PLC program.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this study:

1. To what extent do Missouri exemplary schools implement the components of effective professional learning communities as described by leadership teams and principals?

2. How do members of leadership teams and principals describe the principal’s role in regard to implementation of the Missouri PLC program?

3. How is transformational leadership exhibited by principals of Missouri exemplary PLC schools?

Conceptual Underpinnings

This study was guided by two conceptual underpinnings. The first is the concept of the professional learning community, specifically as presented by the work of Hord
and her associates and DuFour and his associates. The researcher used this concept to identify how schools meet the PLC criteria and to what extent the components of PLCs are implemented in the schools studied.

The second conceptual underpinning theory of this study is that of transformational leadership (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Crowley, 2011). The focus was on to what extent principals in the schools studied exhibited the traits of a transformational leader, including how the principal helps others in the organization develop leadership skills for the benefit of the employee and the larger organization (Bass & Steidlmeier; Crowley; Gumusluoglu & Ilsev, 2009; Kendrick, 2011), encourages employees to be innovative in thought (Gumusluoglu & Ilsev; Kendrick), makes celebration a regular part of the day (Crowley), and encourages shared vision and goals for the betterment of the entire organization (Bass & Steidlmeier).

Limitations of the Study

The scope of this study describes how the components of professional learning communities are implemented in six Missouri exemplary PLC schools. The limitations of this study were relevant to Missouri exemplary PLC schools and the principals of these schools. They are indicated as follows:

1. This study is limited to responses concerning Missouri exemplary schools as identified by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Missouri PLC Program.

2. Because the study was conducted in regards to a single state’s PLC program, the information can only be generalized in relation to Missouri PLC schools.
3. The accuracy of information was limited to the responses and truthfulness of those interviewed.

4. It was assumed that responses were based upon respondent’s observations and experiences while implementing the Missouri PLC program.

5. The researcher is a retired Missouri superintendent who was instrumental in implementing the Missouri PLC program at one of his former schools and may be predisposed to belief as to what extent the PLC components are implemented under the Missouri PLC program.

Definition of Key Terms

The following is a list of common terms used throughout this study, defined as follows:

Collective learning. A process in which teachers and administrators work collaboratively to continuously learn in order to better serve students and ensure student learning is taking place. The attributes of collective learning include, “shared information and dialogue; collaboration and problem solving; and application of knowledge, skills, and strategies” (Hipp & Huffman, 2003, p. 7).

Culture of collaboration. A culture that encourages teachers and administrators to learn and work together, eliminating the isolation often found in the public school setting.

Leadership Team. A team that helps plan the initial implementation of the program, collects data and feedback to help improve practices, monitors collaborative teams, ensures appropriate professional development is utilized, and identifies and
provides the support collaborative teams need to ensure all students learn (MO PLC Implementation Rubric, 2012).

Missouri exemplary PLC schools. Schools recognized by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education via the Missouri PLC Project for the exceptional “implementation of the professional learning community process resulting in improved student achievement in their schools” (Exemplary Schools, 2014, p. 1)

Missouri Professional Learning Communities Program. The Missouri model of professional learning communities was implemented in 2003 “and evolved from the Missouri Accelerated Schools Project” (Missouri Professional Learning Communities/History, 2014). The program offers services through the Missouri Regional Professional Development Centers (RPDCs), located in nine regions around the state (Missouri Professional Learning Communities/History).

Professional learning community. “an ongoing process used to establish a school wide culture that develops teacher leadership explicitly focused on building and sustaining school improvement efforts” (The Center, 2014, ¶ 1).

Shared leadership. A decision making model that encourages employees from all levels of an organization to participate and lead when their expertise is warranted.

Transformational leadership. A leadership style that encourages followers to develop their leadership skills, celebrates success, and encourages innovation in followers.
Design of the Study

A qualitative design model was chosen for this study. Through interviews and observations, the researcher recorded data as it occurred and provided data through the personal lens of the researcher (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1998). Interview questions were presented in an open-ended format, which allowed the researcher to respond to statements presented by the subjects and adjust the questions as needed (Merriam). An advantage of qualitative research is that it is conducted “in the natural setting” (Creswell, p. 181), so respondents may feel more comfortable and willing to respond the questions presented to them.

Data were collected through a series of interviews with principals and leadership teams of five schools designated by the Missouri PLC project as exemplary schools implementing the Missouri PLC model and were analyzed and presented in a qualitative manner as proposed by Merriam (1998). The purpose of the interviews was to determine to what extent the exemplary schools implemented the components of effective PLCs as determined by the extensive body of research available, to determine the principal’s role in the implementation of the PLC in each school, and to determine the extent the principal utilized the transformational leadership style.

Design Controls

According to Creswell (2003) researchers should relate the steps taken “in their studies to check for accuracy and credibility of their findings” (p. 195). To convey reliability and validate the accuracy of the findings, this study utilized three of the “strategies available to check the accuracy of the findings” (Creswell, p. 196). The
strategies used in this study were as follows: using “rich, thick description to convey the findings,” clarifying “the bias the researcher brings to the study,” and presenting “negative or discrepant information that runs counter to the themes” of the study (Creswell, p. 196).

Summary

Professional learning communities have been proven to be an extremely effective tool for increasing student achievement and establishing a more collaborative and innovative work place for teachers and administrators. Since the 1990s, extensive research has proven PLCs produce positive results when implemented appropriately and has posited the principal is vital to the success of any PLC. Through transformational leadership, principals create an atmosphere of shared leadership, celebration, and innovation. This study was designed purposefully to examine schools designated as “Exemplary” by the Missouri PLC Program and the principal’s role in implementation of the program.

This chapter provided the background and purpose of the study as well as an overview of the PLC movement in America’s public schools. Chapter Two is a review of related literature relevant to the present study, and Chapter Three provides the research design and methodology undertaken for the study. Chapter Four presents an analysis of the data collected, and Chapter Five provides the findings, conclusions, implications, and areas for future study.
CHAPTER TWO
A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In the world of K-12 education, school improvement initiatives are a constant. Currently, the concept of the professional learning community (PLC) is in vogue with school improvement leaders (Bullough, 2007; Eaker & Keating, 2012; Elbourtsy & Bratt, 2010; Leclerc, Dumouchel, & Sallafranque-St-Louis, 2012; Padwad & Dixit, 2008; Servage, 2009). The focus of the PLC movement is on how much students have learned, as opposed to what a teacher can get taught in a certain amount of time (DuFour, 2004; DuFour, 2007; Hipp et al., 2003; Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Hord, 1997; Hughes & Kritsonis, 2006; Mason, 2003; Morrissey, 2000). This focus on learning can be achieved when schools create an environment of collaboration, shared leadership, shared vision and values, collective learning and application of learning by teachers, supportive conditions, shared personal practice, and a focus on results through analysis of data (DuFour, 2004; DuFour, 2007; Eaker and Keating, 2012; Hord, 1997; Hord and Sommers, 2008; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Biddle (2002) concluded “creating a learning community…requires a school’s culture to change significantly” (p. 3) and “if schools are to be significantly more effective they must break from the industrial model upon which they were created and embrace a new model that enables them to function as professional learning communities” (p. 4). The purpose of this chapter is to present a review of the literature in regard to the PLC movement. I will discuss a brief background of school improvement initiatives, and I will also present an overview of the PLC
movement and the principal’s role in the creation of a professional learning community in his or her school.

Background of School Improvement Initiatives

PLCs are the current trend in school improvement, but the push to improve education in America has long been a popular topic with educators and those who study education. Bullough (2007) examined the role of school improvement as researched during the Eight-Year Study conducted for twelve years from 1930-1942. The focus of the study was to create connections between the high school and the college and to encourage experimentation and exploration by teachers (Bullough). The Eight-Year Study found that reform in education was equal to better teacher education and capacity building within the school for better informed teachers. The study also concluded that reform requires the teacher to become a researcher and that sustained reform requires trust between teachers and strong relationships between teachers and students (Bullough). Many of the issues of school reform that have influenced more recent movements were found in the conclusions of the Eight-Year Study (Bullough).

More recent school improvement initiatives have been concentrated on specific areas of the educational setting. Research conducted during the 1960s “focused primarily on ‘generic’ teaching skills, such as allocating class time, providing clear classroom demonstrations, assessing student comprehension during lectures, maintaining attention and grouping students” (American Education Research Association, 2005, p. 1). According to Meehan et al. (1997), during the 1970’s, “the targets for reform efforts moved to students through efforts such as minimum competency tests and increased
graduation requirements” (p. 1). During the 1980’s, effective school research and *A Nation at Risk* shifted the focus to the school itself, to the principal as the educational leader of the school, and to the impact the principal could have on school improvement (Hord et al., 1999; Meehan et al., 1997). According to DuFour and Eaker (1998), the reforms offered by this movement “simply called for an intensification of existing practices. They contained no new ideas” (p. 3).

**Background of Professional Learning Communities**

Although most of the school improvement initiatives of the 1980’s focused on the influence of the principal on student performance, during the early 1980’s, Little (1981) and Bird & Little (1983) were emphasizing many of the concepts later recognized as the foundations of PLCs. These studies concluded that schools achieved greater improvement when their teachers talked often about the practice of teaching, observed one another teaching, planned teaching together, and taught each other about teaching (Bird & Little; Little).

During the early 1990’s, school reform efforts continued the focus on whole school reform, but many reformers returned to the concept of including the entire community in school reform (Meehan et al., 1997). Berliner and Biddle (1995) argued “literally nothing good will happen in our schools unless the professionals who run those schools make it happen” (p. 336). They recognized that top-down directed change does not work in other professions, so it will not work in education. Educational reform during the later 1990’s and beyond was heavily influenced by the work of Peter Senge in regard to the learning organization in business and later his work in regard to schools as
learning organizations (Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Hipp et al., 2003; Hord et al., 1999; Huffman & Hipp, 2000; Hughes & Kritsonis, 2006; Meehan et al., 1997). According to Hord et al., Senge “promoted the idea of a work environment where employees engaged as teams, developing a shared vision to guide their work, operating collaboratively to produce a better product, and evaluating their output” (p. 1). This work was a cornerstone in later work to establish PLCs. The emphasis on how business utilized collaboration continued, as Schmoker (2005) argued, “other professions understand that collective efforts to improve, sharpen, and refine one’s professional practices have a profound and palpable impact on quality and improvement” (p. 140). Although PLCs emerged during the 1990s, Miller and Kritsonis (2009-2010) concluded PLCs have become “almost a household name among educators of all levels” (p. 1) in recent years.

Components of PLCs

Some of the most extensive work in the study of PLCs and how schools become professional learning communities has been completed by Shirley Hord and her associates during a five year study conducted by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL). Many researchers (Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Hipp et al., 2003; Hord, 1997; Hord et al., 1999, Huffman & Hipp, 2000; Huffman, 2001; Meehan et al., 1997; Morrissey, 2000) have reported the work and findings of this extensive study and have drawn from these findings to illustrate the many aspects required for a school to become a PLC.

While much of the research of what makes a school a professional learning community offers similar language of the many aspects of a PLC, the work of Hord
(1997) offers five dimensions shared by all schools successfully implementing the PLC model (Cowen & Capers, 2000; Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Hipp et al., 2003; Morrissey, 2000). These dimensions of PLCs include: shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application of learning, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice.

Another body of extensive work in the study of PLCs and how schools become professional learning communities has been completed by Richard DuFour and his associates. As stated above much of the research conducted in regard to PLCs utilizes similar language to describe the many aspects of a PLC, but DuFour’s work offers three “Big Ideas,” that PLCs should: ensure students learn, create a culture of collaboration, and focus on results (DuFour, 2004; DuFour, 2007; DuFour DuFour, & Eaker, 2008; DuFour and Eaker, 1998; Hughes & Kritsonis, 2006).

One additional component of PLCs is the idea of celebration of the big successes as well as the little ones. According to Eaker and Keating (2012), “we celebrate what we value, and by celebrating, we communicate what we value” (p. 41).

Shared and Supportive Leadership

Unlike the focus of the 1980’s educational reform theories that emphasized the importance of the principal as the educational leader of the school, PLCs emphasize shared leadership focused on learning (Cowen & Capers, 2000; Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Hipp et al., 2003; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Leo & Cowan, 2000; Morrissey, 2000). One administrator cannot meet all the leadership roles needed in a PLC school; the school must have shared leadership (Edvantia, 2005). According to Hord (1997),
a school whose staff is learning together and participating in decisions about its operation requires a campus administrator who can let go of power and his/her own sense of omnipotence and omnicompetence and thereby share the leadership of the school. (p. 9)

Thompson et al. (2004) concluded “educational leaders certainly want and need to develop teacher leaders who will be committed to action and converted into agents of change if they are going to meet the challenges facing educators today” (p. 4). However, shared leadership does not translate to mean the principal is not important in a professional learning community. Hipp et al. argued “the most important element in the development of a professional learning community is the leadership and determination of the principal” (p. 17).

Shared and supportive leadership in a PLC should be seen as more than getting a vote on issues of importance to the organization and should, instead, promote “a multitude of interactions and relationships that build capacity for change” (Huffman & Hipp, 2000, p. 6). Shared leadership in this sense requires members of the organization to be responsible for colleagues’ learning and to take responsibility so all students achieve at a high level (Edvantia, 2005; Morrissey, 2000). If implemented correctly, shared leadership “may help galvanize a school around ambitious goals and establish conditions that support teachers and facilitate student success” (Edvantia, p. 7). Hipp and Huffman (2003) concluded that shared leadership in successful PLCs addressed three critical attributes of the organization, including “nurturing leadership among staff; shared power,
authority and responsibility; and broad-based decision-making for commitment and accountability” (p. 6).

**Shared Values and Vision**

According to Senge (1990), “you cannot have a learning organization without a shared vision” (p. 209). Hord (1997) and Eaker and Keating (2012) agreed that for significant impact, improvement must include the entire faculty in vision, mission and purpose and in determining how the organization will reach the goals. The vision of the organization should create a mental image for all staff members of what is important and should guide all decisions about teaching and learning (Hord, 1997; Hord & Sommers, 2008). Hughes and Kritsonis (2006) and Huffman and Hipp (2000) posit vision should come from each staff member and should be molded into a vision for the organization by careful guidance from the principal through collaborative discussions. Zmuda, Kuklis, and Kline (2004) concluded “the first step for sustained and meaningful improvement in any school is an establishment of common direction and a commitment to sustained effort” (p. 26). Roberts and Pruitt (2009) posited “the characteristic shared values and norms expresses the idea that the members of the professional learning community have reached agreement about the mission of their school and the values and norms that are to shape their behaviors as professionals (p. 8).

Hipp and Huffman (2003) found four critical attributes of shared values and vision within successful PLC schools, including, “espoused values and norms; focus on students; high expectations, and shared vision guides teaching and learning” (p. 7). The
most successful PLC schools are ones that have a clear vision focused on student learning and achievement (Hipp & Huffman; Morrisey, 2000; Thompson & McKelvy, 2007).

Collaboration and Collective Learning & Application of Learning

Hord’s (1997) third dimension of successful PLC programs is the idea that staff members should work collaboratively and learn collectively to better help students in their learning. Berliner and Biddle (1995) proposed this when they concluded “school improvement is more likely to occur when educators at a school are themselves organized into communities of learners” (p. 338). By working collaboratively and emphasizing learning for the teachers, PLC schools are more successful in working with all students (DuFour et al., 2008; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Eaker & Keating, 2012; Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Hord & Sommers, 2008; InPraxis Group Inc., 2006; Lezotte, 2005; Rasberry & Mahajan, 2008). The InPraxis Group Inc. posited what teachers learn is equally as important as what students learn in the PLC setting. According to Hord and Sommers groups of teachers learn more collectively than individuals can learn independently, and “the significant factor here is that the learning and reflection of the professionals is continuous and focuses on students and their benefits” (p. 12).

According to Servage (2008), “the PLC is more than group work….Collaborative teacher learning calls participants to develop a strong sense of community” (p. 64). True collaboration is difficult and often becomes just another thing for teachers to do, but it is “one characteristic that all thriving professional learning communities have in common” (Maximizing the Impact, 2007). Schmoker (2005) concluded collaboration is essential to success in a PLC, because “isolation is the enemy of improvement” (p. 141). DuFour,
DuFour, and Eaker (2008) envisioned collaborative teams which were, “a group of people working together interdependently to achieve a common goal for which they are mutually accountable” (p. 179-180).

Hipp and Huffman (2003) reported five critical attributes of PLC schools in regard to collective learning and application of learning; these attributes were, “shared information and dialogue; collaboration and problem solving; and application of knowledge, skills, and strategies” (p. 7). True change in any school involves learning for all, including the faculty, because students learn more when teachers learn collectively and share information with colleagues (Hipp & Huffman; Hughes & Kritsonis, 2006; Thompson & McKelvy, 2007).

Supportive Conditions

Hord (1997) posited “supportive conditions determine when and where and how the staff regularly comes together as a unit to do the learning, decision making, problem solving, and creative work that characterize a professional learning community” (p. 13). The term supportive conditions refers to the physical setting and structural conditions such as use of time, communication, and professional development processes as well as collegial relationships such as attitudes, vision, group norms, and respect, and these supportive conditions impact all aspects of the PLC (DuFour et al., 2008; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Eaker & Keating, 2012; Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Hord; Huffman & Hipp, 2000; Morrissey, 2000).

Hipp and Huffman (2003) expanded upon this dimension of PLCs by identifying attributes of the structural conditions and the collegial relationships aspects of supportive
conditions. “Collegial relationships include five critical attributes: caring relationships; trust and respect; recognition and celebration; risk taking and a unified effort to embed change” (p. 7). These collegial relationships should be built at all levels of the organization to ensure members are comfortable sharing ideas freely. Structural conditions “include three critical attributes: resources; facilities; and communication systems” (Hipp & Huffman, p. 7). Ensuring these structural conditions are present for all members of the PLC organization is a vital aspect of the school administrator’s job.

Morrissey (2000) concluded “creating supportive conditions is a key to maintaining the growth and development of a community of professional learners” (p. 7).

Shared Personal Practice

Teachers in successful PLC schools have moved away from the traditional model of teaching where teachers are isolated and have chosen to work collaboratively and to share personal practices with their colleagues (InPraxis Group Inc., 2006; Morrissey, 2000). The dimension goes beyond a simple discussion of one’s teaching and is instead an on-going process of peers regularly observing others’ teaching and sharing ideas on how to improve (Hord, 1997). Teachers are encouraged “to interact, provide feedback, and share results of student learning experiences” (Hipp & Huffman, 2003, p. 6). Through shared personal practice, teachers are “sharing failures and mistakes, demonstrating respect and constructively analyzing and criticizing practices and procedures” (InPraxis Group Inc., p. 3).

According to Hipp and Huffman (2003), “the critical attributes in this dimension include: observation and encouragement; shared outcomes of new practice and provide
feedback; and analysis of student work and related practices” (p. 7). Accomplishing these aspects of shared personal practice often requires a shift in paradigms from traditional teacher roles, and because of this, sharing of personal practice is usually the last of the five dimensions an organization will accomplish (Morrissey, 2000).

*Ensure students learn*

Ensuring that all students learn at high levels is a primary focus of the PLC movement (DuFour, 2007; DuFour et al., 2008; Eaker & Keating, 2012; Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Hord & Sommers, 2008). DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour (2005c) argued the sole purpose for schools to exist was “to ensure that all students learn at high levels” (p. 12), and that “we have not fulfilled our fundamental purpose until all students have learned at high levels” (p. 15). To ensure this is achieved, the focus of the school’s discussion must shift from what is taught to what is learned (DuFour, 2007; Hughes & Kritsonis, 2006). Hughes and Kritsonis posited, additionally, that “students learn when teachers learn together” (p. 8); therefore it is essential this focus on learning be seen at all levels of the school. DuFour et al. (2008) agreed that “if all students are to learn at high levels, the adults in the organization must also be continually learning” (p. 18).

DuFour et al. (2008) argued schools must determine what students should learn, monitor learning frequently, offer help to those who are not learning, and offer enrichment to those who have already learned the information. Determining what students need to learn should lead teams to clarifying essential outcomes and will often lead to a reduction in content, so what is being learned is what the district, school, and team feel is important (Eaker & Keating, 2012). “Teacher teams would eliminate
extraneous content from the curriculum, constantly seek ways to teach less but more significant content, at greater depth and in more meaningful ways” (Eaker & Keating, p. 112).

Monitoring what students are learning requires more than the use of summative assessments such as end of the section tests and state and federally mandated tests once a year (DuFour et al., 2008; Eaker & Keating, 2012). According to DuFour et al., “summative assessment is an assessment of learning, a tool to answer the question, ‘Did the student learn by the deadline?’” (p. 202). The difference here is that “a formative assessment is an assessment for learning, a tool used to inform both the teacher and the student about the student’s current level of achievement” (DuFour et al., p. 202). Eaker and Keating concluded, “teams of teachers…develop formative assessments designed to monitor learning on a frequent and timely basis, constantly seeking, student by student, skill by skill, to answer the question, Are our students learning and how do we know?” (p. 112).

The concept of offering help to those who are not learning is an extremely important part of the PLC movement (DuFour, 2007; DuFour et al., 2008; Eaker & Keating, 2012; Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Hughes & Kritsonis, 2006). DuFour (2004) suggested the response to students in need of additional help should be timely to identify students quickly, offered as intervention not remediation of help, offered when the student’s need is discovered, and directive so students do not get to choose to participate. Eaker and Keating concluded PLC schools should “develop a
schoolwide, systematic plan to provide students with additional time, support, or enrichment within the school day” (p. 112).

Some students will learn concepts faster than others. Because of this, PLC schools should “extend and enrich learning when students have already mastered the intended outcomes” (DuFour et al., 2008, p. 18).

Focus on Results

“Virtually all school improvement models contend that schools will become more effective if the right people have access to the right evidence analyzed in the right way and used to inform the right decisions” (Stiggins, 2005, p. 65). DuFour et al. (2008) concluded that “schools will not know whether or not all students are learning unless educators are hungry for evidence that students are acquiring the knowledge, skills, and dispositions deemed most essential to their success” (p. 18). Roberts and Pruitt (2009) concluded data analysis is essential to ensure all students learn, and teachers should collect and collectively analyze formative and summative assessments in order to plan instruction. Reeves (2005) stated, “Accountability systems must focus not only on what students achieve, but also on how the adults in the systems influenced that achievement” (p. 61). Zmuda et al. (2004) concluded “data collection and analysis must be grounded in rich conversations about the information as well as how different people make meaning of the information” (p. 87).

Celebration

In order to sustain focus on the vision and values of the PLC, “celebrations for small efforts or large are definitely in order” (Hord & Sommers, 2008, p. 137). DuFour et
al. (2008) concurred that celebrating small “victories and the people behind them…sustain momentum for change” (p. 426). Celebrations must be “genuine and linked directly to the district or school’s mission, vision, values, and goals” (Eaker & Keating, 2012, p.41). Eaker and Keating further posited, “it is impossible to overstate the importance of frequent, meaningful celebrations for both students and adults” (p. 58) and “we must celebrate at each stage in the journey--every time significant work is successfully completed” (p. 109).

Muhammad (2009) concluded “how schools celebrate learning and those who help students learn says a lot about how much the school values learning” (p. 105) and “positive school cultures…consistently celebrated the things the school valued (p. 106). “Aside from shaping school culture, celebrations of success energize school improvement efforts” (Roberts & Pruitt, 2009, p. 219). Roberts and Pruitt further posited: “Recognition of progress at certain benchmarks refreshes and energizes the staff to continue its efforts. Celebrations should be built into school improvement activities” (p. 220) for many purposes, including measuring progress of benchmarks, motivating members of the team for better achievement, and keeping members of the community focused on the objectives and goals of the PLC program.

The Principal and PLCs

The role of the building principal has changed several times over the past forty years, but the principal’s importance to any successful school improvement initiative is still critical (Cranston, 2009; DuFour et al., 2008; DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Little (1981) recognized the importance of the principal in helping to establish expectations for shared
discussion between teachers and in modeling behavior expected of staff. Hord and Sommers (2008) argued professional learning communities “will not make an impact if the same old processes of change occur in schools, without the important participation of the principal and other campus leaders” (p. 6). The process of becoming a PLC is time consuming and arduous, and school leaders “must gain a deep, rich understanding of what professional learning communities are, how they differ from traditional schools, and how they work” (Eaker & Keating, 2012, p. 8). One major component of creating a PLC in a school is the concept of shared leadership; however, Hord and Sommers concluded “the principal is the identified leader to focus the conversation and the behaviors in the school that will initiate and sustain learning” (p. 96). DuFour et al. concluded, “no successful professional learning community will form” (p. 303) if the principal is not committed to the change needed for the transformation. According to Sparks (2005) “leaders shape conversations by persistently offering their values, intentions, and beliefs to others and by expressing themselves in clear declarative sentences” (p. 157). Leclerc et al. (2012) concluded “leadership from the principal is…a crucial factor” (p. 3) in the successful implementation of a PLC and “to progress their school as a PLC, principals must exercise a leadership that corresponds well with a learning organization” (p. 12).

It is the role of the principal to “motivate and inspire others to do things collectively that perhaps they never thought possible” (Eaker & Keating, 2012, p. 1). Through the leadership of an effective PLC principal, every teacher in the building can be a leader and should take the lead when they have the expertise in the areas being explored by the team (DuFour & Eaker, 2008). Roberts and Pruitt (2009) concluded “if the
principal, who is charged with steering the school through the change process, is unwilling to share leadership with teachers, meaningful and lasting reform cannot be achieved (p. 59).

According to Eason-Watkins (2005) “a proactive principal with a hands-on approach can foster and nurture…a culture that supports and validates a shared and articulated mission, vision, and core values and is focused on continuous improvement and action” (p 193). One of the principal’s roles in regards to shared values and vision is one of a facilitator leading the faculty and staff to create vision for the entire building (Hord & Sommers, 2008; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). A school leader cannot simply declare a vision for the building; this “will not generate the collective energy needed to propel an organization forward” (Huffman & Hipp, p. 8). It is also important for the principal to lead teachers to periodically review and refine the building’s vision and values to keep them relevant to the work being done (Eaker & Keating, 2012).

Another role of the principal in regards to shared values and vision is to demonstrate their use in an ongoing manner, so the teachers know the vision of the building is not “simply framed and displayed in the district office lobby” (Eaker & Keating, 2012). A clearly articulated vision “will focus staff members on how they spend their time, what topics they discuss, and how resources may be distributed” (Hord & Sommers, 2008, p. 10). The principal must consistently communicate with teachers what the building’s vision is and demonstrate how the vision is being used to guide decisions the team makes on a daily basis (Eaker & Keating; Hord & Sommers).
It is vital for the success of a PLC for the principal to be an active participant in the collective learning process (Hord & Sommers, 2008; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). It should be the responsibility of the principal to ensure collaborative teams are doing the work they should and are discussing students and how best to help them learn (Eaker & Keating, 2012; Hord & Sommers).

The principal, along with the central office, plays a major role in creating the supports needed to maintain a professional learning community in his or her building (DuFour et al., 2008; Hord & Sommers, 2008). Principals can directly influence teachers’ time to allow for, “time and opportunities to communicate regularly, plan collectively, problem solve, and learn” (Huffman & Hipp, 2003, p. 12). Additionally, the principal is responsible for keeping the teams focused on student learning, ensuring the teams have the resources they need, and nurturing the team as a whole to help members of the team feel comfortable sharing with the team (Hord & Sommers; Huffman & Hipp).

Fullan (2005) stated that districts and schools working as PLCs “dig deeply into learning...engage in disciplined inquiry and continuous improvement in order to ‘raise the bar’ and ‘close the gap’ of student learning and achievement” (p. 209). The focus on learning must come from all levels of the school and district because it takes leadership from all levels to ensure the focus on learning is maintained (Eaker & Keating, 2012; Hord & Sommers, 2008). Eaker and Keating concluded that “if a district publically declares ensuring high levels of student learning for all students as its core purpose…educators within the district will act in fundamentally different ways” (p. 111). Hord and Sommers emphasized the importance of the administrator’s leadership, stating,
“principals who talk more about learning and instruction for both staff and students create more professional dialogue” (p. 79). Eaker and Keating concurred that “district leaders must guarantee the connection between collaboratively analyzing student learning and the utilization of specific, focused intervention plans to provide students with additional time, support, or enrichment” (p. 127). Schmoker (2005) concluded, “The principal’s job is to monitor, discuss, and support teachers’ progress in achieving higher levels of student learning on both short-term and annual assessments” (p. 147).

Eaker and Keating (2012) stated, “data in and of themselves do not inform. The critical task of district and school leaders is to determine what the data mean” (p. 147). To this end, the principal plays an important role in ensuring teams focus on the data and what the data mean for instruction (DuFour et al., 2008; Eaker & Keating).

In regards to celebration of large and small accomplishments in a PLC, the principal and other leaders play an important role (DuFour et al., 2008, Eaker & Keating, 2012). Eakers and Keating concluded, “effective leaders use the power of frequent and focused celebrations to shape district culture and remind everyone of their purpose, commitments, and priorities” (p. 41). Roberts and Pruitt (2009) concluded effective leaders “recognize those who serve the organization’s objectives” and “publicly acknowledge the achievements of the staff and the students” (p. 221).

The principal’s leadership is vital in all aspects for the success of the PLC. Williams (2006) summarized the principal’s role when he stated,

Leadership of a professional learning community requires that principals:

a) accept and promote teacher competence by providing teachers with
opportunities to lead, b) deviate from the hierarchical model in matters related to teaching and learning, and most importantly, c) maintain the school’s social legitimacy by focusing staff efforts on the improvement of student learning. (p 7)

Sustainability and Transformational Leadership

“It is not enough to establish a professional learning community; measures have to be put in place to ensure that the learning community sustains itself (Roberts & Pruitt, 2009, p. 215). Because school leadership and teachers leave, sustainability of the PLC is extremely important (DuFour et al., 2008; Roberts & Pruitt, 2009). DuFour et al. stated, “Principals who hope to leave a positive legacy in their schools must recognize their effectiveness as leaders will be determined after they have left their schools” (p. 325).

Because of this, Hampton (2010) concluded, “creating a vision of school leadership than involves democratic theory through transformational leadership is an ideal that educational leaders must strive to make a reality” (p. 185-186).

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership can be defined as leadership which causes followers to transcend their self-interests and appeals to the higher needs of organizational members (Bensimon, Neumann & Birnbaum, 1989; Burns, 1978; Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 2000; Yukl, 2006). The transformational leader motivates members of an organization to achieve more than the members expected and elevates members, inspiring more commitment toward the goals of the organization (Leithwood et al.; Yukl). While the transformational leader inspires others to transcend their own self-interests, the leader
also puts the needs of the organization and its members first, creating a setting in which
the needs and goals of the leader and the followers become fused (Bensimon et al.;
Burns). Burns posited the effectiveness of a transformational leader should be measured
by the “significant change that represents the collective or pooled interests of leaders and
followers” (p. 425).

Yukl (2006) offered four types of behaviors the transformational leader can
exhibit. The first of these behaviors is idealized influence, “behavior that arouses strong
follower emotions and identification with the leader” (p. 262). While this is also a
behavior of the charismatic leader, the transformational leader motivates followers with a
deeper purpose than the more superficial purposes of the charismatic leader (Yukl). The
second behavior Yukl attributed to the transformational leader is that of individualized
consideration, “providing support, encouragement, and coaching to followers” (p. 262). Yukl’s
third behavior of a transformational leader is intellectual stimulation; this occurs
when the leader “increases follower awareness of problems and influences followers to
view problems from a new perspective” (p. 262). Through individualized consideration
and intellectual stimulation, the transformational leader seeks to empower followers and
to make them less dependent, creating leaders of those being led (Brown, 2004; Burns,
1978; Yukl).

The last behavior Yukl attributes to the transformational leader is that of
inspirational motivation, “communicating an appealing vision, using symbols to focus
subordinate effort, and modeling appropriate behaviors” (p. 263). Like idealized
influence, inspirational motivation is a behavior found in the charismatic leader, but Yukl
posited that while the transformational leader exhibits some traits of the charismatic leader, charisma alone is not sufficient to make the transformational process happen within an organization.

Burns (1978) argued the transformational leader is concerned with “end-values such as liberty, justice, equality” (p. 426). To achieve these end-values, the leader seeks to raise both the leader and the led to new levels of morality and motivation to achieve more for the organization and to create change for the betterment of the organization (Bensimon et al., 1989; Burns; Leithwood & Duke, 1999; Leithwood et al., 2000; Yukl, 2006).

In his discussion of transformational leadership, Crowley (2011) cites Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs, stating “Maslow emphasized the importance of ‘self actualization,’ a process of growing and developing as a person to maximize one’s full human potential” (p. 2). To help employees reach their full human potential, transformational leaders empower others to develop their leadership skills for the good of all members of the group (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Crowley; Gumusluoglu & Ilsev, 2009; Kendrick, 2011; Turner et al., 2002).

Transformational leadership effects individuals as well as organizations as a whole and encourages innovation and creativity (Gumusluoglu & Ilsev, 2009; Kendrick, 2011). According to Crowley (2011), “making time to honor and acknowledge people for their effort and contributions is…” important for success and is a major attribute of the transformational leader. Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) posited that transformational leaders provide “followers with challenges and meaning for engaging in shared goals and
undertakings (p. 188) and “are inwardly and outwardly concerned about the good that can be achieved for the group…for which they feel responsible” (p. 188).

Crowley (2011) in his analysis of what makes a good place to work, as reflected in “Fortune” magazine, states,

When announcing the 2010 best employers, Fortune included brief anecdotes about each company providing a small insight into what makes employees at these organizations so committed. What becomes clear from the reading of these is that the great places to work share five common traits:

1. They see employees as the heart of the company and place great focus on worker satisfaction and retention.
2. They’re committed to deep and ongoing development and mentoring.
3. Successes and people are routinely celebrated.
4. The firms reinforce the benefits of collaboration and team success.
5. They communicate effectively and frequently about individual and team achievements and how those impact their company. (p. 30)

Crowley further concluded that all of these attributes were seen in transformational leadership.

Many of the traits of a transformational leader can be seen in the PLC leadership as presented by numerous sources (DuFour et al., 2008; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Eaker & Keating, 2012; Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Hord & Sommers, 2008). Transformational leaders encourage shared vision and shared leadership at all levels, create supportive
conditions for all employees, and celebrate success on a regular basis (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Crowley, 2011; Gumusluoglu & Ilsev, 2009; Kendrick, 2011; Turner et al., 2002.

*Implications for Educational Leaders*

Begley (1999) and Shields (2004) argued that as schools have become more diverse, educational leadership has become more complex and challenging. These complexities and challenges lead educational leaders to closely examine their roles and to adjust to the new demands set by their stakeholders (Begley). To meet the needs of all stakeholders and deal with the complex issues leaders face daily, educational leaders must learn to be agents of change (Anderson, 1998; Begley; Burns, 1978; Shields).

Shields (2004) used the term transformative leadership, not transformational, because change is needed beyond the traditional arrangements of institutions and organizations and educational leaders must reach out to entire communities to affect real change. Transformative leadership as defined by Shields is leadership that works to create communities “in which educators take seriously their accountability for advancing” (p. 113) the value ends of social justice, democracy, and respect for diversity. To accomplish these ends, the transformative leader must be willing to confront difficult topics and to engage in dialogues within the school setting and beyond the school into the community in general (Brown, 2004; Shields, Yukl, 2006). Dialogue concerning controversial issues can be complicated, difficult, and frightening for a leader, but it can lead to a more substantive address of equity issues for all stakeholder groups (Anderson, 1998; Brown; Shields). Yukl has further argued an effective leader engages all
stakeholders in dialogue “to determine what types of changes are necessary and morally right for the organization” (p. 423).

Yukl (2006) has argued that transforming leadership involves change by the leaders but also by those following the leader, but before change can take place within an organization, the leader must influence followers to recognize problems exist. Brown (2004) takes this concept a step further by creating the image of the leader as an activist. The activist leader shares power with others, creates networks, and teaches others to act as activists (Brown).

Shields (2004) posited through dialogue and by building strong relationships, the transformative leader can create “school communities that are socially just and deeply democratic” (p. 10). Shields further concluded, “if we are to achieve academic excellence and social justice in education, our leaders must be transformative” (p. 128).

The Missouri Professional Learning Communities Project

The Missouri model of professional learning communities was implemented in 2003 “and evolved from the Missouri Accelerated Schools Project” (Missouri Professional Learning Communities/History, 2014). The program offers services through the Missouri Regional Professional Development Centers (RPDCs), located in nine regions around the state (Missouri Professional Learning Communities/History).

According to Johnson (2011) the program:

Emphasizes four main questions:

- What should students know and be able to do?
• How will the school determine students who have learned essential knowledge and skills?
• How will the school respond when students do not learn?
• How will the school respond when they already know the material?

(¶ 7)

These four questions are the corollary questions that guide the work of PLC schools. “Becoming a professional learning community requires schools to become proficient in specific components” of these questions (Mid-Year PLC Newsletter, 2011, p. 2). In their work to answer the four corollary questions, Missouri schools utilized the research and resources from many researchers, including “DuFour, Eaker, Hord, Stiggins, Reeves” and focus on “THREE BIG IDEAS: Focus on Learning, Collaborative Culture, and Results Orientation” (Missouri Professional Learning Communities/History). Through the RPDCs, the program works to strengthen schools’ understanding of the PLC process and to “deepen team collaborative skills” (End-of-Year Newsletter, 2011, p. 2).

The first team formed at the beginnings of implementation of the Missouri PLC Program in each school is the building-level leadership team. The leadership team helps plan the initial implementation of the program, collects data and feedback to help improve practices, monitors collaborative teams, ensures appropriate professional development is utilized, and identifies and provides the support collaborative teams need to ensure all students learn (MO PLC Implementation Rubric, 2012).
The Missouri model implements an essential PLC curriculum which was refined by the RPDC resource specialists during the 2009-2010 school year (Mid-Year Newsletter, 2011).

The refined curriculum organizes the essential components into 8 specific strands. Those are as follows:

1. Foundation for Learning Community Culture
2. How Effective Building-Level Leadership Teams Work
3. Administrative Leadership
4. How Effective Teams Work
5. What Students Need to Know and Do
6. Assessment
7. Systematic Process for Intervention/Student Success
8. Continuous Improvement. (Mid-Year Newsletter, p. 2)

“During the spring of 2010, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education joined with The Leadership and Learning Center out of Englewood, Colo., to conduct a study of the most common school improvement initiatives employed throughout Missouri” (Mid-Year Newsletter, 2011, p. 1). This study concluded PLCs offer the greatest potential for improving student achievement, and because of this, “The Missouri PLC Project is taking significant steps to help all schools reach deeper levels of PLC implementation” (Mid-Year Newsletter, p. 1).
Summary

“Well implemented professional learning communities are a powerful means of seamlessly blending teaching and professional learning in ways that produce complex, intelligent behavior in all teachers” (Sparks, 2005, p. 156). DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour (2005a) posited that while creating a PLC is hard work, it is doable, but “at no time in our history have we, as a profession, possessed a clearer sense of what it takes to help all students learn at high levels” (p. 252). PLCs may all look differently and take a substantial time investment and require constant attention from everyone involved (Maximizing the Impact, 2007). Leclerc et al. (2012) argued “schools must develop a culture supported by the partnership of all participants, bringing the principal and the teachers together to work as colleagues while seeking to continuously learn from one another” (p. 1), and PLCs do just that. Elbousty and Bratt (2010) concluded, student achievement is improved by PLCs and “educators can best guarantee learning by enthusiastically embracing PLC teams and seeking answers collaboratively, thus enhancing and encouraging their commitment to working together in support of students and one another” (p. 8-9). Schools that form successful PLCs create a climate supportive of students, teachers, and learning at all levels.
Presented in Chapter Three is the research design and methodology employed during the study. Included in this chapter are the following: Statement of the Problem and Purpose of the Study, Research Questions, Population and Sample, Qualitative Research Design, Data Collection and Instrument of the Study, and Data Analysis.

Statement of the Problem and Purpose of the Study

In the over twenty years since the inception of professional learning communities (PLC), a great deal of research has surfaced in regards to the effectiveness of the concept. Researchers such as Hord (1997) and DuFour (2004 & 2007) have completed extensive studies throughout the United States; however, the Missouri Professional Learning Communities program has only been in existence for a little over ten years at this time. While some researchers have conducted studies of the Missouri program, the majority of research has been centered on the effectiveness of the Missouri program in regards to student achievement and school effectiveness.

The purpose of this study was to determine to what extent Missouri Exemplary Schools implemented the components of the PLC movement and what the role of the principal or building level administrator was in regards to the implementation of the PLC program. Much of the research of PLCs (DuFour et al., 2005b; DuFour et al., 2008; Eaker & Keating, 2012; Hord, 1998) has emphasized the importance of the principal in the PLC setting, but recent research has emphasized the importance even more. Turner et al. (2002) concluded “transformational leaders communicate a collective vision and inspire
followers to look beyond their self-interests for the good of the group” (p. 305). The purpose of this study was also to determine the extent to which the principals of the exemplary schools operated as transformational leaders in the context of the PLC program.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this study:

1. To what extent do Missouri exemplary schools implement the components of effective professional learning communities as described by leadership teams and principals?

2. How do members of leadership teams and principals describe the principal’s role in regard to implementation of the Missouri PLC program?

3. How is transformational leadership exhibited by principals of Missouri exemplary PLC schools?

Population and Sample

According to Merriam (1998), “once the general problem has been identified, the task becomes to select the unit of analysis, the sample” (p. 60). There are two types of sampling in research, probability and nonprobability. “Probability sampling…allows the investigator to generalize results of the study from the sample to the population from which it was drawn” (Merriam, p. 60). Because statistical generalization is not the focus of qualitative research, probability sampling is not needed (Merriam). For this study, a form of nonprobability sampling called “purposeful sampling” was utilized. “Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand,
and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, p. 61). According to Creswell (2003) purposeful sampling “does not necessarily suggest random sampling or selection of a large number of participants and sites, as typically found in quantitative research” (p. 185).

Utilizing purposeful sampling, the researcher chose the sample for this study from the schools designated as “Exemplary” according to the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Missouri PLC Project. After conferring with the PLC consultants at three of Missouri’s Regional Professional Development Centers (RPDCs), the researcher purposefully selected five schools that exhibited exemplary implementation of the Missouri PLC program. The initial interviews were conducted with the principal of each of these schools, and additional focus group interviews were conducted with members of the leadership teams of each school.

There were five principals interviewed for the study. Additionally, five leadership teams were interviewed through focus groups. The numbers of participants in these focus groups were determined by each school’s make-up of their leadership team.

Qualitative Research Design

Qualitative research defines the researcher(s) as the primary research instrument (Merriam, 1998), researching a phenomenon and interacting with those researched to more fully understand the learning relationship. Kemmis (as cited in Merriam) called attention to the researcher’s “critical presence in the context of the occurrence” (p. 200). This researcher participation, although value laden, facilitates an emerging design evolving from knowledge created in a constructivist manner through various techniques.
including observations, interviews, and focus groups (Merriam). Observations by the researcher allow first-hand experience with participants recording rich descriptions of relevant information of place, situation, and culture as revealed without participant embarrassment or possibility of tainted findings (Creswell, 1998). If researchers have a tolerance for ambiguity, sensitivity to context and variables, and good communication skills they can interact in positive ways providing rich opportunities to “explain, describe, judge, compare, portray, and evoke images” (Creswell, p. 220).

The primary source in the collection of data in a qualitative study is the researcher. Through interviews and observations the researcher records data as it occurs around the researcher and provides the data through the personal lens of the researcher (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1998). Additional data collection occurs in the forms of documents or audiovisual materials of relevance to the study (Creswell). Documents utilized by the researcher may include public documents, in the form of meeting minutes or newspaper articles, and private documents such as personal journals, letters or e-mail correspondence (Creswell).

Just as the questions guiding the study may change, the process of data collection may also change as the study continues (Creswell, 2003). One instance of how the data collection process could change is in the format of interviews conducted and the questions asked during the interviews. Merriam (1998) posits that “rigidly adhering to predetermined questions may not allow you to access participants’ perspectives and understandings of the world” (p. 74). If the researcher is willing to change questions as the interviews are conducted, a deeper understanding may be reached.
Analysis of data during a qualitative study is an on-going process, conducted from the time the first interview or observation occurs (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1998). The researcher must continually reflect on the data being collected and make notes or memos that address the analytical questions the study addresses (Creswell). This active analysis of the data and the process of data collection helps “produce believable and trustworthy findings” (Merriam, p.151).

Validity

For studies to be effective for educational practice, they “must be rigorously conducted; they need to present insights and conclusions that ring true to readers, educators, and other researchers” (Merriam, 1998). Cresswell (2003) argued the term validity in qualitative research “is used to suggest determining whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, or the readers of an account” (p. 195-196).

Qualitative researchers must articulate the steps used to ensure accurate, credible findings (Creswell, 2003). Some of the steps a qualitative researcher can utilize to ensure rigor and quality in the research include triangulation of the data, use of rich, thick description, use of member-checking, recording interpretations of perceptions, and the use of an external auditor (Creswell; Merriam, 1998).

Merriam (1998) posited two types of validity in qualitative research, internal and external validity. “Internal validity deals with the question of how research findings match reality” (Merriam, p. 201). For this purpose, the researcher must present
trustworthy data that are clearly presented in “rich, thick description” (Cresswell, 2003, p. 196).

“External validity is concerned with the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations” (Merriam, 1998, p. 207). External validity by this definition offers one possible limitation of a qualitative study that the findings are not generalizable to the larger population. However, the purpose of a qualitative study is not the generalizability of the findings to a larger population; the purpose of qualitative investigation is to gain an understanding of a phenomenon from the perspective of the sample chosen by the researcher.

Data Collection and Instrument of the Study

According to Merriam (1998), “data are nothing more than ordinary bits and pieces of information found in the environment” (p. 69). Data collected during qualitative research consist of “direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge” (Patton, 1990, p. 10) as gathered through interviews.

“Interviewing is probably the most common form of data collection in qualitative studies in education” (Merriam, p. 70). According to Creswell (2003), interviews can be in the form of a “face-to-face: one on one, in-person interview” or a group interview where the “researcher interviews participants in a group” (p. 186).

Data were collected utilizing an open-ended format of interviewing, which “allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam, 1998, p. 74). Additionally, elements of an unstructured format of interviewing, described by Merriam as having a
goal of “learning enough information to formulate questions for subsequent interviews,”
(Merriam, p. 75) were present to allow “fresh insights and new information” (Merriam, p. 75) to emerge.

For the purposes of this study, data were collected through a series of interviews, utilizing questions created by the researcher. Three sets of questions were created, one for members of the members of the PLC leadership teams, one for the principals in schools where the current principal initiated the PLC program, and one for the principals in the schools where the program was initiated by the principal’s predecessor.

Schools to be part of the sample were contacted via a phone call to the principal, followed up by an e-mail to the principal and all members of the leadership team. The phone call and e-mails presented the purpose of the study and assured the confidentiality of all responses from interviewees. Interviews were completed at each school in the regular meeting site of the leadership team and the principal’s office.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research is a process that “involves making sense out of text” (Creswell, 2003, p. 190). Creswell continued that qualitative research data analysis “is an ongoing process involving continual reflection about the data” and “asking analytic questions” (p. 190). Data were analyzed using a narrative analysis strategy. Narrative analysis places “emphasis on the stories people tell and on how these stories are communicated” (Merriam, 1998, p. 157).

According to Creswell (2003) researchers should relate the steps taken “in their studies to check for accuracy and credibility of their findings” (p. 195). To convey
reliability and validate the accuracy of the findings, this study utilized three of the “strategies available to check the accuracy of the findings” (Creswell, p. 196). The strategies used in this study were as follows: using “rich, thick description to convey the findings,” clarifying “the bias the researcher brings to the study,” and presenting “negative or discrepant information that runs counter to the themes” of the study (Creswell, p. 196).

After conducting the interviews of principals and leadership teams, the researcher transcribed all the data to be analyzed. After transcription, the researcher read the data thoroughly to “obtain a general sense of the information and to reflect on its overall meaning” (Creswell, 2003, p. 191).

During the initial analysis of the transcribed data, the researcher utilized coding, which involves “assigning some sort of shorthand designation to various aspects of your data so you can easily retrieve specific pieces of the data” (Merriam, 1998, p. 164). Data were coded according to the number of the question asked during the interview and according to how the response correlated with the principal’s role in the PLC program, the principal’s transformational leadership qualities, and the various components of PLCs. The researcher paid careful attention for common themes across the span of interviews in the study. Finally, the data were interpreted by the researcher to bring meaning to the data (Creswell, 2003).

Researcher’s Biases and Assumptions

According to Merriam (1998), because the researcher is the instrument for data collection and analysis, the instrument “is limited by being human--that is, mistakes are
made, opportunities are missed, personal biases interfere” (p. 20). Qualitative research is filtered through a researcher’s view of the world and his experiences in life (Merriam), so the researcher must be extremely mindful of this during data collection, analysis, and reporting.

The researcher of this study is a retired Missouri superintendent who worked in public education for 25 years and was instrumental in implementing the Missouri PLC program in one of the schools he led. Because of this, special attention was paid to collection and transcription of data to ensure responses were accurately portrayed in the reporting of the data.

Summary

This qualitative study employed face-to-face and group interviews of principals and leadership teams from six schools recognized by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Missouri PLC Program as exemplary PLC schools. Data were analyzed in a narrative manner to answer the three questions driving the study:

1. To what extent do Missouri exemplary schools implement the components of effective professional learning communities as described by leadership teams and principals?
2. How do members of leadership teams and principals describe the principal’s role in regard to implementation of the Missouri PLC program?
3. How is transformational leadership exhibited by principals of Missouri exemplary PLC schools?
CHAPTER FOUR

PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

The purpose of this study was to determine to what extent Missouri Exemplary Schools implemented the components of the Professional Learning Community (PLC) movement and what the role of the principal or building level administrator was in regards to the implementation of the PLC program. Much of the research of PLCs (DuFour et al., 2005b; DuFour et al., 2008; Eaker & Keating, 2012; Hord, 1998) has emphasized the importance of the principal in the PLC setting, but recent research has emphasized the importance even more. Turner et al. (2002) concluded “transformational leaders communicate a collective vision and inspire followers to look beyond their self-interests for the good of the group” (p. 305). The purpose of this study was also to determine the extent to which the principals of the exemplary schools operated as transformational leaders in the context of the PLC program.

The following questions guided this study:

1. To what extent do Missouri exemplary schools implement the components of effective professional learning communities as described by leadership teams and principals?

2. How do members of leadership teams and principals describe the principal’s role in regard to implementation of the Missouri PLC program?

3. How is transformational leadership exhibited by principals of Missouri exemplary PLC schools?
Presented in this chapter is a review of the study design, data collection methods, participants, conceptual underpinnings, and the process of data analysis. Descriptions of each school’s setting and of the principals who participated in the study will also be presented. Additionally, each guiding research question is explored and findings are presented in depth.

Study Design

A qualitative design model was utilized during this study. Through interviews and observations, the researcher recorded data as it occurred and provided data through the personal lens of the researcher (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1998). Interview questions were presented in an open-ended format, which allowed the researcher to respond to statements presented by the subjects and adjust the questions as needed (Merriam). An advantage of qualitative research is that it is conducted “in the natural setting” (Creswell, p. 181), so respondents may feel more comfortable and willing to respond to the questions presented to them.

Data were collected through a series of interviews with principals and leadership teams of five schools designated by the Missouri PLC project as exemplary schools implementing the Missouri PLC model and were analyzed and presented in a qualitative manner as proposed by Merriam (1998). The purposes of the interviews were to determine to what extent the exemplary schools implemented the components of effective PLCs as determined by the extensive body of research available, to determine the principal’s role in the implementation of the PLC in each school, and to determine the extent the principal utilized the transformational leadership style.
Data Collection

Data were collected utilizing an open-ended format of interviewing, which “allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam, 1998, p. 74). Additionally, elements of an unstructured format of interviewing, described by Merriam as having a goal of “learning enough information to formulate questions for subsequent interviews,” (Merriam, p. 75) were present to allow “fresh insights and new information” (Merriam, p. 75) to emerge.

For the purposes of this study, data were collected through a series of interviews, utilizing questions created by the researcher. Three sets of questions were created, one for members of the PLC leadership teams, one for the principals in schools where the current principal initiated the PLC program, and one for the principals in the schools where the program was initiated by the principal’s predecessor.

Schools to be part of the sample were contacted via a phone call to the principal, followed by an e-mail to the principal and all members of the leadership team. The phone call and e-mails presented the purpose of the study and assured the confidentiality of all responses from interviewees. Interviews were completed at each school in the regular meeting site of the leadership team and the principal’s office.

Participants

A total of 39 participants volunteered to participate in this study. This included interviews with a total of five principals and 33 members of leadership teams were interviewed. All participants worked in schools designated as exemplary PLC schools by
the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Missouri PLC Program. Of the five principals participating in the study, two were still working in the buildings where they started the PLC program, and three were in buildings where predecessors had started the program.

Conceptual Underpinnings

This study was guided by two conceptual underpinnings. The first was the concept of the professional learning community, specifically as presented by the work of Hord et al. and DuFour et al. The researcher used this concept to identify how schools meet the PLC criteria and to what extent the components of PLCs are implemented in the schools studied.

While much of the research of what makes a school a professional learning community offers similar language of the many aspects of a PLC, the work of Hord (1997) offers five dimensions shared by all schools successfully implementing the PLC model (Cowen & Capers, 2000; Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Hipp et al., 2003; Morrissey, 2000). These dimensions of PLCs include: shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application of learning, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice.

Another body of extensive work in the study of PLCs and how schools become professional learning communities has been completed by Richard DuFour and his associates. As stated above much of the research conducted in regard to PLCs utilizes similar language to describe the many aspects of a PLC, but DuFour’s work offers three “Big Ideas,” that PLCs should: ensure students learn, create a culture of collaboration,
and focus on results (DuFour, 2004; DuFour, 2007; DuFour DuFour, & Eaker, 2008; DuFour and Eaker, 1998; Hughes & Kritsonis, 2006).

The second conceptual underpinning theory of this study was that of transformational leadership (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Crowley, 2011). The focus was on to what extent principals in the schools studied exhibited the traits of a transformational leader, including how the principal helped others in the organization develop leadership skills for the benefit of the employee and the larger organization (Bass & Steidlmeier; Crowley; Gumusluoglu & Ilsev, 2009; Kendrick, 2011), encouraged employees to be innovative in thought (Gumusluoglu & Ilsev; Kendrick), made celebration a regular part of the day (Crowley), and encouraged shared vision and goals for the betterment of the entire organization (Bass & Steidlmeier).

Data Analysis

After conducting the interviews of principals and leadership teams, the researcher transcribed all the data to be analyzed. After transcription, the researcher read the data thoroughly to “obtain a general sense of the information and to reflect on its overall meaning” (Creswell, 2003, p. 191).

During the initial analysis of the transcribed data, the researcher utilized coding, which involves “assigning some sort of shorthand designation to various aspects of your data so you can easily retrieve specific pieces of the data” (Merriam, 1998, p. 164). Data were coded according to the number of the question asked during the interview and according to how the response correlated with the principal’s role in the PLC program as designated by a PR, the principal’s transformational leadership qualities as designated by
a TL, and the various components of PLCs designated as C. The researcher paid careful attention for common themes across the span of interviews in the study. Finally, the data were interpreted by the researcher to bring meaning to the data (Creswell, 2003).

Descriptions of Settings and Participating Principals

For the purposes of this study, no names of actual participants were utilized; the schools participating in the study were simply referred to by pseudonyms. The principals were referred to by pseudonyms, and the leadership teams of each school were referred to by the pseudonym for their school.

Avendale Elementary School. Avendale Elementary School is located in a district that serves a Missouri military base and is located on the military base itself. During the 2013-2014 school year, Avendale Elementary School served 431 students in grades kindergarten through fifth and had a free and reduced lunch rate of 49.7%.

Ms. Adams is in her eighth year as a school administrator in the district in which she serves. During this time she has been a principal or assistant principal at four separate school buildings. Prior to moving during the 2014-2015 school year to her current building, she was head principal at another exemplary school within the district.

Seven of the eight members of Avendale Elementary’s leadership team participated in the interview for this study. These seven included four classroom teachers, a librarian, a Title I teacher, and an intervention coach.

Brookside Elementary School. Brookside Elementary School is located in the same district as Avendale Elementary School, however it is not located on the military base. During the 2013-2014 school year, Brookside Elementary School served 962
students in grades prekindergarten through second and had a free and reduced lunch rate of 51.6%.

Mr. Barnes is in his 20th year in the district. During this time he served as a para-educator, a behavioral disorder teacher, a fifth grade teacher, and is currently serving in his 10th years as a principal. Prior to moving during the 2014-2015 school year to his current building, he was also a head principal at another exemplary school within the district. Prior to becoming a public educator, Mr. Barnes retired from the US military, having served 20 years in service. Mr. Barnes asked his current assistant principal to be part of the interview process as well; her responses have been included in parts of the data analysis.

Nine members of Brookside Elementary’s leadership team participated in the interview. This included four classroom teachers, the librarian, two Title I teachers, and two instructional coaches.

*Carter Elementary School.* Carter Elementary School is located in a rural district in Missouri. During the 2013-2014 school year, Carter Elementary School served 373 students in grades prekindergarten through fourth and had a free and reduced lunch rate of 70.2%.

Ms. Christian has served the district for nine years, including three years as special education director and six years as principal, during which time she initiated the PLC program. Prior to that she served as a social studies teacher in another district. Ms. Christian is also certified in Missouri as a superintendent of schools.
The leadership team of Carter Elementary school met with the researcher in two separate meetings on the day of the interviews. The entire team of nine was included in the process, including teachers from each grade level, the special education director, the librarian, a Title I teacher/instructional coach, and two specials teachers.

*Downly Intermediate School.* Downly Intermediate School is located in a rural district in Missouri which is near a larger, university town. During the 2013-2014 school year, Downly Intermediate School served 399 students in grades two through five and had a free and reduced lunch rate of 37.1%.

Ms. Dennis has 16 years of experience in education. Ten of those years have been in the role of principal, with the last five served as principal of Downly Intermediate School. Prior to coming to Downly Intermediate School, Ms. Dennis had what she described as, “minimal PLC experience.”

Two of the five members of Downly Intermediate’s leadership team were able to meet with the researcher on the day of the interview. The first was the school’s mentor teacher for a program through the university near the district, and the other was a grade-level representative on the leadership team.

*Earlton Elementary School.* Earlton Elementary School is located in a small, rural district in Missouri. The school district does not have a high school, and the district high school students feed into two larger neighboring districts. During the 2013-2014 school year, Earlton Elementary School served a total of 305 students in grades kindergarten through eighth and had a free and reduced lunch rate of 55.7%.
The person interviewed from Earlton Elementary School currently serves as superintendent/co-principal of the district. Formerly, she was the principal of the school, during which time she initiated the PLC program. Ms. Eventon is currently in her 18th year of education, having taught for 12 years in other districts and served as an administrator in the current district for six years.

Six members of the leadership team from Earlton Elementary participated in the study. This included the new co-principal, the librarian, a Title I teacher, and three classroom teachers.

Analysis of Research Question Number One

The first research question guiding this study was: to what extent do Missouri exemplary schools implement the components of effective professional learning communities as reported by leadership teams and principals? In order to explore and find answers for this question, the researcher created a series of interview questions that asked specifically about the components of PLCs as defined by experts in the field. Specific components of PLCs that were addressed included: shared and supportive leadership, values and vision, collaboration, collective learning for adults, supportive conditions, shared personal practice, ensuring students learn, and data usage. The following paragraphs present analysis of the data collected in regard to these components.

**Shared and Supportive Leadership**

Shared and supportive leadership in a PLC should be seen as more than getting a vote on issues of importance to the organization and should, instead, promote “a multitude of interactions and relationships that build capacity for change” (Huffman &
Hipp, 2000, p. 6). Shared leadership in this sense requires members of the organization to be responsible for colleagues’ learning and to take responsibility so all students achieve at a high level (Edvantia, 2005; Morrissey, 2000). If implemented correctly, shared leadership “may help galvanize a school around ambitious goals and establish conditions that support teachers and facilitate student success” (Edvantia, p. 7).

When asked to describe herself as a school leader, the principal from Avendale Elementary School stated, “Definitely shared leadership. I do a lot with my steering team… I depend a lot upon them to get their feedback and collect and get feedback from the teachers.” Both schools in this district used the term “steering committee” in place of the term leadership team, but they used the terms interchangeably. When asked specifically about shared and supportive leadership in her school, Ms. Adams stated that members of the steering committee “rotate, so every couple of years they have different leadership roles within the steering team.” Ms. Adams said this rotation of duties was a positive aspect of their steering committee, because “you have that consistency, so that seems to keep the eye on the prize of this is where we are, and this is where we want to be.”

Avendale Elementary School’s steering committee was extremely positive about shared and supportive leadership in their roles and in the school. One member of the team stated, “I think everybody supports each other, so if you have a strong point, then you are usually on that committee where you feel the strongest. Then you can support everyone, and that’s shared among everyone.” Another member of the steering committee made the point that “everyone on this committee is on another core committee, so that helps.”
Throughout the interview process at each school, this seemed to be the common format for the leadership teams; the members of the leadership teams were often then leaders or extremely active members of the other PLC teams and committees.

The principal of Brookside Elementary School stated that he encouraged shared leadership within his staff by being a teacher leader. He further stated,

*We have a steering committee, and I want them to carry the load. If they do, they become more aware of the BSIP (building strategic improvement plan) and the DSIP (district strategic improvement plan) and all those aspects of the PLC and the documentation, following the rules, developing the mission and vision and all that stuff.*

He concluded that, “when you empower teachers, they do more than you thought was possible and get things done. That really changes the culture.”

The leadership team, or steering committee in this case, in Brookside Elementary School concurred that their principal, “wants everyone to be aware of the buildings workings, as far as like the BSIP and that sort of thing, not just him doing it. He wants everyone involved with that and to understand it.” When asked specifically about shared and supportive leadership, one member of Brookside Elementary School’s steering committee stated,

*I think this is what we live. I mean we really do; we have facilitators, but, I mean, it’s a shared leadership and everybody’s supported that way. Even when you have to take those tough subjects back to the grade level, there’s a huge amount of support there. Even though it may be a tough issue and*
we are very passionate about what we support, it never waivers as a grade
level team and on behalf of administrators.

Of the five schools interviewed for this study, the members of Carter Elementary
School’s leadership team and their principal seemed the most passionate about shared and
supportive leadership within their school. Ms. Christian described her staff as,
much more empowered than they used to be, especially when I started.
When I started, I replaced somebody who was very autocratic and there
wasn’t any give, so it was kind of easy, but interestingly, not everyone
wants to lead because they figured out that with the leadership opportunity
comes the responsibility of all the work which goes with it. However, by-
in-large, most people, when given the opportunity that they have the
ability to make key decisions, they like that.
Carter Elementary School’s leadership team showed the same excitement and
enthusiasm about shared leadership as seen in their principal. One member of the
leadership team stated,
I would say with the PLC there’s a lot of shared leadership, as far as like
PLC facilitators. I’m a facilitator for my horizontal team, but there are also
vertical teams, and we have ELA and PBS. It’s just putting those leaders
in charge of facilitated positions, and it kind of takes (the principal) out of
it in a way. Then I am in charge of leading a specific team, and that is not
a top down approach, because as a committee we decide collectively what
we think.
Another member of the team agreed that the school has shared leadership and saw that as being in direct relationship to the principal’s role within the building. This team member stated, “I feel like whether it’s in our team meeting or grade level or individual classrooms... As long as we keep that communication open and we share that information, it is supported from top to bottom.”

Ms. Dennis inherited the PLC program from her predecessor, and the program was already effective. The principal stated that she did not have much background in PLCs when she came to school four, but one member of her leadership team described her as “a good instructional leader” in regard to shared leadership. Her team also echoed the team design where members of the leadership team took their ideas back to their grade level teams to share and then brought back their discussion points to the leadership team.

The same format was described at Earlton Elementary School. Ms. Eventon stated, “the way it works is we discuss everything big we have going on the leadership team, then we talk about how they can take that back to the collaborative teams. That’s how it works; it’s just an out and back deal.”

**Shared values and vision**

Shared values and vision are extremely important to the success of any PLC program. Roberts and Pruitt (2009) posited “the characteristic *shared values and norms* expresses the idea that the members of the professional learning community have reached agreement about the mission of their school and the values and norms that are to shape their behaviors as professionals” (p. 8). The most successful PLC schools are ones that
have a clear vision focused on student learning and achievement (Hipp & Huffman; Morrisey, 2000; Thompson & McKelvy, 2007).

All five principals and all of their leadership teams were very clear that the work of creating values and vision for their buildings was done collectively. The principals of schools one and two, which are in the same district, each moved from one exemplary school to another at the beginning of the 2014-2015 school year and found mission and vision statements and collective commitments already in place. However, each discovered different processes had been followed in the creation of these items, and therefore, each reacted in a different manner.

Ms. Adams found that the mission, vision, and collective commitments had been created as a school-wide process before she transferred to the building. She commented that, “they agreed upon the vision and mission for this year, so we are keeping it. That was done through the collective commitments.” Although the work had already been completed for the current year, Ms. Adams said she always has her building revisit these important plans each year. She said, “we revise, and look at our smart goals, our BSIP, and make sure those are all aligned with district goals and that the teachers are aware that this is the work we do.”

One member of the leadership team of Avendale Elementary School described the process they followed to write mission, vision, and collective commitments as: “we just went into groups and wrote down the things we thought were most important in that group, and then we compiled a list of what we shared across the entire building.” However, when the building first began the PLC process, this focus was not present. One
member of the leadership team explained that the principal at that time made decisions of what was important, and it was “her guidance that really drove what we did, and no one really knew where we were driving to. We were just all on the same bus going to a place that we didn’t know where….” This same member of the leadership team concluded that this changed when a new principal came to the building nine years ago. This principal has since moved to be principal of Brookside Elementary School.

Mr. Barnes found a different scenario when he moved to his new building. When he first met with the building’s leadership team/steering committee, the committee members did not really know what was in the building strategic plan, the mission, or the vision. So, when he took over,

The steering committee…went back through and rewrote the BSIP so the smart goals align with the data they’re going to collect, and they just redid the mission and vision. The steering committee and several teachers have really stepped out.

One member of Brookside Elementary School’s leadership team described the process they followed as,

We basically looked at our old mission and vision and the district mission and vision and broke it into areas. We then went around our PLC whole group and everyone just talked, and then we had a committee that came together and combined all that into our vision and mission. It was basically the whole school.
When asked by the researcher if the team saw value in the process their new principal had them follow, one member of the team stated,

Oh absolutely. Because everybody has ownership, and it is just one mission and one vision. Even though it’s our building, it is because we took that input from everybody, everybody has a piece of that mission and vision. And that includes paras, yes everybody; it wasn’t just teachers.

This same process, according to the Ms. Christian, was followed by the staff and administration of Carter Elementary School to create shared values and vision. She described the process as a “very collaborative process where everyone threw out ideas and then we really went through building consensus to come up with something we could all buy in to, and that kind of guides everything we do.”

The members of Carter Elementary School’s leadership team described the process in the same manner. One member simply stated, “We have a voice; everyone has a voice.” Another member of the team described the process as,

It was developed in an all staff meeting. Everyone brought ideas, and then we said, what is best for our kids? What sums up what we are trying to do here? And we had kind of a voting process, and I know every year it’s something different. Right now we are trying to get the kids on board for what our mission is and what we’re trying to accomplish here. Every child, every chance, every day! That’s our mission.
This focus of “what is best for our kids” was repeated by the leadership team of Carter Elementary School, and teams from most of the schools, on several occasions during the interview process.

Downly elementary’s leadership team described a similar process for creating shared values and vision, with one stating that unlike other schools where collective commitments “are just a piece of paper, and then no one looks at them again,” their principal emphasizes the collective commitments through weekly emails and by posting them around the building.

Members of Earlton Elementary School’s leadership team described their vision as very old when their principal came to the school. One member described the process they followed to update the vision as, “the first thing we did was to update the vision and mission through the teams; we could then focus on what was important to the whole of the group.” Another added, “we even took it to the community and the students to get input. This lets them have ownership too.”

Collaboration and Collective Learning and Application of Learning

According to Servage (2008), “the PLC is more than group work….Collaborative teacher learning calls participants to develop a strong sense of community” (p. 64). True collaboration is difficult and often becomes just another thing for teachers to do, but it is “one characteristic that all thriving professional learning communities have in common” (Maximizing the Impact, 2007). Schmoker (2005) concluded collaboration is essential to success in a PLC, because “isolation is the enemy of improvement” (p. 141). DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker (2008) envisioned collaborative teams which were, “a group of
people working together interdependently to achieve a common goal for which they are mutually accountable” (p. 179-180).

Every school interviewed for the purposes of this study reported some form of collaboration or PLC time, during which teachers and/or administrators could come together to make decisions and to collaborate on best practices for the classroom. In all five schools of the study, PLC teams had common planning time; and in schools one through four late starts or late student contact time were utilized once a week for whole team or vertical teaming time.

When asked how she and her team achieve collaboration, Ms. Adams stated, “trust. I think that’s the biggest obstacle to get to where you are comfortable with collaboration in regards to test scores and student data and teacher practices.” Because Ms. Adams is in her first year at this new school, she was asked what she has done to establish trust with her staff. Her response to this question seemed to suggest an indication of the success her schools have seen. She stated, Just openness, I think openness with myself and what I believe. Letting them know where I would like them to be and letting them know that I support them, and I value them as professionals. That I trust their opinions, and this school has a much larger steering team with more individuals than I had before, and that creates a hurdle to get over also to make sure every voice is heard. I try to go around and make sure every voice is heard and watch the body cues and the context in the discussions
of where we want our PLCs to go in our goals for this year. So just keeping that communication open.

While their principal at Avendale Elementary School took a more philosophical take on this question concerning collaboration, the leadership team was very matter of fact about what helps them with their collaboration. One member of the team was quick to point out the fact that there is common plan time at grade levels and “there is time to collaborate every Wednesday morning for either whole group work or grade level teaming.” Another member of the team followed this by stating, “the second and fourth Wednesdays are dedicated to grade level. The first Wednesday is dedicated to ‘On Post’ grade levels getting together. The third Wednesday is whole group, so we get to collaborate that way and during plan times.”

Mr. Barnes acknowledges that even though they have late starts on Wednesdays for teams to collaborate, “they can’t just do it all during that time. We are really pushing that they have to be talking.” He presented a scenario of an instance that happened the last time he was in a team meeting. He said,

One of the things I did this last time was to go through and ask them, how many students do you have? How many students do you have? And quickly adding that up and then saying no you have 92, you are team. However you can, you have to get those 92 students to work together, so you have to be talking together, you have to be using each other’s strengths. If one is good at reading or one is good at math, or you look at the assessments, you have to be talking about these things. How did you
do it? How did you go about it? And then making those changes. They really have to work through that.

Like their principal, the leadership team of Brookside Elementary School acknowledges that the time set aside once a week for team planning and collaboration is not always enough. By their schedule, grade level teams have set aside one day a week to meet as a team; however, one member of the team stated, “but if we need more than one day then we will do it. We know it’s available, so if you have to say you’re having trouble with this, can we get together and talk about it,” the team can get together to discuss issues.

Ms. Christian approached the question about collaboration from the standpoint of her staff’s ability to solve problems together. She stated that when the Missouri PLC program came to evaluate their PLC process, “the department said one thing we did really well was that when something’s not working, we address it head on and do the work to fix it, and I think that’s part of collaboration.” Because good teams “have common goals, they have to have rules of engagement. You can’t let the loudest voice win…. Making sure everyone’s voice counts is probably the biggest thing.”

The leadership team of Carter Elementary School appeared very passionate about their collaboration and the work they do as a team. One member of the team stated,

When we are in horizontal teams, we work on pacing guides, curriculum, data; we do a lot of data analysis. This week we met horizontally, and we talked about how to enrich our classrooms to make sure that we’re differentiating with those highfliers and took apart some of our RTI data.
It is truly about the kids. What are we doing for the kids? How can we change or tweak or fix what we are doing? In bringing those problems to our grade level, you know if you teach something well.

Another member of the team acknowledged, “time was the major thing; now we have the time to meet and collaborate with our grade level or vertically and all staff. Just getting the time is huge.”

Another member of the team chose to focus on how the team can work together for all children. She stated,

I think during that time, if my kiddos are really struggling, we can really discuss that and we feel that we can go in and watch that teacher. Because we collaborate so well we feel like the time really allows us to feel open to each other.

This sentiment was further explained by another member of the team who said,

I was here before the PLCs ever started, and it wasn’t like it is now. You were scared to collaborate with other people, because you didn’t want to be judged. You didn’t want somebody to say something to make it sound like you don’t know what you’re talking about. It’s just so much more open now.

One explanation offered as to why the collaboration worked so well in Carter elementary had to do with the nature of the relationships the various teams have built. One member of the team stated,
We really have such a good working relationship, that it’s easy. I personally can go to anybody in this building and say, hey what should I do about this? You have any suggestions on how to do this? If I’m just having trouble with one of the students from their classes, on struggling to help them get where they need to be, the students are in their rooms all the time, so they may know something that will work better.

This was echoed by yet another member of the team who stated,

I just had a meeting with the fourth grade, and you know we didn’t get a lot of paperwork accomplished, but it was just conversation. So it’s just having that time to discuss what we’re going to do, and we respect the background and the knowledge as we work together.

Like all the other schools in the study, Downly Intermediate School has common planning times and they have late student contact once a week when the principal and counselor hold a PBS assembly each Friday, and like Carter Elementary School, Ms. Dennis and the members of the leadership team feel that their collaboration time is extremely effective due to the time built in for collaboration and to the good relationships they have built. Ms. Dennis stated, “time is a big piece, and that is really where a lot of my role comes in. I have to find this precious resource of time somewhere built into our day.” Part of her ability to provide that time for her teachers comes in the form of supportive leadership from above. The principal stated, “I’m just lucky enough to be supported by a superintendent that allows me to have subs when I need them.”
The leadership team of school four emphasized that success came from their teams, “and those relationships and trust with one another which is huge. I think that’s what it comes down to, just establishing those relationships and trusting one another and being open to criticism.” Another member of the team acknowledged the importance of team time. She stated that one way the principal had allowed them time to build those relationships was “giving them time to work, that time to work is a big factor.”

While Earlton Elementary School has common planning time for teams to meet during the school day, the school does not have a late start or early release time for additional teaming. Because of this, the leadership team has to meet after school once a week. According to Ms. Eventon, “the way it works is we discuss everything big we have going on in the leadership team, and then we talk about how they can take this back to the collaborative teams.” Because of the small size of the school and the fact that the district only has 1.5 administrators, the principal lamented, “depending on what it is and time schedules, I will go sit in these PLC teams, but I don’t sit in the PLC teams as much as I used to. But I do feel like I need to be in there more than I am.”

Despite the fact that they are not able to have as much time during the day for team work, the members of leadership team seem to have a positive attitude about the work they are doing. One member of the team stated that with the emphasis on collaboration, “we have buy-in by the staff; it has opened their eyes to how it helps them.” Another member the team built on this statement, stating, “we have figured out that we are not in isolation, and our common plan time is important. It’s huge!”
When asked about how collective learning happens for adults in their schools, principals and leadership teams alike tended to focus on a more traditional professional development format, with a few exceptions. The principal of Avendale Elementary School spoke of book studies in the sharing of articles from educational journals, stating, “that’s just the culture we’re in.” However, she also added that the teachers, “do peer observations, and we go to other teacher’s classrooms and watch best practices. We share that data.” While Ms. Adams was able to dig a little deeper into the concept of collective learning and how it should look in a PLC, the leadership team of Avendale Elementary School spoke mainly of how time is made if teachers want to go to learn something new at a conference or meeting.

In Brookside Elementary School, it was the leadership team that seemed to have a deeper understanding of the concept of collective learning for PLCs. Mr. Barnes spoke in generalities of professional development offered to teachers, of book studies, of encouraging work on master’s degrees, and of articles shared from the administration. However, members of the leadership team spoke in the terms of in-house learning and of modeling in the classrooms. One member of the team described the process they use by stating,

The PD we started this year, is we have a learning structure of the month. So instead of having all those strategies presented during a professional development after school, we’re going in and modeling those in the classrooms. That cuts down on the time the teachers have to stay after school to get the information, and they can see how it works with their
students. That’s important for them, to see a lesson that works for their students.

Another member of the team added that “we have an instructional coach that will come in and model for us, and my kids love that. They always ask when [the instructional coach] is coming in.”

In regard to collective learning that happens for adults in the school, the principal and leadership team of Carter Elementary School seemed to fully understand the concept. While Ms. Christian did speak in terms of PD and book studies, she also spoke of her emphasis on her teachers furthering their education to earn a master’s degree. She was very proud of the fact that over 75% of her staff have earned or are working on their masters degrees. She acknowledged that this emphasis comes from the top, “that emphasis on lifelong learning, just being smarter than you were yesterday.” To drive home her point, Ms. Christian stated, “public education used to be a very complacent place. Once you got your degree, you went in your room and you taught for 30 years. But that’s not good for kids.”

Members of the leadership team from Carter Elementary School spoke quite passionately about the collective learning they see in their building. The first to speak up on this issue addressed the concept of vertical teaming. She said she likes to send her team members for vertical teaming, because she knows they will get “to learn a lot of things that they wouldn’t have had the chance to if we hadn’t done that vertical teaming. So I think those vertical teams alone have caused a lot of collaborative learning.” Another member of the team echoed the sentiment on vertical teaming, stating,
It’s easy for me as a first grade teacher to meet with the fourth grade teachers and know that I can learn something from them. So it’s important just having the conversations with those fourth grade teachers when I’m doing the ELA team and seeing what’s expected for fourth graders when they are writing as opposed to just K and first grade rubrics.

In addition to emphasizing their work in vertical teams, the leadership team acknowledged the trust required to learn from one another. One member of the team stated,

I think you have to be able to trust that everyone on your team is one that you can learn something from. Even as a facilitator, I can learn from anybody on my team. They are the most knowledgeable persons about their curriculum.

Another member of the team felt this trust amongst the members was part of what held them accountable. She believed it was important for her to know what is required at the levels above her kindergarten class, because she needed to,

Make sure we do our step in the process to make sure that once they do get to the upper grade levels, they have those foundations they need. So I think just learning from the upper grade levels of what they’re doing, really helps put our responsibility in perspective.

The principal and leadership team of Downly Intermediate School emphasized that the school is moving away from the traditional PD model of whole building or district initiatives toward more specialized learning opportunities for individual teams.
One member of the leadership team stated, “we have PD days worked into our schedule, and they pull the teachers in the district they think are the strongest or have a lot of experience in an area and have them running some of our PD sessions.” Another member of the team stated,

I think the ultimate goal that we have is kind of twofold. One is, you know gone are the days of the whole building might be doing some sort of book study, I mean that may still happen for some initiatives, but our curriculum director and (our principal) are really wanting us to become more independent as far as what our grade level needs to achieve our smart goals or whatever we’re working on. So they are really pushing teachers to go more towards that, as opposed to hold district level or building level PD.

Ms. Eventon spoke very generally of encouraging higher education for her teachers but was rather vague on a deeper understanding of collective learning. This was reflected in the leadership team’s response to the question about collective learning for adults in the building. One member stated, “we have our PD days, and collaborative work times built in. Leadership team shares information back to their grade level teams, and they know how much their teams can handle at one time.” While this may show some hints of collective learning, in the end the team’s response came down to “we are allowed to attend state conferences, and we have gone to other schools to learn. We seek out the best PD we can get our entire staff.”
Supportive Conditions

Hord (1997) posited “supportive conditions determine when and where and how the staff regularly comes together as a unit to do the learning, decision making, problem solving, and creative work that characterize a professional learning community” (p. 13). The term supportive conditions refers to the physical setting and structural conditions such as use of time, communication, and professional development processes as well as collegial relationships such as attitudes, vision, group norms, and respect, and these supportive conditions impact all aspects of the PLC (DuFour et al., 2008; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Eaker & Keating, 2012; Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Hord; Huffman & Hipp, 2000; Morrissey, 2000).

Principals of all five schools spoke extensively in regards to the supportive conditions they and their district central offices have sought to create for teachers. Each school has common plan time built into the schedule, and four of the five have additional time during the school week via late starts or late student contact time for teachers one day a week to accommodate additional team time. Ms. Dennis emphasized the importance of this time for teachers stating she believed time was, “the PLC program’s most important piece.” In regard to the extra time available for teams to meet, Ms. Christian emphasized the support she has received from above in her district and the work she has done to make that time available for teachers. She stated, “we have late start Wednesday’s, and that had to be board approved. The common planning time during the day, that’s just up to me to make sure it’s in place.” She also emphasized the support she has received from her superintendent over the years of their PLC work.
Members of the leadership teams did acknowledge the support they get for the extra time during the day and emphasized how important that time was for the work they were doing. A member of Downly’s leadership team stated, “I think the biggest way they can support us is give us time to work together.” This was echoed by the leadership team of Avendale Elementary School. When asked about supportive conditions, the one statement made by the team was, “I was thinking time; you know, PLCs require a lot of time. The Wednesdays and just having that time put in the district schedule is important.”

Another way principals of the schools in the study saw supportive conditions in their schools was through their desire to allow their teachers to do their jobs and to feel ownership and empowerment in their roles. Mr. Barnes, when asked about supportive conditions for the PLC program, stated, “well, I would go back to empowerment. Just talking to teachers. It’s not just telling them to collaborate out there, it has to be in here too,” meaning the principal’s office. During this discussion, Mr. Barnes’ assistant principal stated, “I think the open door is very important, just knowing they can come speak to you when they need to. There are going to be bumps in the road, but I think just having that relationship is key.” Ms. Christian reiterated this point, emphasizing “it’s not just delegating, if people are to have responsibility, they need to have the power to make the decision. You can’t just expect them to do the work and you make all the decisions.”

Members of various leadership teams recognized the support they receive from their principals and the empowerment they are given to make decisions. Members of the leadership team of Carter Elementary School, when speaking of their principal, stated, “I think she brings out the best in all of us. She gives us opportunities to pursue what we are
passionate about and what are our strengths.” Another member of this leadership team stated, “she puts us in roles in which we can see ourselves as leaders and we can push our students. She kind of guides us in that process.”

Members of the leadership team from Earlton Elementary School emphasized the support they receive from their principal in allowing them to make decisions as a team. One stated the principal, “values shared leadership and wants each voice to be heard, and any time she wants to implement something new, she brings it to the team. She is consistent at not making changes without a consensus from the group.”

**Shared Personal Practice**

Teachers in successful PLC schools have moved away from the traditional model of teaching where teachers are isolated and have chosen to work collaboratively and to share personal practices with their colleagues (InPraxis Group Inc., 2006; Morrissey, 2000). This dimension goes beyond a simple discussion of one’s teaching and is instead an on-going process of peers regularly observing others’ teaching and sharing ideas on how to improve (Hord, 1997). Teachers are encouraged “to interact, provide feedback, and share results of student learning experiences” (Hipp & Huffman, 2003). Through shared personal practice, teachers are “sharing failures and mistakes, demonstrating respect and constructively analyzing and criticizing practices and procedures” (InPraxis Group Inc., p. 3).

The principal of Avendale Elementary School reported that shared personal practice is used in many of the buildings within the district. She stated,
we provide release time for teachers to go in and observe others, for instance if a teacher needs help with basic classroom management, we will send someone in that’s really good with classroom management. If they need help in assessment or keeping track of their student’s learning goals and data, we’ll send them to a teacher to observe that. And we provide release time for them to do that.

This principal also stated that teachers have done videotaping to share with others in the district. She said, “they might say, I know you’re really good at mass versus space, so they go in and videotape and will share that within district or within their building.”

The leadership team of Avendale Elementary School was less positive about how they share personal practice in their building. One member the team stated, “we are encouraged to do observations; we are encouraged to do up to four a year. We’re encouraged, but I know sometimes is difficult to schedule, but it’s in writing.” Another member stated, “one year we were supposed to do someone a grade level below us, someone in our grade level, and someone a grade higher.”

Although they were hesitant on this topic at first, when asked by the researcher if they were now comfortable observing each other, one member of the team explained,

At first it was little intimidating, you know basically it was, why are they here? But it’s part of our district; we do learning walks and other buildings come observe us. They are in and out all day long, and so now it’s just something that just happens. It’s not a big deal, so when they are here it’s just like it’s not a big deal and we continue to do our stuff.
Another member of the team agreed, stating, “the kids are also used to adults coming in and out of the classroom, so it’s sort of the norm for them.”

When Mr. Barnes was asked about shared personal practice, he had to admit that his teachers were regrouping, and “some of the teams are talking about those strategies and instructional practices, but I think that’s what we’re breaking into this year. I don’t know how much of that went on before, but they certainly had a lot of PD.” The assistant principal of Brookside Elementary School spoke of data teaming days and how she and Mr. Barnes sit in on data teams, “checking to see if the collaboration pieces are there and if the forms are correct and if they’re on track.” When asked by the researcher if teachers observe in each other’s classrooms, the principal remarked, “I’ve had some teachers this year already say they need in other classrooms, so I said just tell me when, and I’ll get a sub or someone to cover you.”

Despite the reserve reflected in the principal’s reaction to the question concerning shared personal practice of his staff, the leadership team of Brookside Elementary School was far more positive about the work they do. The team talked extensively about the learning walks that happened within the building. One member of the team described a learning walk as,

A group of teachers and the facilitator, like one of our instructional coaches, tour the building and enter every classroom and look at the stuff in the hallway. Each member of the learning walk team has a rubric, a little checklist of things that they’re looking for, for evidence of mastery teaching, or cooperative learning, or structured strategies.
Another member of the team, when speaking about learning walks, stated,

I think as far as personally, it helps me analyze and reflect on what I’m doing and how I can always improve. I really enjoyed the learning walk that I went on, because you get that chance to see the other classrooms and to see what they’re doing maybe the same or in a different way.

Another way the leadership team of Brookside Elementary School addressed the topic of shared personal practice was through the buildings use of vertical teams. When speaking of vertical teaming, one member of the leadership team stated, “that’s been a real plus and a positive. Through vertical teaming, we can see how our students are doing and give positive feedback about that.”

Ms. Christian first approached the topic of shared personal practice from the standpoint of the work that grade level teams do. She explained, “they spend a lot of time at grade levels, but a lot of them eat lunch and plan together way more than once a week. They also have a common, horizontal PLC time.”

The principal then spoke of classroom observations between teachers. She stated, “I have always told them, anytime you want a sub to go observe other people I will do so. That is a standing offer; they can get in as many rooms as they want to observe. Some take advantage of that, but some don’t.”

Speaking of teachers observing other teachers, Ms. Christian explained,

We did some observations earlier this year, and I had a first year teacher observe another first-year teacher. And she was uncomfortable of that, because she was feeling pressure too, but the person she was learning from
had phenomenal classroom management. I said sometimes it’s good to see somebody that’s good at something that’s of the same level you are; you can learn from them because you’re more receptive to that. But they do get a lot of time to observe and to be observed.

The leadership team of Carter Elementary School was extremely enthusiastic about the work they do with shared personal practice in their building. The conversation started on the topic of instructional coaches. One member of the team stated that instructional coaches can come in a classroom and “just kind of observe, and maybe guide me through it. So, I think that’s really helped, to really see other teachers in action, not just hear about it but actually see it.” This was reiterated by another member of the team, who stated,

I agree that the instructional coaches help. They come in and they see things when you are teaching, either in your style or just the way your delivering, and they can see something and say, your lesson was awesome but if you just do this one thing. And as professionals, we all want to grow and we always take that advice and criticism. And then maybe we will practice a couple weeks and say will you come back in to see if I made improvements. It’s just nice to have someone come in and give you criticism in a non-evaluative way.

Yet another member of the team concluded, “last year I had one of the instructional coaches come in because he knew that writing was something that we really needed to
work on. I was able to validate that, yeah I’m doing these things too, so it validates what
I’m doing.”

In addition to the work they do with their instructional coaches, the team was very
positive about the fact that if there is something they really want to learn about and can’t
get within their district, their principal is very willing to send them out to learn. One
member of the team shared this by stating,

We visited other schools, and we had other schools visit us. And we share
everything, we normally send them all out with a folder full of stuff. And
if we go to other schools we come back with a folder full of stuff, so
there’s a lot of sharing.

Another member of the team summed up her opinion of shared personal practice by
stating, “I love to watch other people, just to see how they do it.”

At Downly Intermediate School, both the principal and the leadership team spoke
with a great deal of passion about shared personal practice within their building. Ms.
Dennis stated,

Our leadership team brought up last year about their desire to go observe
more often, and so we have presented that to the staff and are letting them
chew on it little bit. We are really passionate about it being all about
learning and not about evaluation. I completely support that; it seems
obvious to me.

Ms. Dennis has trained on and implemented the new NEE model of teacher evaluation
created by the University of Missouri-Columbia, and her teachers have sought to learn
more about the model so they can utilize it in their observations of each other. She stated that her team “asked if they could observe more of these videos and do some scoring themselves so they can understand the model even deeper.” The principal continued, stating,

They are really gaining a lot of things from doing those activities; using the Missouri State Department’s MOST tool, it has tons and tons of videos on it, they are able to clarify what the components of the NEE model mean. So, they are loving that, you know watching other teachers teach.

The principal and leadership team of Earlton Elementary School had very little to say on the topic of shared personal practice. The entire conversation in both instances centered on what the principal does to point out good practices she has seen. The principal did state that “one of the things that we’ve done is just where they have share out time during the collaborative team meetings, where they take a few minutes to share out.” There was no discussion of observing each other in the classrooms, just an emphasis on the principal’s role and how they share out during team time.

Ensure Students Learn

Monitoring what students are learning requires more than the use of summative assessments such as end of the section tests and state and federally mandated tests once a year (DuFour et al., 2008; Eaker & Keating, 2012). According to DuFour et al., “summative assessment is an assessment of learning, a tool to answer the question, ‘Did the student learn by the deadline?’” (p. 202). The difference here is that “a formative assessment is an assessment for learning, a tool used to inform both the teacher and the
student about the student’s current level of achievement” (DuFour et al., p. 202). Eaker and Keating concluded, “teams of teachers…develop formative assessments designed to monitor learning on a frequent and timely basis, constantly seeking, student by student, skill by skill, to answer the question, Are our students learning and how do we know?” (p. 112).

When asked the question as to how each school ensured students learn, every school responded in essentially the same manner. The principals and leadership teams all focused on the use of data and the school’s response to intervention (RTI) programs and how the building is ensuring that all students’ needs are being met. Eaker and Keating (2012) concluded PLC schools should “develop a school wide systematic plan to provide students with additional time, support, or enrichment during the school day” (p. 112). Through the use of their data, each of the buildings of the study was able to track their students’ progress and to place them on the appropriate tier of the RTI model.

The principal of Avendale Elementary School stated that her teachers sit down on a regular basis and,

Each grade level talks about students individually. How are they doing on the common assessments? How are they doing on the smart assessments? How are they doing with reading fluency? Are there attendance issues? Social, emotional what can we do with PBS? We do that one by one, student by student.

Ms. Adams also spoke about the use of formative assessments within the entire district. She stated,
At every grade level each teacher gives the exact same pretest and posttest, and we have three observations that can be mini assessments, homework, or classroom observations. These come between the pretest and the posttest, and they are unique to the buildings, but like everyone in my fourth grade gave the same three observations. But across the district the same pretest in the same posttest are used.

Mr. Barnes shared the form all of his teachers use (see appendix E) to track their students’ data to determine if each student is on track. On this single form, the teachers can record all of the formative evaluations done throughout the year for each student in each class. The principal stated that his teachers “bring this form to data days, and we talk about each student. We don’t just talk about students that are behind, because we have to pick up enrichment.”

One member of Brookside Elementary School’s leadership team, when asked about how the school ensures students learn, stated,

We have data days where we meet, and we sit down and just talk about every student. We focus on enrichment, because sometimes we focus in on the kids that are really struggling and they get all of our attention, and those kids that are really excelling are left behind. So it’s really focused and we are trying to meet the needs of all students.

Another member of the team said “this can be a struggle because you have really low kids and you have really high ones.” For those students in tier two of the building’s RTI model, who may not be ready to move up to the next tier but are showing progress, “our
reading instructional coach gives us activities to push them a little further. So we collaborate in that way.” In addition to the work that is being completed by the instructional coaches, the building has established an enrichment committee to help teachers meet the needs of those children who already know what is being taught, because as one member the team stated, “we have to be ready for those kids as well as the other ones.”

Ms. Christian stated, “we look at data; we eliminated the old teacher anecdotal, ‘well I can tell they are learning’” justification for how they do things. She concluded, “teachers know that if they want to make big changes, there better be data to support it.”

The leadership team of Carter Elementary School was again passionate about the work they are doing in their teams. When asked how they know that students are learning, one member of the team stated, “Data, oh yes data!” Another member the team concurred, “it’s all about the data.” And while other schools spoke at lengths about the teachers use of data, the leadership team of Carter Elementary School emphasized that their students also track their data. This same member of the team said, It’s fun, because the kids are now aware of their data. The students take ownership of their learning, and so the way we ensure that is we talk about data. We use it like it’s just another word. Even at the kindergarten and first grade levels, they know the words proficient and advanced, and they know what mastery is.
In addition to the tracking of data to ensure that students are learning, Carter’s leadership team recognized the building’s response to intervention model was important. One stated,

We also have a very well-developed RTI program, which is we’re looking at the data and placing students in with different teachers according to their needs, in hopes that we see growth. Then we monitor their progress as they move to tier two see if there has been growth.

The members of this leadership team also recognized the value in pretesting students, “because we can’t just randomly start in the middle. We start out seeing where they are and what they know, we collected data, a lot of data at the beginning.” Another member of the team stated, “with the assessments from the beginning of the year, we take those and we start making our pacing guides from them. Then we know where to go and what needs to be taught.” Another member of the team concluded,

We do a lot of assessing at the very beginning, and continuing after that we watch for growth. If there is not growth, we intervene and we figure out what the child needs. And we work as a whole, so if it’s not working with me doing it then someone steps in to do it. We’re comfortable with that, because they’re all our kids.

Ms. Dennis first spoke of Downly’s, “student support team that we call the ‘care team.’ They meet once a month and we bring in some outside resources for support. We have a local counseling center that always sends somebody to support us in each month.” She also spoke of the building’s use of data. She emphasized this when she stated,
We have regular data team meetings, where we talk about not just reading and math, but we dig down little deeper. We do a lot of pre-and post-data collection, and I believe teachers are starting to realize that their smart goal data collection has to be formalized and they are starting to embed it in more and more units.

As the teachers track data, they are able to utilize the building’s RTI model to meet all students’ needs. Ms. Dennis said, “we have two different times each day where students are grouped by need. Those groups are flexible and they change about every 6 to 8 weeks.”

The leadership team of Downly Intermediate School was quite passionate about the work they do in regards to ensuring that students learn. The first member the team to speak on the subject stated,

We absolutely follow the corollary questions; we talk about it a lot. We start with curriculum, what do we want the kids to know? And from our curriculum we pull out essential learning outcomes, so what are the essential things that they need to know, and that’s where our common assessments are either pulled from or are being formed around because it’s an ever-changing process.

Another member of the team described the teachers’ process as,

Then we all utilize a backwards design model, so we figure out what they need to know and then we form the assessments and then plan our lessons according to that. Once we get the results, we track the data, we have
intervention time, or we reteach or do different strategies. We don’t just switch around for intervention time; a lot of our grade levels switch around for spelling. We do a lot of sharing kids, and I think our mindset is they are our kids, not just my kids.

The principal and leadership team of Earlton Elementary School, while emphasizing the curriculum writing process they have completed and speaking about their RTI model, spoke very little on the topic of data collection and tracking. The principal stated, “I feel like we’re doing a fair to good job with data, but I do feel like we could drill down and get a little more focused so it’s not such a broad shot at things.” The only mention of data by the leadership team was when a member stated, “we are very data driven. We are really learning how to track data, and students are learning how to track their own data.”

*Focus on Results*

Research conducted on the effectiveness of PLCs has found that, for the process to be successful, teachers must focus on data and utilize that data in team and school planning practices. DuFour et al. (2008) concluded that “schools will not know whether or not all students are learning unless educators are hungry for evidence that students are acquiring the knowledge, skills, and dispositions deemed most essential to their success” (p. 18). Roberts and Pruitt (2009) concluded data analysis is essential to ensure all students learn, and teachers should collect and collectively analyze formative and summative assessments in order to plan instruction.
As seen in the previous section on how schools ensure students learn, the use and analysis of data was the focus of almost every team interviewed for the study. Schools one through four spoke extensively on the use of data and how it drives almost every decision that is made by the leadership team and the administration; the exception to this was Earlton Elementary School where the use of data was not emphasized but was discussed in a cursory manner.

When asked the specific question of how data are utilized in team and school planning practices, one member of the leadership team of Avendale Elementary School stated, “it drives classrooms, it drives our RTI time. It drives centers.” Another member of the team explained,

We are also starting our first round of data teams; that is where we meet as a grade level with our principal and our Title I math and reading specialists, and we get together as a team to look through our data. We are collaborating to see how we can help the most kids and work together as a team to come up with a solution.

This same process was being followed in Brookside Elementary School, which was just completing their first round of data teaming for this year. The emphasis from the leadership team of Brookside Elementary School was on the fact that they, “sit down and we just talk about every student.”

The leadership team and principal of Carter Elementary School were again passionate on the topic of how data is utilized in school planning. The principal reiterated that when the leadership team wants to make changes in curriculum or practices, “there
better be data to support it.” The leadership team of Carter Elementary School emphasized the four corollary questions of the PLC process; one member of the team stated,

I think you have to begin with the analysis of your data, what are the strengths, what are the weaknesses? Then determine where you need to go, you know going back to the corollary questions. What do we need to teach them? What are we going to do if they don’t know it? What are we going to do if they do know it? By beginning with that and keeping that in mind, that is how we plan our units.

This process of going back to the corollary questions and of teachers asking themselves about their processes as they move forward was echoed by another member of the team, who acknowledged,

You have to look at your rigor. Am I teaching them where I should be? You really use that to adjust; just because you’ve put a skill on your pacing guides two weeks, it doesn’t mean they had to stick to that. If your data shows that you don’t need another week on that, then of course you can revamp. It allows flexibility and just to know when kids need to move on.

Ms. Dennis stated that data are used a great deal in their building on a daily basis. She emphasized that data are used to “form our intervention groups, to show growth, but what we’re starting to find more and more, is it’s also helping us to collect data about our curriculum.” As the teachers and administrators are working on the conversion to the
common core, the principal stated that they are really feeling out where they need to make changes. “We have vertical teams at work on the core areas, and so those teams are using the data they collect to say we’re missing the boat on this concept and we need to beef it up or look at the curriculum again.”

The leadership team of Downly Intermediate concurs with their principal, with one stating that the team uses data,

Almost daily on our team planning practices, so it’s used to guide instruction, to group kids, to improve teachers, to identify where re-teaching needs to take place, and often times we’ll just give a pre-test to see if they have the skills.

Another member of the team concluded that data are “a big part; it’s used for smart goals and pretty much everything we do.”

As stated earlier, the leadership team and principal of Earlton Elementary School were less positive about the use of data within the building. Ms. Eventon reiterated this by stating, “I feel like we’re doing a fair to good job with data, but I do feel like we could drill down and get a little more focused.” But having stated this, despite the fact that she did not feel she and her team utilized data as well as they could, she concluded, “when I look around I feel like we’re in a really good place, and our scores are really increasing.”

*Celebration*

In order to sustain focus on the vision and values of the PLC, “celebrations for small efforts or large are definitely in order” (Hord & Sommers, 2008, p. 137). DuFour et al. (2008) concurred that celebrating small “victories and the people behind
them...sustain momentum for change” (p. 426). Celebrations must be “genuine and linked directly to the district or school’s mission, vision, values, and goals” (Eaker & Keating, 2012, p.41). Eaker and Keating further posited, “it is impossible to overstate the importance of frequent, meaningful celebrations for both students and adults” (p. 58) and “we must celebrate at each stage in the journey--every time significant work is successfully completed” (p. 109).

Each school in the study reported that celebration was a major part of their daily practices; this included celebrations of student success and of team and individual success. The principal of Avendale Elementary School explained that “whenever we are together in a whole group, whether the steering team or the entire PLC group, we celebrate, so we ask for celebrations and sometimes we sit there without hearing anything.” She further explained that she and her team “celebrate little things too. We also celebrate silly things to keep up morale; like today is national polka dot day, so there’s staff wearing polka dots today.” In addition to the small celebrations completed each day, Ms. Adams reported, “and of course we announce every time we have big data gains.”

The leadership team of Avendale Elementary School reiterated the fact that every meeting begins with celebrations, with one member of the team stating, “sometimes it’s easier than others to come up with it, but it is intentional.” The leadership team also focused a great deal on celebrations for students and for their success academically and behaviorally. One member stated,
At our PBS assemblies we celebrate our students for good behavior in front of all the students, and we tell the students why. So they all know what to strive for, and we celebrate that with them. We make it clear that it’s about behavior, not academics in this case. We let them know that you can still be great without being the top of your class.

Another member of the team added that these students “get lunch with the principal, and she reads it over the intercom. We call them ‘paws for praise’ and these cards are then sent to their parents with that same praise.”

Mr. Barnes stated that staff celebration is a part of every team meeting and whole staff meeting on the late start Wednesdays. He also emphasized celebrations for students, stating,

Through PBS, we have several positive behavior awards for the students and the teachers. We call these ‘paws for praise,’ and I read these each morning on the intercom. Then I stand at the door and give high fives as they come in.

The leadership team of Brookside Elementary School was very positive about the celebrations conducted by the teachers and by the principal of the building. When asked how celebration was used in the building, one member of the team stated,

Oh constantly. Our special teachers host a PBS assembly once a month with all grade levels. It happens all day long, and students are recognized for each special area along with attendance. They get a reward, and we do track how many students we recognize.
In addition to these celebrations for students, another member of the team emphasized that “the principal has a student of the month from each classroom.”

In addition to the celebrations for students, the leadership team of Brookside Elementary School emphasized the principal’s celebrations of teachers’ successes. One member stated, “we have Tiger bucks for teachers if we get recognized for something, something as small as making sure your name and date are on a note coming to the office, and hey, like the kids, I like getting recognized.” According to another team member, the principal, on a daily basis, recognized teachers on the intercom in the mornings by announcing things “like he was in this classroom and Mrs. so-and-so’s children were doing this. I mean every once in a while you like to get that praise.”

The principal and leadership team of Carter Elementary School spoke extensively of the celebrations their school conducts on a regular basis. Ms. Christian stated, “you know, I don’t know if you can ever recognize too much.” And one member of the leadership team stated simply, “we like to celebrate!” Celebrations are held for student success as well as teacher success, and the principal emphasized that celebrations aren’t always huge. She said that she’d found, “even just the intercom that is so simple. But we announce you know so-and-so mastered his math facts, and they get a thrill, because they get to bring me the sticky note saying that we recognize compliments.” She further added, “if the class gets 100 compliments in the hallways, they get something, but you know we try not to party too much, and not do a movie every Friday. It needs to be goal specific.”
The leadership team of Carter Elementary School concurred that celebrations can be effective even though they are not huge. One member of the team stated, “it’s not like we have to have a pizza party, just hearing their name on the intercom gets them so excited.” Another member of the team added that,

I think we also have ample opportunities for the parents to come in and participate in the celebrations. We do have involvement activities where they come in, and we can share something about success with our grade level curriculum and get the parents involved in the excitement.

Carter Elementary School, according to Ms. Christian, also holds regular celebrations of teacher success in big and small ways. During the 2014-2015 school year, she, Started a staff member the month; where they nominate people from the staff. But I might also say at the staff meeting that so-and-so is doing a good job with something new in her classroom. I do this especially for people who aren’t always getting the press. It’s just recognizing silly little things that they do well so they feel appreciated.

Ms. Christian emphasized the importance of these little celebrations, because “teachers don’t do it for the money, but they need to feel appreciated.”

The leadership team emphasized the new staff member of the month celebrations held in the building. One stated, “we as teachers get to nominate other teachers or staff for staff member the month. It might be simply that we see something they do wonderful
or if they have helped us in a certain way.” Another added that, “we also recognize them in our faculty meetings.”

Another member of the leadership team stated that the faculty and staff also celebrate in little ways. She stated, “as a staff, we are pretty good about getting together and just having fun.” Another member the team added, “I think since we’ve done the PLC, we complement each other and we really have fun together. And that’s a nice thing. It’s not just all serious.”

Ms. Dennis used celebration time as a chance to give her teachers more PLC time together. She explained,

Myself and my lead teacher take all of the students each Friday morning for an hour, and during that time we do a lot of celebrating from character types of things to academic achievement, attendance, and so that’s our regular celebration time.

She continued by explaining that the school also

Does a lot of MAP celebrations when we get our state scores back, and we share celebrations with parents, and they share with us. Even things not related to academics, you know, they send us things about what their kids are doing in the community, so I feel like it’s really embedded.

When Ms. Eventon was asked about how celebration is used in her building, she stated, “we need to get better at that, but I do feel we celebrate. We try to draw out good things that are happening in our building and recognize kids.” She stated the building
begins every morning with an assembly for students, and although she no longer conducts those assemblies, when she did, she liked to celebrate the little things. She explained,

I might just say, you know yesterday I was having a bad day at the end of the day. When I went in, and you know Justin, Justin stand up, he was in the office and he was just smiling. Have you ever been around someone that is just always smiling? Gosh that’s just the biggest compliment, it’s like sunshine on a rainy day. Justin I just want to thank you for that.

The principal concluded, “it’s like those little things we tried to instill in our kids to celebrate, like the good qualities that we see in our kids throughout the day.”

When the leadership team of Earlton Elementary School was asked about celebration, once again their focus was on the role the principal plays. Unlike the other schools that talked about how celebration is used in their classrooms too, the members of Earlton Elementary School’s leadership team emphasized that the principal “makes a point to point out things she has seen that we are doing well.” Another added that, “we get Lifesavers at meetings for things we have done well.”

Analysis of Research Question Number Two

The second research question guiding this study was: how do members of leadership teams and principals describe the principal’s role in regard to implementation of the Missouri PLC program? To explore and find answers for this question, the researcher asked specifically how the PLC program was initiated within the buildings, what the roles of the leadership team and the principal were in that initiation, and how
those roles have changed since implementation of the program. The following paragraphs present analysis of the data collected in regards to these components.

One major component of creating a PLC in a school is the concept of shared leadership; however, Hord and Sommers (2008) concluded “the principal is the identified leader to focus the conversation and the behaviors in the school that will initiate and sustain learning” (p. 96). DuFour et al. (2008) concluded, “no successful professional learning community will form” (p. 303) if the principal is not committed to the change needed for the transformation. According to Sparks (2005) “leaders shape conversations by persistently offering their values, intentions, and beliefs to others and by expressing themselves in clear declarative sentences” (p. 157). Leclerc et al. (2012) concluded “leadership from the principal is…a crucial factor” (p. 3) in the successful implementation of a PLC and “to progress their school as a PLC, principals must exercise a leadership that corresponds well with a learning organization” (p. 12).

*Steps Taken to Implement the PLC Program*

The principals of Avendale and Brookside were not serving as administrators when their district implemented PLCs across the board; however, they were both working in the district at that time. Ms. Adams was a teacher in the district when PLCs were first implemented 11 years ago. When asked about the steps taken to initiate the program, she stated that the district “started midyear, and they said hey, we’re going to this late start and we’re going to try to do some professional development.” She continued, “we just thought PLCs were professional development, and then we learned after years of
development and pain that it was more than just professional development. There was a lot more to it.”

One member of the leadership team of Avendale Elementary School stated, “the first year we really didn’t know what was going on, including our administrator, so we did a book study. It was not PLC as we know it.” Another added, “no one knew what it was, how it looked and what we were asked to do.”

The same sentiment was expressed by the leadership team of Brookside Elementary School. One member described the beginnings of the PLC process as,

We were all just kind of muddling our way through; it was brand-new and we got late starts. We started making assessments and things, but nothing was really data-driven. It was just kind of wobbly there at the beginning, and I think that it was that way and every building.

Unlike the principals of schools one and two, and of school four, the principal of Carter Elementary School was in her current position when PLCs were implemented. When the researcher asked the leadership team how the program was initiated in the building, one stated that Ms. Christian “kind of spearheaded this, and talked with some of the RPDC people and kind of figured out that we were ready to take those next steps.”

Several members of the team emphasized that the principal frontloaded a great deal of information and learning for the teachers before implementing the PLC’s in Carter Elementary School. One member the team stated, “we had a lot of education; we got to go to the PLC Institute at St. Charles. Once we got there, we realized that we were maybe a little ahead of the game, because we had already been educated.”
Another member of the team emphasized that almost every member of the faculty attended the PLC Institute in St. Charles that first year, and “after that initial conference, we came back and we started the school year, and we didn’t just plow into it. She guided us through it step by step, and that helped.” One member of the team expressed that part of the reason their trip to the first PLC Institute was so successful was because,

At that initial conference, those evenings, we ate dinner together. Our minds started rolling with it, what we liked about it and what we learned to implement. So we spent that time together in the evenings we were able to start implementing things piece by piece.

One final member concluded, “I think another thing is that we were not just told this is what you have to do and this is how you will do it. We were able to take what we had learned, come back and say where do we go to start this?”

Ms. Dennis was not in the district when PLCs were implemented in her building, but the members of the leadership team interviewed for this study were in the building when PLCs were started. One member of the team described the process of how PLCs were initiated as,

It was initiated and brought up from our superintendent of the time. It was a little bit of a top down approach, but the idea was there. I feel like we got really good, extensive training those first couple of years, and those of us on the leadership team got to attend trainings through the RPDC. We got a lot of stuff to bring back to our buildings, and we would do a lot of the same activities or processes with our staff.
Another member of the team added that “there was good support from our principal at the
time; he kind of took a little bit more of a backseat and let the leadership team really
drive it. He was kind of there just as support maybe.”

When the researcher asked Ms. Eventon about how the PLC process was initiated
in her building, she stated, “well, I started that. I shouldn’t say that, we started that my
second year here. That was because my first year I was trying to learn the culture and get
to know the building.” She stated there was a need in the building for change, because

It was very apparent that our staff felt the disconnect from kindergarten to
eighth grade. Everyone was doing the best they knew how, but no one
knew what the right arm and the left arm were doing. I mean, it was like
separate schools and even separate schools within grades.

She concluded that, “there were some good practices going on, but there was no
consistency.”

Before coming to Earlton Elementary School, Ms. Eventon had worked in a
district where PLCs had been implemented the first year Missouri started their program.
She stated she wanted to implement PLCs because, “I had, on the front end, already seen
the potential for PLCs and had seen the pitfalls too.” She continued that, “when I came
here and saw the needs of the district, it was a no-brainer.”

Members of the leadership team of Earlton Elementary School explained the
initiation of the program in the same manner as the principal. One stated that she,
meaning Ms. Eventon, “started PLCs here her second year after getting to know our
building and how we do things.” Another member of the team stated that, “during that first year, she introduced PLCs to us and let us get used to it before implementation.”

**Principal and Leadership Team Roles at Implementation**

As stated earlier, the principals of Aventon and Brookside were not administrators when the district implemented the PLC process. However, as both were teachers in the district, they were aware that implementation was put upon their principals at the time and that even the administrators do not understand what their role should be. Mr. Barnes stated, “the district wasn’t very helpful, they just said do it. I don’t think they had the knowledge at that point, so it came down to that we worked together and just kind of developed it ourselves.”

When members of the leadership team at Avendale Elementary School were asked about their roles in the leadership team when the process was established, one member stated, “I was just a member. We were members, but you know, there was really nothing PLC. It was just a book study.” When asked by the researcher if there was no leadership team when they first started, another member of the team stated,

In the beginning there was no leadership team, the whole building was doing PLC. We all did the book study, but the leader was really the principal. It was her guidance that really drove all we did, and no one really knew where we were driving to. We were just all on the same bus going to a place that we didn’t know where it was.

When asked about her role at the initiation of the PLC process in Carter
Elementary, Ms. Christian stated that she was “pretty instrumental in the beginning; I mean, if you don’t have the buy-in of the leadership, it is not going to work. So getting people excited about it and letting them see for themselves the value in the process was pretty critical.” Ms. Christian of Carter Elementary School further concluded, “the top leadership has to get it; they have to understand what it is and then do the work that comes with it. You can’t just throw the names out there, sit back, and make it happen. It’s a lot of work.”

The leadership team of Carter Elementary School described their roles at the beginning as much the same as they are now. One member stated, “I think we were the representative committee for our grade levels, so it started out as we were kind of grade level chairs.” She continued, that as members of the committee, they “would go to meetings, and we would get information…that would affect the whole school and then take it back and share it.” This member also stated that before PLCs, the role of grade level chair tended to rotate from year-to-year, but when Ms. Christian came to the building, she was, “really good at choosing certain people for those roles, so she looked at the grade levels, found those strengths and who could really lead the grade level of it needed to be led. Then it became more of a group of us stayed together.”

Ms. Dennis was not in the building or the district when PLCs were implemented at Downly Elementary. However, she stated that when she came to the district, the teachers of the district felt her “role should include more involvement. It was too hands-off before and they felt they were floating a bit without some guidance.”
Members of the leadership team of Downly Intermediate School stated that when the process was initiated in the building, the leadership team met weekly. The building “used to do early release on Wednesdays for the first five or six years, and then as soon as our early release time was over, the leadership team would meet.” One member of the team commented that through this process, “we got a lot accomplished, but it was baby steps. We would take on one big task and we would do it full out. Another baby step, and then go one to the next step and just keep layering them.”

Ms. Eventon stated that in the beginning of the PLC process it was her role “to have that whole get on the bus or get off the bus conversation. There was a lot of complaining in the beginning, so we had to take some time and really discuss the four corollary questions.” She explained that her role initially was to get her teachers focused on deciding what was most important for them as a district and to ensure that everyone working in the building was on board with the process. She explained,

In the beginning that was my job, because there were some people here at that time that maybe aren’t here anymore. That wasn’t really just my decision, but together we came to the conclusion that maybe this was not the best fit for them. In the beginning that was my function, to be the voice that stood up and said that, but I knew the leadership team was behind me and the collaborative teams were behind them and we were together on that.
Ms. Eventon concluded that this process “took about two years to get it where we are all totally high functioning, and we don’t have to worry about everyone being on that same page.”

The leadership team of Earlton Elementary School explained that their role in the beginning of implementation of the PLC process was for each member of the leadership team to be in charge of a smaller group. The leadership team would “meet once a week and take information back to our smaller teams, and then concerns and ideas trickled back to the leadership team.”

How Have Roles Changed?

When Ms. Adams was asked about how her role in the PLC process has changed, she acknowledged that that her role has changed greatly. When the process was started in the district, she was a teacher, and stated that “as a teacher I avoided any leadership. I just wanted to be there with my kids and that is it.” When she was promoted to the role of principal at her previous school, “that was kind of a hard time. They had been through kind of an ordeal, and there was no cohesion.” She further explained that,

The steering team that was there really was not working with other teachers, so that was the biggest hurdle we had to get over. To create a sense of trust and community and collaborative teaming was the biggest obstacle for me to take on when I first started my principalship there. That was done relatively quickly, and from there, it just blossomed. The steering team kind of wiped the slate clean, and they started from scratch. They did a great job with collaboration and teamwork.
Because Ms. Adams is in her first year in this new building, the researcher asked her what her role has been in the new school. She began by stating, “I stepped into a well running, fine-tuned PLC steering team and PLC process in this building.” She saw her role as that of an advisor, because the leadership team is continuing the work they started the previous year, and she is “just making sure that everything is continuing the work they began.” She concluded by stating that her role is just to help facilitate the work of the leadership team.

Mr. Barnes also started his administrative tenure in a building that implemented the PLC program before he was hired as principal. However, because his predecessor did not understand the work of the PLC, he explained that his role at the beginning “was more directed at that point, because nobody knew much about PLCs. It was like bringing in a whole new program.” He stated that his role now is that of a teacher leader, and he wants his leadership team “to carry that load.” He sees it as his role to empower teachers and let them do their jobs, because “when you empower teachers they do more than you thought was possible and get things done.” Mr. Barnes concluded that “those things we do, we do with high expectations. I expect people to do these things if that’s what we are committed to.”

Ms. Christian, when asked how her role had changed in the PLC process, explained that at this point she did not have “to direct as much,” because some members of the leadership team “have been on it for five years now.” She continued that the building does PBS with the PLC process and that she doesn’t “do anything with PBS anymore. I mean they run things by me, but instructional coaches have taken over a lot of
the responsibility.” Because she has chosen to step back and allow the leadership team and other staff members to be leaders, she believes “the leadership team has become more and more empowered to actually facilitate meetings and coordinate initiatives, so my role has definitely taken on a more supportive role rather than directive.”

The leadership team of Carter Elementary School stated that their roles had not changed much since the inception of the program. The education component they received during the planning process for implementation defined their role from the beginning. One member of the team explained, “we discuss more, but it hasn’t really changed that much in what we do. Everything we discuss goes back to the grade level teams, and it’s all discussed at the grade level and that’s how we share information.” One aspect that members of the leadership team of Carter Elementary School said had changed in their role as members of the leadership team was in the openness they share at this point as compared to when they first started the PLC process. One member of the team concluded, “I think it boils down to once we start discussing, you can hear a lot of different opinions but in the end it’s what’s best for kids. That’s what we always come back to, what’s the very best for kids.”

Ms. Dennis stated that her role “was much the same” as when she came to the district. Although she believes the teachers of her building were looking for more guidance from her at the beginning, she stated that she would “like to be a little less leading them.” She continued by stating, “I think they rely on me too much, and I would say that my role has been stepped back just little bit, but I haven’t stepped back enough.”
The leadership team of school four, however, expressed that their roles had changed since PLCs had first started. One member the team stated, “like with the leadership meetings, we decreased those, because we’ve kind of gotten things more organized and got it together now.” This same member of the team saw the leadership team’s role in a different light than her principal did. She stated, “I just feel like we need less guidance from the top down. Now I feel like it’s the teams and the team leaders helping to keep it organized. We’ve come a long way.”

Unlike the principals of the other four schools that have stepped back and allowed their leadership teams to be more of a driving force in the building, Ms. Eventon, while expressing that her role had changed, still described a process where she played a major role in the workings of the PLC process. This principal stated, “our teachers have a say in just about everything,” but she then also stated, “so, it’s choosing what we need to get their input on.” This point was driven home when one member of the leadership team stated, “our role hasn’t changed really.” The leadership team went on to describe their role as one where they are given information and they take it back to their teams and then communicate back to the leadership team.

Analysis of Research Question Number Three

The third research question guiding this study was: how is transformational leadership exhibited by principals of Missouri exemplary PLC schools? In order to explore and find answers for this question, the researcher asked the principal and leadership teams about the principal’s leadership style and about the principals strengths as a leader. Additionally, other questions used during the interviews dealt with aspects of
transformational leadership also seen as components of PLCs, and therefore, the researcher was able to glean data concerning transformational leadership from the responses to these questions.

For the purposes of this study, shared leadership has been defined as a leadership style that encourages followers to develop their leadership skills, celebrates success, and encourages innovation in followers. On varied levels all five principals in the study demonstrated traits of a transformational leader in their responses to the researcher’s questions. The leadership teams of the first four schools were very adamant about how their principals have encouraged their leadership skills and have encouraged them to grow in their roles on the leadership team.

The principal of Avendale Elementary School described her leadership style as one of shared leadership. She stated, “I believe in my teachers as professionals, and I let them do what they do best and teach.” In regards to her teachers, Ms. Adams also acknowledged, “I rely heavily on their input and their expertise to know what the kids are doing and what the kids are not doing.” Members of Avendale Elementary School’s leadership team echoed this aspect of their principal, when one stated, “coming in, she hasn’t wanted to try and make a lot of changes. She’s kind of let things be, and let things that work for us just be.”

Members of the leadership team described Ms. Adams as calm and supportive and acknowledged that even though she is in her first year in this building, she has encouraged them to be the leaders. One member of the leadership team acknowledged that the principal had “given us that space to see if maybe we can be the leaders.”
Another member the team stated Ms. Adams had “asserted her confidence; she has been like, your school had great scores last year and I know you are doing things the right way. She really let us know she had faith in us.”

Because Mr. Barnes had previously been at Avendale Elementary School, the researcher was able to glean more data about his role in his buildings. When the researcher asked Mr. Barnes about his leadership style, the assistant principal immediately described the principal as having “shared leadership.” The principal reinforced this leadership style when he stated that he liked “to get the teachers involved and let the leaders step out there.” He further stated, “when you empower teachers they do more than you thought was possible and get things done.” The assistant principal stated that by Mr. Barnes allowing the teachers and staff to make decisions and to be leaders, “they have ownership.”

Mr. Barnes described his strength as a leader in the fact that he allows “people to do their job.” He further stated that when the leader allows their staff to do their jobs, “more comes out and there’s follow through.”

Because Mr. Barnes had been at Avendale Elementary School during the 2013-2014 school year, the researcher asked Avendale Elementary School’s leadership team to describe how their former principal encouraged them to build their leadership skills. One member of the leadership team stated that Mr. Barnes had “strongly encouraged my education. Every year at our back-to-school meeting, it was like how many of you have your masters?” Another member of the team stated, “he gave a former teacher here plenty
of time in his office when he was gone. She is now a principal in the district.” One other member of the team concluded,

When things needed solved, he would bring them to the steering committee, and he would encourage us to help him come up with a solution. He’d be like what do you guys think, and he encouraged us to know if a grade level had something that wasn’t working. He would work with us and ask, how would you guys solve this? What do you think is going to work here? He always said that his role was a facilitator.

The leadership team of Brookside Elementary School echoed the sentiments of the leadership team of Avendale Elementary School. When asked to describe Mr. Barnes as a school leader, one member the team described him as “seasoned. He wants everyone to be aware of the buildings workings, not just him doing it; he wants everyone to be involved.” Although members of this team had only worked with Mr. Barnes for a little over six weeks at the time of this interview, they described him as “very knowledgeable. Supportive. Very visible.” Another member of the team stated, “he’s supportive; he’s a facilitator. It’s kind of like what we try to do with our students, we kind of focus them and let them go, but then there is guidance if we need that guidance.” One member of the team concluded, “he allows us to take ownership.”

When the researcher asked the leadership team how Mr. Barnes encouraged teachers to develop their leadership skills, they expressed how he was expecting and encouraging them to handle issues they had never dealt with before. One member the team spoke of how he was encouraging them to take control of “things we probably
didn’t have our hands on” before. Another member of the team concluded, “he has stepped back, and we have stepped up.”

Ms. Christian, when asked to describe herself as a school leader, stated, “I try to be very collaborative; I think the further up on the educational food chain you get, generally speaking, you have a lot of control issues, and I’ve gotten much better at that through the years.” She further stated her belief that “if people are to have the responsibility, they need to have the power to make decisions.” This principal expressed that the PLC program had helped her grow as a leader also. She stated, “I always thought I was fairly collaborative, but now more so. I believe the PLC program helped with that, as far as establishing the leadership team and allowing them to make decisions.”

Members of the leadership team of Carter Elementary School described Ms. Christian as, “very supportive. Encouraging, actually, she encourages everyone to continue their education, to do and go beyond where they are right now.” Another member of the team stated that the principal, “really recognizes our qualities and promotes those qualities to help the district.” Other members of the team described her as very approachable, positive, and forward thinking.

When Ms. Christian was asked how she, as the school’s leader, encouraged teachers to develop their leadership skills, she expressed desire to allow everyone’s voice to be heard. She stated,

I give them opportunities to lead, and like I said, some of them don’t view themselves as leaders because they’re not the loudest ones, the most vivacious. It’s trying to find their strengths and giving them those
opportunities…. And then they start getting empowered…. I think the biggest thing is just giving them opportunities, finding opportunities where they can be successful.

Ms. Christian concluded, “not everyone is going to facilitate a PLC team all year, but everyone can lead if a principal just gives them opportunities.”

When asked the same question, multiple members of the leadership team of Carter Elementary School stated that they never would have started their master’s degrees in administration if it had not been for Ms. Christian’s leadership and encouragement. One member of the leadership team that had just completed her Masters said,

I never thought I would. You know, I was a fourth grade teacher forever, but she saw me develop leadership skills I didn’t even know I was doing…. Now I’ve completed the leadership Academy, I go to leadership meetings, and I do a lot of different things that she has given me the opportunity to do.

Another member of the leadership team stated Ms. Christian “encourages you to step out of your comfort zone.” This team member described a leadership activity where the entire team spent the day on a high ropes course, and despite the fact that the team member was not comfortable in this situation to begin with, she stated, “but I got up on that pole. I think it taught me a lot about what I need to work on to be a good leader. It was definitely a rough day, but I knew that I can count on these guys, so it was very eye-opening.”

Ms. Dennis described her leadership style as one of active participation with her teachers and staff. She stated, “I like to get in there and do things that they are doing with them. I, a lot of times, let them come up with their own answers…. They have more
ownership when they come up with answers themselves.” She further explained her strengths as a leader as communications and as being “really strong at building relationships.”

Ms. Dennis’s assessment of her leadership style was supported by the members of her leadership team. The members of the team described her as an instructional leader and as very supportive of the teachers. One member of the team stated, “I don’t feel that there has ever been a time that she’s not in support of what we’re doing, and she’s very willing to listen if there is concern.”

Ms. Dennis, when asked about how she encouraged teachers to develop their leadership skills, said, “that’s my favorite thing to do.” She further explained that when a teacher expresses a desire to go into administration, “I get really excited, I say let me help you. I try to just have a lot of conversations with teacher leaders and talk about examples of things that are happening, and say, what would you do? Or do you have any thoughts on this?” Ms. Dennis concluded, “I think I just kind of value their input and give them lots of different experiences, especially those teachers that are getting ready to have an administration degree.”

The members of Carter Elementary School’s leadership team recognized their principal’s role in developing their leadership skills in the time she’s been in the building. One member of the team stated that, “she’s the one who really encouraged me to go into administration. I was just kind of floating around, for the last seven years as a mentor, and I really didn’t have a plan for a Master’s degree.” This same member stated, “I think
she does a really good job of finding people that she sees the leadership qualities in and pushing them into that direction.”

During the interviews at Earlton Elementary School, it seemed to the researcher that there appeared to be somewhat of a disconnect between how Ms. Eventon described her own style and how the leadership team described her leadership. Ms. Eventon described her style as “definitely collaborative, but collaborative almost in a selfish way.” She further explained this by stating, “I know that sounds strange, but sometimes I feel selfish…. I don’t know how you would get the insights or the answers if you need to really make the best decisions” without using collaboration. However, she then went on to explain “I want their input; I need their input. I couldn’t do it if I didn’t have their input. You really have to have that input from your staff.” As stated in Chapter Two of this study, shared and supportive leadership in a PLC should be seen as more than getting a vote on issues of importance to the organization. However, the process described by Ms. Eventon lends itself to this view of the process.

The members of leadership team number five expressed that their principal, “took the initiative to move us forward and help us focus on what is important.” One member of the team reiterated that the principal “values shared leadership and wants each voice to be heard.” However, when the team was asked about shared and supportive leadership, their description centered around a team that is basically a conduit for communication between the principal and the other teachers and that centers around members having a vote on issues, with little emphasis on the team’s leadership role.
Summary

This chapter has presented the study design, data collection methods, participants of the study, conceptual underpinnings, and the process of data analysis. Additionally, descriptions of each school’s setting and of the principals who participated in the study were also presented. Finally, each guiding research question was explored and data were presented in depth. Chapter Five of this study will present the findings and conclusions based upon this data analysis. Implications for practice and recommendations for future study will also be presented in Chapter Five.
CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to determine three things: to what extent Missouri exemplary schools implemented the components of the Professional Learning Community (PLC) movement; what the role of the principal or building level administrator was in regards to the implementation of the PLC program, and to determine the extent to which the principals of the exemplary schools operated as transformational leaders in the context of the PLC program. Through a series of interviews with the principals and leadership teams of five exemplary schools, selected through purposeful sampling by the researcher, data were recorded as they occurred and were reviewed and analyzed through the personal lens of the researcher (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1998).

In an effort to ensure accuracy and credibility of the study’s findings, the researcher used “rich, thick description” to convey the findings,” clarified “the bias the researcher brings to the study,” and presented “negative or discrepant information that runs counter to the themes” of the study (Creswell, p. 196). Finally, data were presented in a qualitative format, utilizing the words of the study participants to explore the research questions in detail. From the data presented in Chapter Four three important items became clear; the first of these is that, to varying degrees, all five schools in the study implement the components of the PLC process in their daily work with students; second, the principal plays an important role in that process. The third item to emerge from the data was that the majority of the principals involved in the study exhibited
extensive traits of a transformational leader, while one of the principals was less representative of a transformational leader.

Presented in Chapter Five is a summary of the findings and conclusions based on the data analysis contained in Chapter Four, implications for practice, and recommendations for further study. By recording and transcribing interviews of participants, the researcher was able to present the data in each participant’s words and language as recommended by Creswell (2003).

Summary of Findings

This study was guided by two conceptual underpinnings: the concept of the professional learning community, as presented in the works of Hord et al. and Dufour et al., and the theory of transformational leadership as presented by Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) and Crowley (2011). To this end the researcher created a series of fifteen questions designed to explore the perceptions of the principals and leadership teams in regards the components of PLCs and the principals’ leadership styles. From analysis of the data a number of themes emerged; these themes were as follows: a stringent adherence to the PLC process and the components of that process, a focus on student success, trust on two levels between the leadership team and the principal and between the different members of leadership teams, a belief in the importance of the principal’s role in the ongoing PLC process, and finally the theme of transformational leadership was apparent.
Adherence to PLC Components

The first obvious theme to be gleaned from the data was that, to varying degrees, each of the schools in the study adhered to the components of the PLC process as presented in the work of Hord and Dufour as reported by various sources (DuFour, 2004; DuFour, 2007; DuFour et al., 2008; DuFour and Eaker, 1998; Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Hipp et al., 2003; Hord, 1997; Hord et al., 1999, Huffman & Hipp, 2000; Huffman, 2001; Hughes & Kritsonis, 2006; Meehan et al., 1997; Morrissey, 2000) and in the Missouri PLC program. Each of the first four schools’ leadership teams and principals spoke at times with a great deal of passion in regards to the effectiveness of the work they were doing through the program components. One thing that arose for the researcher was an obvious disconnect at times between what the principal of Earlton Elementary School perceived and what the members of the leadership team of Earlton Elementary School presented in their interviews.

The first example of this disconnect is seen in regard to shared and supportive leadership amongst the teachers and leadership teams of the various schools. At various points in the interviews each of the first four principals expressed desire to empower their leadership teams to assume the leadership in regards to student success. Each of these first four schools presented, through their answers to interview questions and their obvious regard for each other’s opinions, an image of shared leadership that included the three critical attributes of shared leadership as presented by Hipp and Huffman (2003). These three attributes include: “nurturing leadership among staff; shared power, authority, and responsibility; and broad-based decision-making for commitment and
accountability” (p. 6). Ms. Eventon and her leadership team did not present this image in their descriptions of their building’s process. At one point Ms. Eventon spoke of allowing her teachers to “have a say in just about everything.” This is in stark contrast to the manner in which Mr. Barnes described his desire to have his teachers “carry the load.” He felt this was important, because “if they do, they become more aware….”

This same disconnect can be found in the responses of Earlton Elementary School’s principal and leadership team in regard to collective learning and shared personal practice among the staff. While the first four schools emphasized in-house learning and the use of modeling in their classrooms at various levels, the participants from Earlton Elementary School spoke in very general terms about professional development its and the desire to “seek out the best PD we can get our entire staff.” Earlton Elementary School’s interpretation of collective learning and shared personal practice falls shorts of the school where teachers are encouraged “to interact, provide feedback, and share results of student learning experiences” as suggested by Hipp and Huffman (2003, p. 6).

Finally, the components of ensuring students learn and focusing on results are evident in all of the schools in the study, but to a lesser degree in Earlton Elementary School. While participants from each of the first four schools in the study spoke extensively of their use of data to inform decisions and to drive instruction, the same enthusiasm was not found in Earlton Elementary School. When asked how Earlton Elementary School ensures students learn, the principal replied, “I feel like we’re doing a fair to good job with data, but I do feel like we could drill down and get a little more
focused so it’s not such a broad shot at things.” DuFour et al. (2008) concluded that “schools will not know whether or not all students are learning unless educators are hungry for evidence that students are acquiring the knowledge, skills, and dispositions deemed most essential to their success” (p. 18). And while the data show this is happening in the first four schools interviewed for this study, Earlton Elementary School, while working with data to some extent, falls short in regards to this description of the use of data and evidence.

The data presented in Chapter Four suggested that the components of effective PLCs are present in each of the first four schools and to some degree in Earlton Elementary School. Participants from each school, including Earlton Elementary School, spoke with passion in regards to certain aspects of the PLC process in their buildings. Participants from all five schools expressed enthusiasm about the process of creating shared values and vision that was followed in their buildings.

**Focus on Student Success**

The second theme to emerge from the analysis of the data presented in Chapter Four is that of how the individual schools emphasized student success as the focus of their work on a daily basis. High achievement on state tests and Missouri’s Annual Performance Report is one component of the Exemplary PLC Recognition guidelines (see Appendix F). The data indicated a major part of this theme was the focus on all students, as evidenced through the emphasis on each school’s RTI program and the desire to “develop a school-wide, systematic plan to provide students with additional time, support, or enrichment within the school day” (Eaker & Keating, 2012, p. 112).
All five schools in the study reported an active RTI model with time built into each day to provide the support and enrichment each individual child may need. While it is often easy for educators to speak of remediation and help for those students who are having trouble grasping the concept, each of these five schools went beyond that, discussing the enrichment processes and how those students who have already mastered the information are being served. This is especially evident in Carter Elementary School whose leadership team stated that during the 2014-2015 school year,

“We focus on enrichment, because sometimes we focus in on the kids that are really struggling and they get all our attention, and those kids that are really excelling are left behind. So it’s really focused, and we are trying to meet the needs of all students.”

Schools one through four emphasized the fact that when teams meet, they pay attention to every student, not just those who are struggling. The principal of Avendale Elementary School emphasized how they pay attention not only to the academic achievement of their students, but to the whole child during their team meetings. This is also emphasized by Downly Intermediate School that includes representatives from a local mental health agency during their care team meetings to offer support for the teachers.

One final aspect of how the schools in the study focused on student success can be found in the emphasis on how the students in the building are “not just my students, but our students” and on “what is best for our kids.” This is clearly shown when one member of the leadership team of Carter Elementary School explained, “we work as a
whole, so if it’s not working with me doing it then someone else steps in to do it. We’re comfortable with that, because they’re all our kids.” 

In regard to the components of an effective PLC program, the first four schools in this study exhibited all the components examined through this research; however, each did so at various levels. While the fifth school in the study demonstrated effective implementation of most components of an effective PLC, the overall program as presented to the researcher was less than exemplary of the components as seen in Chapter Two of this study.

**Trust**

The third theme to emerge from the analysis of data presented in Chapter Four is one of trust on two levels: trust between the principals and their leadership teams and trust between members of the leadership teams. Trust is an important aspect of the PLC process, especially in regards to the areas of collaboration, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice. According to the InPraxis Group Inc (2006), through shared personal practice, teachers are “sharing failures and mistakes, demonstrating respect and constructively analyzing and criticizing practices and procedures” (p. 3).

This trust was seen in the example set by the principal of Avendale Elementary School, who, when asked how her team and she have achieved collaboration, stated, “trust. I think that’s the biggest obstacle to get to where you are comfortable with collaboration in regards to test scores and student data and teacher practices.” In spite of the fact that the principal of Avendale Elementary School had only been with her team in this building for approximately six weeks, the leadership team of Avendale Elementary
School stated that their new principal had, “asserted her confidence” in what the teams had been doing before she came to the building and had given the team the space to be the leaders of the PLC program. This same trust between the principals and leadership teams of the various schools was demonstrated through the leadership teams’ obvious comfort in their roles in their buildings and in their belief that their principal wanted them to lead the buildings’ improvement process.

The leadership teams of the schools in the study exhibited trust amongst themselves and a willingness to rely on the other members of the team and the other teachers in the building to ensure that all students learn. One member of Carter Elementary School’s leadership team explained that she believed the teams in the building were successful because they, as teachers, had

To be able to trust that everyone on your team is one that I can learn something from…. There is not one person in our schools that doesn’t know what their expectations are for their kids, for the year and how they are going to get their kids there.

Importance of the Principal in the PLC Process

The fourth theme to emerge from the analysis of the data as presented in Chapter 4 of this study was one of the importance of the principal’s role in the PLC process. The leadership teams of schools one through four presented an image of the principal as leaders who offered guidance for their teams and supported and facilitated the work of the PLC program overall. Members of the leadership teams of these schools described the
principals as ones who took a backseat and allowed the leadership team and the grade level teams to make decisions about the school’s curriculum and learning.

According to Eaker and Keating (2012), the process of becoming a PLC is time consuming and arduous, and school leaders “must gain a deep, rich understanding of what professional learning communities are, how they differ from traditional schools, and how they work” (p. 8). The data presented in Chapter Four of this study indicates that the principals of all five schools had an understanding of how the PLC school differs from a traditional school,

DuFour et al. (2008) concluded, “no successful professional learning community will form” (p. 303) if the principal is not committed to the change needed for the transformation. The data indicate that, to varying degrees, the principals of the schools in the study were comfortable with and encouraged their teachers to take leadership roles and to make decisions that they believed were best for the students in the building as a whole.

According to Eaker and Keating (2012), it is the role of the principal to “motivate and inspire others to do things collectively that perhaps they never thought possible” (p. 1). Leadership teams of each the first four schools in the study expressed the interest their principals had in helping or encouraging those teachers to further their education and to reach new heights and achievement throughout the buildings. This was extremely evident in the views of Mr. Barnes who felt that when a principal empowers his teachers, the principal will be surprised at how well the teachers do.
Transformational Leadership

The last theme to emerge from the analysis of the data presented in Chapter Four is one of transformational leadership as demonstrated by the principals of these exemplary PLC schools. For the purposes of this study, transformational leadership was defined as a leadership style that encourages followers to develop their leadership skills, celebrates success, and encourages innovation in followers. When viewed through this definition, the principals of schools one through four, and even of Earlton Elementary School on some levels, demonstrated transformational leadership in their work through the implementation of the PLC program.

Principal and leadership teams of all five schools, to varying degrees, reported that the principals encouraged members of their staffs to develop their leadership skills through their work with the PLC program. The principals of schools number one through four encouraged their teachers to seek higher education but also to take the lead in creating curriculum, developing shared values and vision, making decisions, and developing assessments to ensure that students are learning.

Celebration was an important theme at each of the schools in the study. Principals and leadership teams alike, expressed that celebration was an important part of ensuring the work they did was recognized and would continue. The celebration that was demonstrated through the data indicated that the schools utilize celebration in regards to student success as well as in regards to teacher and team success. The data indicated that the celebrations were encouraged, led, and implemented quite often by the principals.
The principals of all five schools were shown to encourage innovation in their buildings through a variety of methods. All five of the principals encouraged their teachers to explore professional development options and to seek learning opportunities that met the values and vision of the building. The leadership teams of schools one through four, while emphasizing that their principal encouraged professional development, made it clear that the professional development they sought had to relate to the school’s goals or strategic plan.

Leadership teams of all five schools demonstrated a belief that their principals believed in the PLC program and that its implementation would be best for their teachers and the school. The leadership team of Carter Elementary School emphasized their principal’s leadership in the implementation of the PLC program and expressed their appreciation for her leadership in providing the educational opportunities required to understand the program before implementation. The leadership teams of the other schools also expressed the important roles their principals played in the implementation of the program and/or in the continued support for the sustainability of the program.

Research Question Number One

The first question guiding the research of this study was: To what extent do Missouri exemplary schools implement the components of effective professional learning communities as described by leadership teams and principals? Many researchers (DuFour, 2004; DuFour, 2007; DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008; DuFour and Eaker, 1998; Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Hipp et al., 2003; Hord, 1997; Hord et al., 1999, Huffman & Hipp, 2000; Huffman, 2001; Meehan et al., 1997; Hughes & Kritsonis, 2006;
Morrissey, 2000) have offered insight into the components of an effective PLC, including the importance of shared and supportive leadership, collaboration, shared values and vision, shared personal practice, ensuring students learn, focusing on results, and celebration.

The data in Chapter Four indicated the schools in the study implemented the components of effective PLCs to varying degrees, but the components were present in every building of the study. The leadership teams of all five schools were clear they believed their principals encouraged shared leadership within their buildings. One member of the Brookside Elementary leadership team summed this up by stating,

I think this is what we live. I mean we really do; we have facilitators, but, I mean, it’s a shared leadership and everybody’s supported that way. Even when you have to take those tough subjects back to the grade level, there’s huge amount of support there. Even though it may be a tough issue and we are very passionate about what we support, it never waivers as a grade level team and on behalf of administrators.

The data also indicated the schools had implemented extensive collaboration time for their teachers and staff to make decisions in a number of team configurations. Each school reported horizontal, vertical, and leadership teams that met on a regular basis, and all five schools had fully implemented the RTI model in their buildings. Collaboration and/or RTI time was built into each school’s day, and time outside the school day was also utilized by all schools. One member of the leadership team of Carter Elementary
School concluded, “it’s just having that time to discuss what we’re going to do, and we respect the background and the knowledge as we work together.”

Ensuring students learn and focusing on results for the PLC program were also important in all five schools in the study. The leadership teams of the schools spoke of how they viewed all of the students in the building as “not just my kids.” They also emphasized the RTI work for all students. One member of the Downly Elementary leadership team stated, “we don’t just switch around for intervention time; a lot of our grade levels switch around for spelling. We do a lot of sharing kids.”

As revealed in the data, all of the components of effective PLCs were found to some degree in all five schools. Every school’s principal and leadership team spoke passionately about how they implemented various components in their buildings.

Research Question Number Two

The second question guiding the research of this study was: How do members of leadership teams and principals describe the principal’s role in regard to implementation of the Missouri PLC program? One major component of creating a PLC in a school is the concept of shared leadership; however, Hord and Sommers (2008) concluded “the principal is the identified leader to focus the conversation and the behaviors in the school that will initiate and sustain learning” (p. 96). DuFour et al. (2008) concluded, “no successful professional learning community will form” (p. 303) if the principal is not committed to the change needed for the transformation.

The data suggested the principals of all five schools were important to the effective implementation of the PLC program. Ms. Adams, Mr. Barnes, Ms. Christian,
and Ms. Eventon all spoke of how they were more directive at the beginning of the PLC process in their school but their roles had changed with full implementation. Ms. Eventon described her role in the beginning of the process was “to have that whole get on the bus or get off the bus conversation,” and to make sure everyone on her staff would be a part of the process.

The principals explained their roles had changed, and they now took more of a back seat and allowed the leadership, grade-level, and vertical teams made decisions. This was best seen from Mr. Barnes, who saw his role now as that of a teacher leader, and he wanted his leadership team “to carry that load.” He saw it as his role to empower teachers and let them do their jobs, because “when you empower teachers they do more than you thought was possible and get things done.” Mr. Barnes concluded that “those things we do, we do with high expectations. I expect people to do these things if that’s what we are committed to.”

Research Question Number Three

The third question guiding the research of this study was: How is transformational leadership exhibited by principals of Missouri exemplary PLC schools? Transformational leadership can be defined as leadership which causes followers to transcend their self-interests and appeals to the higher needs of organizational members (Bensimon, Neumann & Birnbaum, 1989; Burns, 1978; Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 2000; Yukl, 2006). The transformational leader motivates members of an organization to achieve more than the members expected and elevates members, inspiring more commitment toward the goals of the organization (Leithwood et al.; Yukl).
The data of this study suggested the traits of a transformational leader were found in all five principals in the study. They encouraged and participated in celebrations for students and staff on a regular basis, encouraged their staffs to develop their leadership skills, and encouraged innovation.

The leadership teams explained how their principals have encouraged and allowed leadership from the teachers and staffs of the buildings. One member of the Avendale Elementary School leadership team acknowledged that the principal had “given us that space to see if maybe we can be the leaders.” Another member of the team stated that the principal had “asserted her confidence; she has been like, your school had great scores last year and I know you are doing things the right way. She really let us know she had faith in us.” One member of the Brookside Elementary team spoke of how Mr. Barnes was encouraging them to take control of “things we probably didn’t have our hands on” before. Another member the team concluded, “he has stepped back, and we have stepped up.”

Implications for Practice

The findings discovered through this research study generated several implications for the kindergarten through 12th grade school setting. These implications include how important it is for schools to implement the components of the PLC program for success for all students, how principal preparation programs can better prepare school leaders to recognize the success of the PLC program, and how transformational leadership can be utilized to ensure success.
School administrators and teachers should consider the effectiveness of the PLC program in the schools of this study and should reconsider their views on school improvement. Professional learning communities have been shown to be an effective tool for increasing student achievement and establishing a more collaborative and innovative work place for teachers and administrators (DuFour, 2004; DuFour, 2007; DuFour et al., 2008; DuFour and Eaker, 1998; Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Hipp et al., 2003; Hord, 1997; Hord et al., 1999, Huffman & Hipp, 2000; Huffman, 2001; Hughes & Kritsonis, 2006; Meehan et al., 1997; Morrissey, 2000). Biddle (2002) concluded “creating a learning community…requires a school’s culture to change significantly” (p. 3) and “if schools are to be significantly more effective they must break from the industrial model upon which they were created and embrace a new model that enables them to function as professional learning communities” (p. 4). Because of this, it is vital for school leaders to embrace the PLC model and all of the implications for success the model brings with it. Schools that implement the PLC model will be more successful in improving the educational process for all students and in eliminating the isolation usually found in the traditional public school model.

The data from this study suggested institutions of higher education that prepare future school administrators should consider providing an understanding of the PLC movement and PLC programs in their principal preparation programs. This study found that the most successful principals in these programs were ones who recognized the value of the PLC program and encouraged their teachers and staff to be active members in the leadership of the building. Leclerc et al. (2012) concluded “leadership from the principal
is...a crucial factor” (p. 3) in the successful implementation of a PLC and “to progress their school as a PLC, principals must exercise a leadership that corresponds well with a learning organization” (p. 12). However, these skills must be emphasized and instilled by the programs that are preparing the educational leaders of tomorrow if those leaders are to recognize the value of the PLC process and its implications for the success of all students in their schools.

Finally, the data indicated that the principals in all five schools demonstrated the traits of a transformational leader at varying levels. Transformational leadership can be defined as leadership which causes followers to transcend their self-interests and appeals to the higher needs of organizational members (Bensimon, Neumann & Birnbaum, 1989; Burns, 1978; Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 2000; Yukl, 2006). Each of these schools was designated as exemplary through the Missouri Department of Education and the Missouri PLC Program, and the success of these schools can be seen as an indication of the effectiveness of transformational leadership in the public education setting. School administrators can use this information in their process of deciding how to lead their schools to sustainable improvement. Transformational leaders in public schools will find teachers and staff members are more satisfied in their jobs and are more receptive to taking on leadership roles and to accepting change because it came from a consensus.

Recommendations for Further Study

The results of this study contribute to the current body of research and literature on the effectiveness of the PLC process in the kindergarten through 12th grade setting. Because PLC programs continue to increase across the state of Missouri and the nation, it
is important for research to continue to be conducted as to how the principal affects the success of the PLC process and the success of the buildings in which they serve.

Research has shown that the principal is vital to the success of any school improvement initiative and impacts the extent to which change happens within her building (Cranston, 2009; DuFour et al, 2008; DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

Each of the schools in this study was an elementary school designated as exemplary by the Missouri PLC program; therefore, the data reflect a uniquely, individual setting, that of a highly successful, elementary school. Further study could include investigation of the PLC program at the middle school and high school levels and the principal’s role in those settings.

If this research were to be continued, it would be important to expand the participation of the teachers and staff members of the schools. Further study could include in-depth interviews with individuals and/or groups of teachers and staff members that have been in the building since implementation of the program and of new employees to explore their insights into the PLC program.

Further research should also be considered that is conducted in a more in-depth manner with one specific exemplary Missouri PLC school. This could include a deeper case study of the school, with the researcher spending more time in the building observing teachers at work and teams during their meeting times.

As two of the schools in this study were in a district that had implemented PLCs district wide, further study could also be conducted with this district or similar districts. It
would be useful to look deeper into the role of the central office in the PLC process, especially in regards to the supportive conditions created from the top down.

Because sustainability of the PLC program and change is such an important part of the PLC process, further study is warranted in regards to how PLC programs have continued after a change in administration in buildings. This could be completed as a quantitative or mixed methods study, with teachers and other staff members responding to questions about the program before and after the change in administration.

Finally, it is recommended that future research should further investigate how the principals of PLC schools exhibit transformational leadership in their role. Transformational leadership effects individuals as well as organizations as a whole and encourages innovation and creativity (Gumusluoglu & Ilsev, 2009; Kendrick, 2011). The data found in this study suggested that the traits of transformational leaders were present in the principals of all five schools in this study, and further study on this issue could serve to better inform on the principal’s role in helping to transform their school for success.

Conclusion

The PLC movement has grown exponentially since its beginnings and has produced such impressive results that Schmoker (2005) concluded, “the use of PLCs is the best, least expensive, most professionally rewarding way to improve schools” (p. 137). The success of the PLC process is well documented through the work of numerous researchers (DuFour, 2004; DuFour, 2007; DuFour et al., 2008; DuFour and Eaker, 1998; Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Hipp et al., 2003; Hord, 1997; Hord et al., 1999, Huffman &
Hipp, 2000; Huffman, 2001; Hughes & Kritsonis, 2006; Meehan et al., 1997; Morrissey, 2000); therefore, the focus of this study was instead on the process itself and the principal’s role in that process.

The data showed that the five schools, all of which were designated as exemplary under the Missouri PLC program, had successfully implemented, to varying degrees, the PLC program as designed by the Missouri Department of Education. Each of the schools exhibited shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application of learning, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice. Each school also ensured students learn, created a culture of collaboration, and focused on results.

Data also indicated that the principals of each of these schools played a vital role in the success of the PLC program. DuFour and Eaker (2008) posited that under the leadership of an effective PLC principal, every teacher in the building can be a leader and should take the lead when they have the expertise in the areas being explored by the team. The principals in the study demonstrated a willingness to share their leadership and to encourage their teachers to take the reins when necessary.

Finally, the data indicated that the principals of these schools each demonstrated traits of a transformational leader in varying degrees. The school leaders in the study demonstrated that the use of celebration, the encouragement for followers to develop their leadership skills, and the encouragement of innovation in their followers, were all important parts of their philosophy on school leadership.
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Appendix A

PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

(Principal who initiated the PLC program in his/her current school)

1. Please tell me about your background personally and professionally.

2. How would you describe yourself as a school leader?

3. What do you see as your greatest strengths professionally?

4. Please tell me about the PLC program at ______________ school.
   a. What steps were taken to initiate the program?
   b. What was your role in the beginning?
   c. How has your role changed since the program started?

5. Please tell me about shared and supportive leadership in this school.

6. How have you and your teachers created shared values and vision?

7. How do you and your teachers achieve collaboration?

8. Tell me about collective learning that happens for adults in your school.

9. What steps have been undertaken to create supportive conditions for PLC implementation?

10. How do your teachers participate in shared personal practice in their classrooms?

11. Please tell me about how ______________ school ensures students learn.

12. How is data utilized in team and school planning practices?

13. How have you, as the school’s leader, encouraged teachers to develop their leadership skills?

14. Tell me how celebration is used here at ______________.

15. How have you ensured the PLC program will be sustained if you should ever leave this school?
Appendix B

PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

(Principal who’s predecessor initiated the PLC program in the school)

1. Please tell me about your background personally and professionally.
2. How would you describe yourself as a school leader?
3. What do you see as your greatest strengths professionally?
4. Please tell me about the PLC program at _____________ school.
   a. What was your role in regards to the PLC program when you first came to this position?
   b. How has your role changed since you first started here?
5. Please tell me about shared and supportive leadership in this school.
6. How have you and your teachers created shared values and vision?
7. How do you and your teachers achieve collaboration?
8. Tell me about collective learning that happens for adults in your school.
9. What steps have been undertaken to create supportive conditions for PLC implementation?
10. How do your teachers participate in shared personal practice in their classrooms?
11. Please tell me about how _____________ school ensures students learn.
12. How is data utilized in team and school planning practices?
13. How have you, as the school’s leader, encouraged teachers to develop their leadership skills?
14. Tell me how celebration is used here at _____________.
15. How have you ensured the PLC program will be sustained if you should ever leave this school?
Appendix C

LEADERSHIP TEAM QUESTIONS

1. Please tell me about your backgrounds personally and professionally.

2. How would you describe _____________ as a school leader?

3. What do you see as _____________’s greatest strengths professionally?

4. Please tell me about the PLC program at _____________ school.
   a. What steps were taken to initiate the program?
   b. What was your role as members of the leadership team in regards to the PLC program when the program was first initiated?
   c. How has your role changed since the program started?

5. Please tell me about shared and supportive leadership in this school.

6. How have shared values and vision been established?

7. How has collaboration been achieved?

8. Tell me about collective learning that happens for adults in your school.

9. What steps have been undertaken to create supportive conditions for PLC implementation?

10. How do you, as teachers, participate in shared personal practice in their classrooms?

11. Please tell me about how _____________ school ensures students learn.

12. How is data utilized in team and school planning practices?

13. How has your principal encouraged teachers to develop their leadership skills?

14. Tell me how celebration is used here at _____________.

15. How has your principal ensured the PLC program will be sustained if he/she should ever leave this school?
Appendix D

Informed Consent Statement For Study Participants

**Project Title:** The Principal’s Role in the Implementation of Professional Learning Communities in Missouri Exemplary PLC Schools.

**Identification of Researchers:** This research is being completed by Mark Pottorff. I am a doctoral candidate with the Department of Educational Leadership & Policy Analysis at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

**Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this research is to examine how the components of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are implemented under the Missouri PLC program and the principal’s role in that implementation.

**Request for Participation:** I am inviting you to participate in this case study of exemplary PLC schools as identified by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and Missouri PLC program. It is up to you whether you would like to participate. If you decide not to participate, you will not be penalized in any way. You can also decide to stop at any time without penalty. If you do not wish to answer any of the questions, you may simply skip them.

**Description of Research Method:** The research involves participating in a focus group interview session that should last from 60 to 90 minutes. The researcher will ask about your experience in the implementation of the PLC program, your principal’s role in this implementation, and his/her leadership style. You will also have a chance to ask questions. If you would like to know the results of this study, please contact Dr. Sandy Hutchinson. She can be reached at hutchinson@ucmo.edu or at (660) 543-4720. You may also reach Mark Pottorff at pottorff.mark@gmail.com or (573) 422-3432.

**Privacy:** All of the information we collect will be kept confidential. Participants identities will be known only to the researcher and steps will be taken to conceal your identity should the results be presented to the public. Pseudonyms will be utilized to keep identities of all participants confidential.

**Explanation of Risks:** The risks to this study are similar to the risks of everyday life.

**Explanation of Benefits:** PLCs are studied to add to the knowledge base of current and future programs. This research project will help leaders make decisions on the benefits of PLCs and the transformational leadership style.

**Questions about Your Rights:** If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the University of Missouri Institutional Review Board at (573) 882-9585.
Appendix F

Exemplary PLC Recognition*

To receive this recognition, a school must:

- Submit a formal request for consideration as an exemplary PLC school.
- Complete the staff perceptual survey (MO PLC Benchmark Assessment).
- Complete the PLC Implementation Rubric as a self-assessment.
- Meet achievement level performance guidelines as set forth by the MSIP 5 achievement standards by:
  - Scoring a minimum of “On Track” in each of the achievement categories (ELA total and subgroup, Math total and subgroup) through status, progress or growth (if the growth category is used to meet this criteria, growth must be labeled significant (S).
  - Earning 85% or greater of total points (at least 34 out of 40)
  - Special Note: Non-State Assessed schools (primary, alternative, vocational, etc.) must refer to their state assessment plan and submit an equivalent number of data sets (5) which demonstrate positive growth in student achievement performance over the course of the past three years. Data must indicate super-subgroup performance, and preferably, two categories should be in ELA and Math.
- Complete and submit a reflection narrative which includes:
  - A certification cover sheet;
  - Evidence of a commitment to the essential PLC concepts;
  - Evidence of student achievement;
  - A short narrative summary describing their school in the professional learning community process. This summary may be copied and disseminated to serve as a model for other schools seeking improvement practices.
- The school will participate in an On-Site Review the spring prior to, or early fall of the year in which the school is being considered. The school must receive exemplary scores (proficient or deep) on all indicators of the Missouri Professional Learning Communities Implementation Rubric.

When schools are identified as Exemplary PLC Schools, they are recognized for their accomplishments at the Powerful Learning Conference and are given an opportunity to
share their journey of becoming a professional learning community school – including a data display reflecting their improved outcomes for students. For more information, contact a member of the MO PLC State Management Team.

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Dr. Michelle Smith
PLC Data/Web Manager
314-852-6031
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*Found at: http://www.moplc.org/exemplary-schools.html
VITA

Dr. Mark Pottorff worked for twenty five years in public education in Missouri. He taught high school English and was a speech and drama coach for ten years in the Cole Camp R-I school district. He served six years as a principal, three in the Pilot Grove C-4 high school and three in the Cole Camp Middle school. He finished his career as a district superintendent, serving in the Calhoun R-8, Pilot Grove C-4, and Maries Co. R-I school districts.

Dr. Pottorff earned an Associates of Arts degree from State Fair Community College in Sedalia, Missouri, a Bachelors of Science, Masters of Science, and Educational Specialist degree from Central Missouri State University in Warrensburg, Missouri. He earned his EDD from the University of Missouri-Columbia in 2014.