

BUILDING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY
IN A RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICT: AN EVALUATIVE INQUIRY

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Doctor of Education

by
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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

BUILDING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

IN A RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICT: AN EVALUATIVE INQUIRY

presented by Angela Besendorfer,

a candidate for the degree of doctor of education,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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Dedication

Completing the process of a doctorate degree certainly is not the accomplishment of an individual. Many people sacrifice and support an individual to reach this goal. My story is no different. In this space, I want to express my sincere thanks for the support and encouragement to a group of special people. I dedicate this document to those who made it possible. I also share my apologies with you for the times that I missed special things because I was working toward this goal. Your understanding commitment to me through this process was critical in me reaching this achievement.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ii
List of Tables	viii
List of Figures	ix
Abstract	x
Chapter One	1
Introduction	1
Statement of the Problem	3
Purpose of the Inquiry	5
Specific Evaluative Inquiry Questions	6
Definition of Terms	7
Summary	8
Chapter Two	10
Review of Related Literature	10
Whole-School Reform	10
District-Wide Reform	13
Professional Learning Community as Reform	16
Professional Learning Communities as a Research-Based Model for School Improvement	17
Core Principles of Professional Learning Communities	20
Focus on Student Learning	20
Culture of Collaboration	24
Culture	24
Structure of collaboration	24

Collaboration in a Professional Learning Community	25
Focused collaboration	28
Shared Vision and Values	31
Professional Learning Communities' Influence on Student Achievement	33
Conclusion	36
Chapter 3	38
Research Design and Methodology	38
Design	40
Evaluative Inquiry	40
Adopting the Professional Learning Communities Model	43
Setting and Participants	45
Data Collection Methods	48
Focus Groups	49
Interviews	50
Document Review	51
Data Analysis	52
Researcher Role	53
Limitations	55
Summary	56
Chapter 4	58
Findings and Analysis of Data	58
Chapter Structure	58
Cultural Congruence with Professional Learning Communities at School Sites	59

Dogwood Primary School.....	59
Shared Vision and Values	60
Focus on Learning	61
Culture of Collaboration	63
Dogwood Elementary School.....	66
Shared vision and values.....	67
Focus on Learning	68
Culture of Collaboration	70
Dogwood Intermediate School.....	74
Shared Vision and Values	77
Focus on Learning	79
Culture of Collaboration	80
Dogwood Middle School	85
Shared Vision and Values	85
Focus on Learning	89
Culture of Collaboration	92
Dogwood High School.....	99
Shared Vision and Values	103
Focus on Learning	105
Culture of Collaboration	107
Analysis of Common Themes.....	110
Concepts of Collaboration	111
Teambuilding.....	112

Focused Collaboration	116
Deprivitization of Results	118
Challenges of Inclusion.....	120
Impact on Teacher Orientation.....	122
Teacher Personal Growth.....	124
Structuring Time.....	126
The Power of Allocated Contract Time	126
Utilization of Late Start Time.....	130
Challenges of Student Supervision during Late Start.....	136
Teacher Time Out of the Classroom.....	139
Function of Leadership	140
Collaborative Leadership	141
Empowerment of Teachers.....	143
Technical Assistance.....	148
Facilitation from District Leadership.....	151
Conclusion	153
Chapter 5.....	155
Conclusions and Implications	155
District Analysis of Professional Learning Communities Implementation	156
Shared Vision and Values	156
Focus on Learning	157
Culture of Collaboration	159
Professional Learning Community Principles are Highly Interdependent	161

Relationship between Shared Vision and Values and the Collaborative Culture	161
Relationship between the Use of Time and the Development of a Culture of Collaboration	163
Empowerment within the Collaborative Culture Impacts Focus on Learning.....	165
Importance of Collaboration in Professional Learning Community	167
Implications for Practitioners.....	168
Recommendations	172
Future Research Directions	174
Final Thoughts.....	175
References.....	176
Appendix A.....	191
Appendix B.....	192
Appendix C	193
Appendix D.....	194
Vita	195

List of Tables

Table	Page
1. Activities for PLC Time by Building	136

List of Figures

Figure	Page
1. MAP percentile rank in the state for 3rd and 4th grade in communication arts and math from 2004 to 2007.....	70
2. MAP percentile rank in the state for 5th and 6th grade in communication arts and math from 2006 to 2007.....	76
3. MAP percentile rank in the state for 7th and 8th grade in communication arts and math from 2004 to 2007.....	98
4. MAP percentile rank in the state for 11th grade in communication arts and 10 th grade in math from 2004 to 2007	103

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ABSTRACT

This inquiry explored the implementation of the professional learning communities (PLC) model using a utilization-focused (Patton, 1997) inquiry approach in order to provide feedback to enhance the development of the PLC model in five schools in one district in rural Missouri to increase the probability that the PLC model will result in improved student achievement. Experts identified in current literature have concluded that schools demonstrating high achievement exhibit the characteristics of PLC. This inquiry explored the development of the core principles of a PLC including the identification of facilitators and barriers to the process. As a result of a district-wide initiative in a rural school district, a high school, middle school and three elementary buildings implemented the PLC reform process with assistance from a regional consultant. Leadership Teams were trained in the PLC process and led the implementation process at each building. In conjunction with the PLC implementation, the district also began a district-wide late start initiative to provide time for teacher collaboration. Qualitative data was collected through focus groups, interviews and document review regarding the PLC implementation and the current operations in the school. Data from each school is shared separately followed by an analysis of common themes across schools, thus highlighting the similarities and differences in the implementation of PLCs in the various school contexts within the same school district.

Data analysis revealed three common themes across the buildings including concepts of collaboration, time as a resource and the function of leadership. Identification of motivating factors as well as barriers to the implementation of a PLC is examined. An in-depth look at the implementation of the PLC process is explored at each building including providing a brief background on the school setting and student achievement results. The findings of this evaluative inquiry demonstrated the concept that even with the same technical assistance, implementing a PLC process is context specific. The three elementary buildings had greater success in the development of the core PLC principles although they were not without conflict. The middle school had the lowest level of implementation followed by the high school. The data demonstrated that the Leadership Teams had a greater understanding of PLC in these buildings but the collaborative culture that signifies a PLC has not yet emerged except in pockets.

Chapter One

Introduction

Rhetoric and outright attacks on public education have called for dramatic changes since 1983 when the Reagan administration released *A Nation At Risk*, a report riddled with strong language and disturbing findings on the state of education in the United States. To the American people, the report was a warning that the educational foundations of our society were being eroded (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The alarm of 1983 is still ringing today as Steel and Craig (2006) state, “public education has been the nation’s most unchanging entity” (p. 676). The publication of *A Nation At Risk* was a major event but it did more to shock than to correct. Education across America continued to lack the gains that politicians were seeking in order to compete in the global market. The attention then turned to a focus on raising student achievement when the *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* was signed into law leading to concentrated efforts on comprehensive change, school improvement, and achievement for all children.

The persistent lack of sustained and widespread success in improving student achievement across the nation led to the current legislative attempt to reform public education. The federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) required states to make measurable annual progress in raising the percentage of students proficient in reading and math and in narrowing the achievement gap between sub-groups. Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) on student achievement calls for incremental gains until all students achieve at proficient levels by 2014. NCLB was and continues to be an ambitious law that has forced states to move faster and further to improve the achievement of every student. Perhaps NCLB’s tight timelines and high expectations

combined with existing state education agendas will prove successful where past reform efforts have fallen short. The outcome of NCLB to reach the goal of every child achieving at the proficient level is still unknown, yet it is clear that schools are grasping for answers.

In response to the legislation, school districts across America have attempted many reform efforts. A lot of effort, goodwill, activity and money have been spent on our schools, and yet Coeyman (2003) concludes that even after twenty years of attention there is very little to show for it by way of improvement. The ultimate results of the efforts focused on “school improvement” have little connection to gains in student achievement (Louis, Toole & Hargreaves, 1999). School leaders are now facing the sanctions associated with lack of improvement. The headlines are clear as the media compares school against school on state assessment results as well as the denotation of “met” or “not met” as a symbol of quality in comparison to standards.

The search for real solutions to the achievement gap has led school leaders to research-based strategies. Now more than ever, school practitioners are utilizing research to make decisions about instruction, achievement, and school improvement. The escalating accountability has in turn resulted in a growing research knowledge base about how to improve student achievement. Leaders are selecting new programs based on a building body of knowledge about programs that have resulted in increased student achievement in similar settings. After adoption of these programs, leaders frequently wait to see if increased student achievement occurs. This study was designed to evaluate the implementation process of a research-based innovation aimed at improving student achievement in a rural Missouri school district to increase the probability of achieving the desired results.

Statement of the Problem

As noted by Hill, Campbell and Harvey (2000) the need for a quick fix to improve student achievement is prevalent today and has resulted in schools adopting the latest reform model with little attention to planning and implementation. Often key elements of the reform are simply not implemented or are implemented poorly resulting in a failed reform effort. Leaders are making decisions often based on data provided by the consultant trying to sell the program containing information about success stories in other settings. When schools adopt a new program designed to improve student achievement, frequently the implementation plan suggested by the consultant exceeds the time available with the staff resulting in an implementation plan that varies greatly from the ones reflected in the data that drove the school to adopt the program (Louis, Toole & Hargreaves, 1999).

The act of replicating successful reforms is difficult. Louis, Toole and Hargreaves (1999) suggest that “since first-order changes are considerably easier and more common, transformative models (second-order change) are often downsized and implemented as first-order changes” (p. 261-262). Furthermore, some educators are “prone to substitute good intentions for results” (DuFour, Eaker & DuFour, 2005a, p. 21). The school context can also affect reform efforts when “political resistance, strikes, fiscal crises, scandals, emergencies affecting student safety, and dwindling public confidence in reform leaders have disrupted implementation and limited progress” (Hill, Campbell & Harvey, 2000, p. 37). The urgent need to impact student achievement leads to fragmented implementations of previously successful programs often resulting in less than desirable outcomes. However, Preskill and Torres (1999) warn that, “In many respects, many change efforts

have fallen short because organizational leaders have failed to acknowledge the complex nature of organizational life” (p. 12).

When school leaders utilize research-based decisions to select improvement initiatives, they often fail to attend to the implementation process. A critical look at the development of a model during implementation provides valuable information to ensure the anticipated improvement. It is imperative to determine if the implementation process has been successful by analyzing the action steps taken, procedures and support for the improvement initiative that are present, as well as to look at how the core principles of the improvement initiative are taking root in the school. An evaluation of the implementation needs to include the perceptions of the teachers involved in the improvement initiative in addition to the school leader and artifact data. This gives a full picture from the top and bottom so that the development of the core principles can be captured and analyzed against the continuum to measure progress. Through studying the implementation phase, a school leader can prevent future problems by being proactive with support and resources to ensure a proper development of the adopted initiative is achieved.

A critical look at the implementation phase involves more than simply checking-off a list of items/actions to be done. The researcher needs a depth of understanding of the improvement initiative to understand the core principles in order to analyze the developmental phases. When evaluating the development process, a continuum of growth needs to be articulated to judge the progress a school is making toward full implementation. Specific attention to development provides information to correct issues that arise during the implementation phase rather than waiting to conduct an evaluation

long after the implementation phase as a response to the results, either positive or negative.

Purpose of the Inquiry

Schools across the nation are implementing reform models to improve student achievement. History has demonstrated that improvement is much harder than simply adopting a new innovation. When an innovation is evaluated questions arise regarding the implementation, integrity, impact, institutionalization, maintenance, and the ability to replicate the success (Louis, Toole & Hargreaves, 1999, p. 254). The purpose of this study was to explore the implementation of the professional learning communities (PLC) model using an evaluative inquiry approach in order to provide feedback to enhance the development of the PLC model in five schools comprising rural Missouri school district. The decision was made to implement the model at the district level to increase the probability that the PLC model would result in improved student achievement.

The Dogwood School District (a pseudonym) was similar to many school districts across the nation in that a reform model had been selected as the way to meet the student achievement standards of NCLB commonly referred to as Adequate Yearly Progress or AYP. After studying the research on school improvement and reflecting on previous attempts at reform, the administrative team in partnership with the teaching staff committed to implementing a professional learning communities model to increase student achievement. Although a large body of knowledge existed about professional learning communities, the district utilized technical assistance available from a regional professional development center.

Professional learning communities (PLC) are used to describe how organizations should work in order to create success. Experts including Hord (2004), Louis (2003),

Schmoker (2006), Louis, Toole & Hargreaves (1999), Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach (1998), Preskill & Torres (1999), DuFour, Eaker and DuFour (2005a), Louis and Marks (1998), Lezotte (2005), and Fullan (2005) have researched schools demonstrating improvement and conclude that these schools exhibit the characteristics of a professional learning community. In Schmoker's (2006) most recent book, twenty authorities are cited behind the statement that professional learning communities are the "surest, fastest path to instructional improvement" (p. 105). Strong professional learning communities are characterized by continuous, structured teacher collaboration that generates collective personal responsibility for student learning resulting in gains in student achievement (Louis & Marks, 1998; Hord, 2004; Wenger, 2001; Schmoker, 2006). The success of this approach has been documented at the school/building level in many accounts; however, some experts look at a district-level initiative as an ideal professional learning community (Schmoker, 2006). This inquiry explored the district-level adoption of the professional learning communities model. The results were shared in order to facilitate the further development of the professional learning community model. The evaluative inquiry guided the future development efforts within the district including identification of supports necessary to further the implementation of the PLC model.

Specific Evaluative Inquiry Questions

An evaluative inquiry process that involved the staff in the design and execution of the inquiry was utilized to explore the development of the PLC process in the Dogwood School District. The concept of an inquiry team was consistent with the principles of a learning community. While the professional learning community teams worked to explore how to improve student learning, the inquiry team determined how to support the implementation process of the PLC.

This study was designed to enhance the development of the professional learning community model in the Dogwood School District. The evaluative inquiry was utilization-focused (Patton, 1997); therefore, the specific evaluative inquiry questions were designed as part of the process. In general, the study explored the development of the core principles of a professional learning community within five schools. The broad questions that guided this inquiry were:

1. To what extent were the core principles of the professional learning community model evidenced in five schools in the first year of implementation?
2. What did school staff members identify as supportive of the development of a professional learning community model in each school?
3. What did school staff members identify as barriers to the development of a professional learning community model in each school?

Definition of Terms

1. *Professional learning community* can be defined as “a school in which professionals (administrators and teachers) continuously seek and share learning to increase their effectiveness for students, and act on what they learn” (Leo & Cowan, 2000, para. 1). Various experts use other terms in place of professional learning communities such as “learning communities,” “communities of practice,” “collaborative communities,” and “continuous improvement teams” (Schmoker, 2005). For the purposes of this inquiry, the term professional learning community was defined based on the characteristics agreed to by the experts explored in the literature review section of this paper. The core principles of a professional learning community include (a) a focus on student learning,

(b) a culture of collaboration including deprivitization of practice and reflective dialogue, and (c) a shared vision and values (DuFour, Eaker & DuFour, 2005a; Hord, 2004; Schmoker, 2006; Fullan, 2006; Louis and Marks, 1998; Kruse et al, 1995; Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2001; Easton, 2004; Buffum & Hinman, 2006; Roy & Hord, 2003; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004; Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell, and Valentine, 1999).

2. *Concept of whole school reform* was important in this inquiry and should be defined. Also known as comprehensive school reform, whole school reform is characterized by an effort to implement research-based innovations to overhaul schools with integrated programs usually involving the assistance of a consultant and additional resources for sustained implementation (Berends, Bodilly, & Kirby, 2002b; Sack, 2002; Lytle, 2002). For the purpose of this inquiry, whole school reform was defined as a “unifying design that allows all staff members to perform to the best of their abilities and that integrates research-based practices into a *coherent* and *mutually reinforcing* set of effective approaches to teaching and learning for the entire school” (Berends, Bodilly, & Kirby, 2002b, p. 168).

Summary

The call for improvement in student achievement has triggered the adoption of reform models in schools across the nation. Evidence of successful reform models is available to demonstrate that school improvement efforts can indeed result in increased student achievement. A critical component of a reform model is proper implementation.

This inquiry explored the implementation process of the professional learning communities model in a school district with five buildings. Through the inquiry, the development was facilitated to ensure a greater chance of positive impact on student achievement.

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. Chapter one provides a brief overview and statement of the problem as well as the identification of the inquiry questions. Chapter two contains a review of related literature including information on whole school reform, professional learning communities as a reform model, core principles of a PLC and the impact of PLCs on student and teacher learning. Chapter three provides the background for the methods and design of the study including information on evaluative inquiry. The setting and participants are described to provide a clear understanding of the specific context for this inquiry. Chapter four describes the evaluative inquiry findings and analysis of the data. Chapter five summarizes the conclusions and implications and describes the overall impact of the inquiry project on Dogwood School District.

Chapter Two

Review of Related Literature

Accountability for student achievement has increased, as has the production of “research-based reforms.” This inquiry project focused on the development of a district-wide professional learning communities (PLC) model for school improvement. Professional learning communities have emerged in recent years as a popular strategy for school improvement (Louis, Toole & Hargreaves, 1999; Preskill & Torres, 1999; Hord, 2004; Fullan, 2002; McRel, 1993; Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1998; Schmoker, 2004; Easton, 2004; Childs-Bowen, 2007; DuFour, Eaker & DuFour, 2005a; Schmoker, 2006; Fullan, 2000; Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2001; Buffum & Hinman, 2006). Evidence suggests that schools with PLC characteristics have improved student achievement, positive learning environments, teachers holding higher expectations for achievement and behavior, reduction in achievement gaps, and changes in teacher instructional practices compared to schools without these characteristics (Scribner, Hager & Warne, 2002). This literature review addressed four areas relevant to the district-wide implementation of PLCs: whole-school and district-wide reform, PLC as a reform model, defining core principles of PLCs, and PLCs impact on student achievement and teacher learning.

Whole-School Reform

The quest for improvement and the current accountability measures have school leaders implementing reforms in search of increased student achievement. The federal government has created an emphasis on whole-school reform through their comprehensive school reform program as an attempt to overhaul schools. Whole-school reform efforts have attracted a lot of attention due to the millions of dollars invested to

implement various research-based reform models. The design of whole-school reform was intended to replace the piecemeal approach with a line of attack that links all educational services in a school to a coherent vision that drives improvement (Sack, 2002). For the purpose of this inquiry, whole school reform was defined as a “unifying design that allows all staff members to perform to the best of their abilities and that integrates research-based practices into a *coherent* and *mutually reinforcing* set of effective approaches to teaching and learning for the entire school” (Berends, Bodilly, & Kirby, 2002b, p. 168).

In the last few decades much has been learned about professional development and school improvement. The literature is rich with examples of schools journeying through reforms in the quest for high student achievement. Reforming schools is not an easy pursuit as noted by the ample examples of reform efforts that have not accomplished the intended results (Berends, Bodilly & Kirby, 2002b; Sack, 2002; Lytle, 2002). Sack (2002) notes that the problems of whole-school reform often occur when districts attempt to implement one-size-fits-all programs without taking into account the individual school context. Recommendations from researchers on how to achieve levels of high student achievement through school reform have been learned through positive and negative examples (Louis, Toole & Hargreaves, 1999; Hord, 2004; Fullan, 2002; Easton, 2004; Williams, 1999; Dean, Galvin, & Parsley, 2005; McRel, 1993; Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1998; Schmoker, 2004; Berends, Bodilly & Kirby, 2002a; Lytle, 2002).

Huitt (1999) recognizes that reform efforts should focus on schools not teachers and suggests creating job-embedded opportunities for learning and growth. Thus, the key unit for educational change is the school. The principal, teachers, students, parents and community must be considered because they hold the functioning reality with which

change must partner (Williams, 1999; Copland, 2003). This change does not come without changes at the district level. Four elements identified as necessary at the district level for reform efforts to be successful include 1) policies focusing on decentralization, 2) local capacity building, 3) building-level external accountability, and 4) stimulation of innovations (Fullan, 2000). All aspects of a school should work together focusing on the core academic program through alignment of financial resources, professional development, and governance with the goals of the reform (Mid-continent Research for Educational Learning, 2000). The sustained improvements in student results that today's educators are searching for "will not occur in an isolated, free-lance culture, where no one knows what anyone else is doing or what each other's operative goals are" (Schmoker, 1999, p. 111). Thus, leaders are crucial in setting the stage for whole-school reform through developing a vision focused on staff learning to produce better student outcomes (Mid-continent Research for Educational Learning, 2000; Cowan & Pankake, 2004) and changing the political forces that the guard status quo (West Ed. Policy Perspectives, 2003).

In order to improve student achievement staff members must increase their own knowledge and skills through professional development programs with a focus on system-wide improvement exemplifying the belief that the shared expertise of individuals will drive instructional change (Fullan, 2002). Involvement of teachers in planning professional development is recommended to ensure topics address areas of knowledge and skills that are relevant to teachers (Desimone, et al, 2002). The involvement of stakeholders from various perspectives gives the 360-degree consideration of improvement efforts. Accordingly, to deviate from status quo and the current reality, schools will need a "supportive peer reference group and a communication network with

the larger system” (Williams, 1999, p. 84). Therefore, improving schools requires an alliance between the superintendent, district support staff, principal, teachers (Dean, Galvin, & Parsley, 2005), parents, policy makers, curriculum developers, school board members as well as students (Novick, 1996). New learning at multiple levels will be a necessity for success in whole- school reform efforts; however, Roy (2007) contends that district-level staff members are in a strategic position with the responsibility to ensure the development of instructional excellence.

District-Wide Reform

Individual schools operate within the context of a larger school district. Accountability of recent legislation has resulted in a more centralized approach to reform efforts. District-level leaders are more involved in school improvement efforts to ensure their districts will meet the academic standards of NCLB. Research on instructionally effective school districts by Murphy and Hallinger (1998) found structured district control with school autonomy resulted in greater levels of effectiveness. These districts had a focus on productivity with improving student learning as the top priority. Once a commitment to undertake changes was made, the resources needed to be successful were almost always provided. These improvement efforts were linked with district goals, in fact, goals served as a major vehicle to maintain excellence and promote improvement with almost two-thirds of the goals directly related to curriculum and instruction. Furthermore, they found a high level of district-directed alignment among schools in their approaches to instruction and expectations for student learning.

Dean, Galvin and Parsley (2005) suggest that a district-wide systemic approach including all schools with attention to all systems including “curriculum, instruction, assessment, professional development, resource allocation, and community involvement”

(p. 68) is necessary. Furthermore, the district should provide guidance, exemplars of effective school improvement plans, and feedback on a school's improvement plan to ensure success. Staff development focuses on organizing adults into learning communities whose goals align with those of the school and district (Roy & Hord, 2003). The suggested district-wide approach is consistent with Fullan's (2006) recommendation that the work to achieve system reform elicits a need for schools to learn from other schools that he refers to as "lateral capacity building" (p. 10). A district-wide approach offers focused support and a synergistic momentum for improvement efforts in individual schools across the entire system.

The overarching theme in a district-wide initiative is the strength generated by the alignment of goals. When results-oriented goals are set at a district-level as a guide for improvement with defined outcomes relevant to the entire organization a coalition is formed. All school employees hear the same message from the central office and board about what is important that leads to the question of "what does that mean to me?" for each subgroup of the district. Schools develop their improvement plans with alignment to the district goals and a drill-down effect is created. The school level goals define how the district-level goals apply to that particular entity of the district essentially identifying the role the school plays in achieving the district goals. The next level that is present in some models is when the goals are drilled down to the smaller learning communities that may be organized as grade level teams, departments, or subject-alike groups. These subgroups of the school develop their goals in alignment with the building goals. Each of the improvement plans includes the development of goals aimed at the district-level goals thus creating a focused improvement effort (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2002; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many, 2006).

These goals should drive decisions about professional development for staff members. While a district-level focus on improvement is important, the National Staff Development Council has declared a goal that “all teachers in all schools will experience high quality professional learning as part of their daily work” (Mizell, 2007, p. 2). Mizell articulates that to achieve maximum results, professional development should be approached at the school-level rather than the district-level; however, he includes that the goal states “all schools” making districts responsible for ensuring that high-quality professional development is part of the teachers’ daily lives.

A district-level focus on improvement is necessary if all schools are going to ensure success for all students. This type of systemic substantive change does not happen by accident and is never simple (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many, 2006; Morrissey & Cowan, 2004). Bruffee (1999) and Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) see reform as an obligation to develop and build structures and relationships within the educational organization so that all the members of the educational organization can create new knowledge. To advance these efforts requires the organization itself to foster the development and creation of knowledge (Bruffee, 1999; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Katzenback and Smith, 1993; McRel, 1993), thus, creating a learning organization characterized as actively working “to improve itself by casting present practices under critical scrutiny and by seeking new and better ways of doing things” (Mai, 2004, p. 211). Evidence of a district’s focus on organizational learning can be found in its professional development policies, resources and practices that facilitate social processing of new ideas (Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1998). Zmuda, Kuklis, and Kline (2004) assert that a “competent system proves itself when everyone within the system performs better as a result of the collective endeavors and accepts accountability for that improvement”

(p.163). There is no substitute for this type of internal school development (Fullan, 2000). There are no packaged programs that ensure success, but there are structural features that promote success (Schmoker, 2004). The next section explores professional learning communities (PLCs) as a structural process proven to increase student achievement.

Professional Learning Community as Reform

Professional learning communities have become ubiquitous with attempts to reform and improve schools during the last decade—so much so, that the term risks losing its meaning. The term PLC has become so popular that school professionals use it to define all types of combinations of individuals working collaboratively within a school setting. However, PLC has a unique definition within the research literature (Louis, Kruse & Marks, 1996). A professional learning community can be defined as “a school in which professionals (administrators and teachers) continuously seek and share learning to increase their effectiveness for students, and act on what they learn” (Leo & Cowan, 2000, para. 1). Hord, (2004) describes PLCs as “schools flourishing through democratic leadership and ongoing professional development” (p. 1). Teams characterize the learning communities with a common commitment engaged in improving their daily work to advance the school goals and student achievement (Louis, Kruse & Marks, 1996).

The words in the phrase “professional learning communities” bring separate meanings together in a key concept that has been attracting attention in education for more than a decade (Hord, 2004). *Professional* acknowledges the knowledge and skills that each educator brings to the PLC process. *Learning* is an important component resulting from the continuous inquiry, data analysis, dialogue, and focus on a common goal. *Community* denotes the stakeholders’ collective actions based on common beliefs (Childs-Bowen, 2007). Together these words have meaning in the education community

as a set of common characteristics found in schools that are considered to be high performing. Various experts use other terms in place of professional learning communities such as “learning communities,” “communities of practice,” “collaborative communities,” “continuous improvement teams” and “communities of continuous inquiry and improvement” (Schmoker, 2005; Hord, 2004). The same concept in business or industry may be called “self-managing teams,” “team-based organization” or “quality circles” (Peters, 1987). Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) identified the transformational process of working in teams as a key to organizational knowledge creation applicable to all types of organizations.

Earlier, PLCs were referred to as structural processes. It is important to note that PLCs are not improvement programs or plans but rather ongoing structures for improving staff capacity for learning and change (Hord, 2004). In this realm, teachers are the first learners resulting in better student learners. Perpetual learning through experimentation and innovation is an ongoing activity rather than a step to be completed in a reform plan. Thus, “becoming a learning community is less like getting in shape than staying in shape; it is not a fad diet but a commitment to an essential, healthier way of life” (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004, p.5). Successful learning communities exhibit a democratic accountability and recognition that change starts at the individual level when individuals take responsibility for the collective outcomes of the organization’s goals (Preskill & Torres, 1999).

Professional Learning Communities as a Research-Based Model for School Improvement

The schools identified by educational researchers as improving student achievement through a PLC model have many authors claiming we now know *how* to improve our schools. An in-depth exploration of the literature on PLCs generates both

theoretical information as well as findings from studies of schools implementing a PLC process. Schmoker (2006) cites twenty experts in the field who agree that “the right kind of continuous, structured teacher collaboration improves the quality of teaching and pays big, often immediate, dividends in student learning and professional morale in virtually any setting” (p. 177). In the current white water of the educational front when organizations are facing rapid and significant changes while realizing the value the intellectual capital of their own members, Preskill and Torres (1999) suggest organizational success may be achieved through learning communities. PLCs capitalize on the human capacity within schools to reach common goals as all teachers work as learners alongside their colleagues (Louis, 2003). Schmoker (2006) states, “there is no good reason to delay this reform” (p. 178) because the model makes the most of the best factors and strategies to affect achievement. Lezotte (2005) advocates, “Clearly, continuous school improvement based on Effective Schools research is an example of professional learning communities in action” (p. 190).

Hord (2004) invested over a decade studying PLCs beginning by looking at successful schools and then attempting to implement a PLC reform process in five schools. Hord cites five major themes in a PLC: “supportive and shared leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application of that learning, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice” (p. 1). These themes are consistent with the works of DuFour, Eaker and DuFour (2005) and Easton (2004), although ideas presented by Schmoker (2006) would extend the list to include collaboration and a guaranteed viable curriculum as separate themes while eliminating a specific category for shared leadership and supportive conditions. Louis and Marks (1998), Kruse et al (1995), Fullan (2006) and Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell, and Valentine (1999) consistently agree on five

elements of school-wide professional learning communities as a focus on student learning, shared values, collaboration, deprivitization of practice and reflective dialogue.

The elements of a PLC are not a hierarchy or steps to success; rather the presence of these elements distinguishes a school-wide professional learning community from other forms of school culture (Louis & Marks, 1998). Wenger (2001) refers to communities of practice that naturally develop and have a free-flowing creativity that strengthen the organization and address problems at hand. Membership in these communities is voluntary due to a personal investment that the members maintain. These types of informal communities of practice can become building blocks used by school leaders to nurture the development of more formal professional learning communities, but these blocks will not naturally generate the achievement demanded by NCLB. Participation in collaborative learning teams is not optional, but rather expected or mandated, in schools that demonstrate high levels of success. The National Staff Development Council contends all teachers must be involved in high quality professional development (Roy & Hord, 2003).

PLCs are about “establishing lasting new collaborative cultures” (Fullan, 2006, p. 10) rather than the latest flavor of innovation. Instead of a conventional reform and including unconnected professional development, professional learning communities is a powerful alternative as teachers engage in focused cycles of instruction, assessment and adjustment of instruction (Schmoker, 2004). A collaborative culture has been prescribed as the key to teacher development and school improvement (Louis, Toole & Hargreaves, 1999). PLC is not “reform *du jour*” because in a district-wide system emphasis, superintendents and principals come and go but the plan designed by the faculty under the guiding principles of a PLC will remain (Buffum & Hinman, 2006). Rather than a

reform itself, PLC as a structural process is a means for sustaining internal reforms; Louis (2006) notes that a strong professional learning community is a good defense from the external pressures that erode away at the innovations. Therefore, the “continuous, incremental improvements are the real building blocks of sweeping systemic change that is rapid—and attainable” (Schmoker, 1999, p. 56). The next section further explores the key principles of a PLC.

Core Principles of Professional Learning Communities

The result Schmoker (2006) believes is possible if all schools would implement the PLC process is harder to create than it is to visualize. As school leaders attempt to implement PLC as a school reform effort, attention to specific characteristics is necessary. This section looks more deeply at the core principles of a PLC that framed this inquiry. The core principles include (a) a focus on student learning, (b) a culture of collaboration including deprivitization of practice and reflective dialogue, and (c) a shared vision and values.

Focus on Student Learning

A targeted focus on student learning is critical for a successful PLC. In the book, *Good to Great*, Collins (2001), identified that organizations striving to achieve greatness need to choose one focus for their work and keep their eye on the target at all times. In good to great transformations, “there was no single defining action, no grand program, no one killer innovation, no solitary lunch break, no miracle moment” (p. 14) that suddenly defined the organization as “great.” Rather, the process of becoming “great” resembled working endlessly toward a common goal, “building momentum until a point of breakthrough” (p. 14). In a PLC, the focus is on student achievement (Louis & Kruse, 1995; Hord, 2004; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004). Although some might

think a PLC is about teacher development or changing organizational structures, the bottom line is how students perform. Everything else is simply a means to an end (Louis, Kruse & Marks, 1996; Louis, Toole & Hargreaves, 1999; Wenger, 2001).

The focus on student learning becomes reality when time and resources are dedicated to activities focused on ensuring student learning. Schools operating as PLCs devote time within teachers' contracted time to engage in activities focused on improving student achievement on a regular basis preferably weekly as a minimum (Louis, Kruse & Marks, 1996; Hord, 2004; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006). This time for collaboration on student learning is a vital element in implementing a PLC process in a school. School districts committed to student success must allocate the resources necessary to support these structures in order to produce the desired results.

In a school operating as a PLC, staff members create a learning environment to support and realize learning so that each student achieves to his or her greatest potential (Hord, 2004). Decisions to restructure positions to provide assistance to struggling students and to alter schedules to allow time to do the important work of a PLC are characteristic of PLC schools (Sparks, 2005). However, becoming a PLC involves greater investment day in and day out to demonstrate a true commitment to student learning. There are profound implications when the focus shifts from teaching to a focus on learning. By asking key questions like "what do we want each student to learn?" "how will we know when a student has learned it?" and "how will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning?" (DuFour, 2005; Buffum & Hinman, 2006), staff members embody the most important elements of a PLC. Through this process, educators' efforts will focus on teaching and learning from providing a guaranteed viable curriculum to engaging in dialogue about instructional techniques and analyzing student

work in a collaborative setting (Hord, 2004; Louis, Kruse & Marks, 1996; Marzano, Pickering & Pollock, 2001; Schmoker, 2006; DuFour, Eaker and DuFour, 2005). Easton (2004) identifies several methods that when implemented demonstrate a focus on student learning. The list includes such methods as teachers conducting action research, designing and evaluating student assessments, data analysis, lesson study, classroom walk-throughs, critical friends groups, case discussions, curriculum design, peer coaching, portfolio development, shadowing of students, and study groups, to name a few. In schools characterized as a PLC, these types of collaborative activities are part of the regular school culture.

One fundamental element that must be included in a focus on student learning is the analysis of student achievement. In a PLC, teachers analyze summative data such as state assessments to drive future planning. Additionally and potentially more important, time is spent developing common assessments based on a common curriculum followed by analysis of student results in collaborative meetings (Hord, 2004; Stiggins, 2005; Schmoker, 2006; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many, 2006). Stiggins (2005) refers to this as assessment for learning when results are used to inform future teaching to ensure higher achievement. This is a dramatic shift from traditional methods of assessment. Stiggins (2005) recommended, “Rather than relying on assessment as the source of information used to decide who is rewarded and punished, we use assessment as a road map from start to ultimate success” (p. 77). In a PLC, these assessments result in additional learning for students through reteaching and learning for teachers in how to provide better instruction by collaborating with colleagues. Becoming better teachers through regular collaboration with other teachers is a key principle of a PLC.

In addition to the overarching focus on analysis of student achievement to serve as feedback on the instructional process, teachers in a PLC demonstrate a planned response if students are not learning. The development of a guaranteed viable curriculum provides the ability for teachers to know when a student is not meeting the objective. The difference in a PLC is the response to this information. Schools that have improved student achievement responded with insistence on learning by providing extra help as soon as there was evidence that a student was having difficulty learning (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004). This response is coupled with the underlying belief that every student can learn (Louis & Marks, 1998; Saphier, 2005; Stiggins, 2005; Lezotte, 2005; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Karhanek, 2004). In the most successful schools, structures for this type of extra help have become systematic. Furthermore, support for not learning should be a timely directive that is treated as an intervention rather than a remediation (DuFour, 2005). This includes a variety of methods for an automatic response to “not learning” that in some cases include restructuring staff members to be available to provide support for learning. A specific plan should be developed at the building level to define the response. One model exemplifying a "whatever it takes" response is developed as a pyramid of interventions that provides cascading interventions to ensure learning (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Karhanek, 2004). This student specific response is important if a school professes to have learning as the key focus of the school. A commitment and strategic focus on improved student learning is a keystone of a professional learning community (Louis & Kruse, 1995; Hord, 2004; Louis, Toole & Hargreaves, 1999; Wenger, 1999; DuFour, Eaker & DuFour, 2005a; Schmoker, 2006; Fullan, 2000; Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2001; Buffum & Hinman, 2006).

Culture of Collaboration

Culture. The core principle of a focus on student learning is exemplified in the work of PLC collaborative teams. The culture of collaboration distinctive of PLCs is a distinguishing factor in determining schools as professional learning communities. Schein (1996) defines culture as a shared set of assumptions about how the world is and should be that influences the perceptions, thoughts, and behaviors of a group of people. This culture is described as the “laws of the road” (Preskill & Torres, 1999, p. 155) within an organization. Many researchers believe a change in culture is a precursor to real structural change in organizations (Preskill & Torres, 1999). As noted previously, schools implementing PLCs often restructure to allow staff time to meet. Time to meet in general does not guarantee the development of the collaborative culture necessary to result in improved student achievement (Sparks, 2005), therefore, leaders must be able to discriminate between pseudo teams and high-performing teams (Schmoker, 1999). The collaboration referred to in the PLC literature is focused on student learning with a results-orientation. Furthermore, the time allowed is spent by participants actively engaged in dialogue with learning as a focal point. PLC collaborative teams are characterized as having members working interdependently to reach common goals concentrating on improved student learning (Hord, 2004; DuFour, Eaker & DuFour, 2005a; Louis, Toole & Hargreaves, 1999; Andrews & Lewis, 2002; Buffum & Hinman, 2006; Lee & Smith, 1996; Leo & Cowan, 2000; Roy, 2007; Wenger, 1999; Strahan, 2003; Schmoker, 2006). This section will explore more deeply the type of collaboration represented in PLCs.

Structure of collaboration. Collaborative teams can take many forms ranging in size from the entire professional staff of a school to grade level or department groups

(Hord, 2004; Schmoker, 2006; DuFour, 2005). Generally, staff members will meet in various groups on a regular basis. For instance, the entire faculty may meet monthly while smaller collaborative teams meet weekly. It is vital that time for collaborative teams to meet becomes part of the normal school routine during contract time so that all teachers are accountable to participate (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many, 2006). Peterson (1994) cautions, “Teachers need time to meet, talk, think, and interact. When time is scarce, the dialogue and exchanges of information are more often superficial and focused on immediate problems, issue, or obligations” (fostering relationships para 6). When asked, teachers in schools functioning as PLCs identify time as the key factor in the success of their work (Wood & Anderson, 2003). Therefore, a supportive structure necessary for PLC success includes job-embedded time for collaboration (Hord, 2004; Louis, Toole & Hargreaves, 1999; Schmoker, 2006; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan, 2006).

Collaboration in a professional learning community. Many researchers identify the concepts of collaboration that are described in the literature as a critical facet of PLC success (Louis and Marks, 1998; Kruse et al, 1995; Fullan, 2006; Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell, and Valentine, 1999; Hord, 2004; DuFour, Eaker and DuFour, 2005; Easton, 2004; Schmoker, 2006). Grogan (2003), Cook and Yanow (1993), and Oldroyd and Hall (1997) support a participatory process in decisions for change and organizational learning enhanced through the PLC collaborative culture. Bruffee (1999) and Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) agree that effective teams begin with social interactions. Morgan (1997) further supports the idea of social interaction, that in order to communicate and increase knowledge, educators must “become more effective in dealing with their environment” (p. 113). In order to develop effective environments, there needs to be a structure in place

that allows for the changing and exchanging of tacit and explicit knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi). Bruffee contends the creation of an effective environment takes place through boundary crossing with collaboration, while Nonaka and Takeuchi call it creating a knowledge spiral. In either case, it allows for the effective sharing of knowledge that in turn creates new knowledge. Most educators would agree “knowledge creation is the cornerstone of innovative activities” (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995, p. 223). The opportunity to meet collaboratively with colleagues is the mainstay that leads to novel solutions to problems presented to a PLC. The power of collaboration relies on the notion that the expertise needed to generate solutions exists within the members of the collaborative team (Hord, 2004; Schmoker, 2006).

The development of a collaborative culture requires many types of support and is dependent upon several variables for success. Leonard and Leonard (2001) reveal that effective collaboration is more than simply having teachers meet together. It requires skills in consensus building, decision making and conflict resolution. According to Buffum and Hinman (2006), collaboration among teachers was not a natural act. A supportive condition necessary for successful PLCs is collegial relationships (Leo and Cowan, 2000). Described as relationships of trust, respect, positive caring associations and norms of continuous critical inquiry and improvement, collegial relationships among staff members produce action toward a goal. Developing the collective capacity to achieve the fundamental purpose of the school is a component in the PLC model (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005a). Neck and Manz (1994) described effective team functioning as “teamthink” (p. 934) in which team performance is enhanced through divergent thinking, open communication, celebration of diversity and open discussion surrounding issues of doubt within the team. Schools that made transformations to PLCs

experienced the natural conflict and dissention as part of the change process; however, these staffs learned how to respond to the normal reactions to change in an effective manner while continuing their forward growth as a PLC (Morrissey & Cowan, 2004). The human side of collaboration means learning to deal with the different individual reactions to new information.

When teachers view themselves as active members of teams rather than passive implementers of someone else's plan, they work together to overcome the fears of change (Schmoker, 2004). Marks and Printy (2003) find "as teachers inquire together, they encourage each other toward answers for instructional problems" (p. 374). This type of collaboration is a form of professional development that is connected to the daily life of teachers and grounded in the questions and concerns of teachers (Novick, 1996). Thus, the fundamental learning unit is the team, not the individual (Huffman & Jacobson, 2003). However, it is important not to lose sight of the individual's role in a collaborative team. Scribner, Hager and Warne (2002) suggest

Communities should be thought of as entities composed of individuals who come together to share certain values and beliefs but maintain an individuated identity, thus maintaining both 'I-ness' (professional autonomy and individual development) and 'we-ness' (shared identity). I-ness and we-ness occurring together suggests a level of shared identity through which teachers are better positioned not only to respond to problems of practice using their individual insights and experiences but also to do so in ways that both share knowledge and skills with their peers and are good for the organization as a whole through shared vision (p. 69-70).

Collaboration with the purpose to be more effective instructionally so that students benefit is exemplified when “teachers and administrators work together, share their knowledge, contribute ideas, and develop plans for the purpose of achieving educational and organizational goals” (Leonard & Leonard, 2001, p. 10). In contrast to the typical actions of implementing previously unknown strategies, successful collaboration in PLCs depends largely on implementing what is already known relying on internal expertise of team members (Schmoker, 2005). Wallace and Poulson (2003) find that leaders of effective schools “work with the staff to foster development of school culture where the staff find meaning in their work and are motivated to learn and solve problems with a greater degree of collaboration than typifies many schools” (p. 230). Democratic leadership through delegation and empowerment is a sensible choice among the many uncertain paths that leaders face (Louis, 2003) and is characterized as a key element of a PLC as described by Hord (2004) when referring to supportive shared leadership. High-performing teams evidence mutual accountability through shared leadership among administration and teachers (Bolman & Deal, 1997) resulting in easier change efforts through increased commitment and motivation (Peterson, 1994). Furthermore, Copland (2003) found reform work was generally more sustainable when leadership distribution was broader throughout the school community.

Focused collaboration. Effective collaborative teams are characterized by a focus on student learning through the tenants of action research where carefully selected experimentation is conducted with attention to the results. The PLC collaborative teams establish goals and take action to meet those goals. The collaborative development and focus on specific goals with targeted results increases the likelihood for immediate impact (Conzemius & O’Neill, 2002). Schmoker (1999) contends, “the introduction of

specific, measurable goals is among the most promising yet underused strategies we can introduce into school improvement efforts” (p. 23). However, the success of a school is dependent on “how effectively we select, define, and measure progress and how well we adjust effort toward goals” (Schmoker, 1999, p. 25). When goals are related to a team's mission it assists the team by keeping it focused and on task. Goals provide motivation “which they find personally compelling, as well as challenging but achievable. Having such goals helps people make sense of their work and enables them to find a sense of identity for themselves within their work context” (Leithwood, Seashore, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004, p. 6). Conzemius and O'Neill (2002) point out that team goals are appropriate for both desired results as well as how the group will work together. The “use of SMART guidelines to define goals that are Strategic and Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-based, and Time-bound” (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2002, p. 40) guides the team's work in a manner that provides feedback leading to informed future action. SMART goals help make sure the team sets realistic goals that can be measured and are attainable (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). It is motivating when collaborative teams experience short term wins and/or continuous small victories in the sense that success builds success (Schmoker, 2004) hence developing a culture where members believe they can impact the learning of students.

An example of collaboration around goals is the development and use of common assessments. Frequent, common, high-quality formative assessments are developed based on an agreed upon curriculum that precisely defines what students should know and be able to do. Collaborative teacher teams usually develop the common assessment, administer the assessment and then invest time in analysis of student results (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006). Taking time to determine if the team met their original

goal is one factor of the time spent around the common assessment. Additionally, the team will spend time analyzing results in comparison to other teachers then engaging in reflective dialogue about instructional strategies to enhance future instruction.

Assessment utilized in this manner is referred to as assessment FOR learning (Stiggins, 2005; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006). The collaborative analysis of student work capitalizes on the internal expertise by learning from one another (Hord, 2004; Schmoker, 2006). Collaborative time is centered on student learning through ongoing development of curriculum, revision of instructional strategies, and analysis of student performance. This reflective dialogue on teaching and learning is an important component of a successful PLC (Hord, 2004; Marks & Printy, 2003; Wenger, 1999; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many, 2006; Schmoker, 2006).

Collaboration is the foundation that leads to other key elements of a PLC including reflective dialogue and deprivitization of practice. PLC collaborative teams engage in reflective dialogue and inquiry about student learning and teaching (Hord, 2004). The teacher collaboration in a professional learning community is designed to be frequent, continuous and include concrete and precise talk about teaching practice (Schmoker, 1999). Much of the collaborative work centers around what school staff want students to learn, how they will assess the learning, and what response will be elicited if the students have not learned the objectives (Hord, 2004; Buffum & Hinman, 2006; DuFour, 2005).

In order for the collaboration to be effective, team members must have a high level of trust and mutual respect (Hord, 2004). To be open with shortcomings and truly share about an individual team member's instruction and student results, the team environment must be safe from blame. By focusing on the team goals, an

interdependence where all team members share in the success of each team member is generated. Members of high-performing teams exhibit collective accountability (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2002; Katzenback & Smith, 1993). Open sharing coupled with a daring approach to the brutal facts elicits innovative ideas for increased student achievement in the future. When team members embrace the deprivitization of practice as a means to improvement, they can focus on student learning without worrying about egos, thus problem solving for better results (Louis & Marks, 1998; Kruse et al, 1995; Fullan, 2006; Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell & Valentine, 1999; Hord, 2004; Easton, 2004; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Karhanek, 2004). In a collaborative culture as described, team members share in each other's celebrations and empathize in disappointments. When analyzing results, team members should investigate results as if they are conducting autopsies without blame (Collins, 2001). Trust and mutual respect at this level takes time and effort to develop. Leaders should provide opportunity for team building activities including the development of team norms (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2002; Preskill & Torres, 1999). Additionally, SMART goals help to focus the group on results rather than on competitive comparisons between teachers (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2002; Schmoker, 2006; DuFour, DuFour Eaker & Karhanek, 2004). Through guidance and support, school leaders can encourage and enhance the work of PLC collaborative teams leading to the deprivitization of practice and reflective dialogue found to result in improved student learning.

Shared Vision and Values

An important component that guides the work of the PLC collaborative culture is the core principle of shared vision and values. The uniting factor of a "shared vision among the staff supports norms of behavior and guides decisions about teaching and

learning in the school” (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2000, p. 5). School leaders should set the tone in developing vision and values in the school rather than keeping staff guessing about what is important (Louis, 2003). Lezotte (2005) contends “if reform is to be effectively and efficiently implemented, the change process must reach out and give voice to all the keepers of the culture to secure their commitment” (p. 187). The shared vision and values serve as a common message uniting staff members for improvement that define the fundamental purpose of the school and serves to drive future decisions (Hord, 2004; Wenger, 1999; Louis & Marks, 1998; Eaker, DuFour & DuFour, 2002).

A vision is the organization’s definition of its preferred image for the future that compels the staff to work toward that image (Hord, 2004). The development of a strategic vision, according to Nonaka (1988) “makes the members of an organization recognize differences from ‘being’ to ‘becoming’, which creates a feeling of discrepancy or non-equilibrium” (p. 60). Involvement of staff members in the development of the school vision is recommended to enhance the ownership and commitment to the vision by the staff. The vision should be communicated and articulated to all school stakeholders with continual reminders throughout the school year. The dream of what the school will be like in the future should serve as a motivator and guide decisions to ensure alignment of the vision and current activities (Hord, 2004; Louis, Toole & Hargreaves, 1999; Schmoker, 1999; DuFour and Eaker, 1998).

A characteristic of the vision of PLCs is an enduring focus on student learning. In a PLC vision students are pictured as capable of high achievement. This concept leads to the second component of shared values. In a PLC, staff members articulate a shared set of values or beliefs. These key beliefs of educators and the way those beliefs are manifested

in individual behavior and school policies serve as a foundation for the work of the school (Saphier, 2005; Hord, 2004; DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

The school staff needs to engage in activities to define their beliefs about learning. Through this process, they articulate their personal beliefs in order to be able to accept the common beliefs of the school. The task of delving into the real meaning behind words in order to create a common understanding is a powerful activity in creating a collaborative culture. For instance, the underlying concepts beneath the cliché' *all kids can learn* should be explored so that not learning can likewise be defined. A vital component of a PLC is the unwavering belief that all children can achieve at high levels (Stiggins, 2005; Lezotte, 2005; Saphier, 2005; Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2000) regardless of the barriers and obstacles "even if they are far behind academically and need a significant amount of time to catch up. Educators who carry this belief into their practice are not unrealistic about the obstacles they and their students face. They simply have not given up" (Saphier, 2005, p. 86). The underlying shared values lead to actions of tenacity toward successful student learning, thus resulting in improved overall student achievement. Saphier (2005) promotes that "Strong professional learning communities produce schools that are engines of hope and achievement for students" (p. 111) by emulating the espoused shared vision and values.

Professional Learning Communities' Influence on Student Achievement

The promise of PLCs is supported through various successful reform stories including the claim that "thousands of schools and even entire districts can attest to the power of these structures for promoting first incremental and then cumulatively dramatic and enduring improvements in teaching and learning" (Schmoker, 2004, p. 430). The changes in teaching practices resulting in improved student learning are facilitated

through strong professional learning communities (Scribner, Hager & Warne, 2002). Many researchers agree that PLC is the most viable strategy for school reform currently available to schools (Schmoker, 2006).

Evidence that PLCs positively affect schools is readily available in the literature. A study by Louis & Marks (1998) finds a positive relationship between teachers organized into professional communities and the organization of classrooms for learning and academic performance. Accordingly, they found that “in schools with professional communities, students achieved at high levels” (p. 558). The PLC schools were characterized by a collective responsibility for student learning, an attribute associated to student achievement gains on standardized tests (Louis & Marks, 1998). Strahan’s (2003) inquiry demonstrates improved achievement over three years of PLC implementation in three elementary schools that had high achievement with a student population not typically associated with high performance. Thompson, Gregg and Niska (2004) found that schools with evidenced characteristics of a professional learning community had positive trends in student learning based on various indicators including test scores. Buffum and Hinman (2006) cite a high school where several significant changes have occurred since the implementation of PLC five years ago including lowering the failure rate, increasing advanced placement and improved scores on standardized tests. In many of the schools that have been studied the school has collaborated with an external consultant to help the school staff navigate the path to improvement (Dean, Galvin, & Parsley, 2005). The positive results cited by these researchers are coupled with encouragement that PLCs are a realistic process that can be implemented to improve student achievement for any school.

Hord (2004) began her study of PLC through an inquiry process of a school that was markedly different from other schools in the region in atmosphere and educational results. In 1992 when she began her work with the school, the concept of PLC was just emerging. After studying this school, her team began to consider how to assist other schools to use that school as a model so they could also work as a PLC as well. Hord has documented the journey of other schools that committed to implementation of the principles of PLC. The journey of these schools cannot be characterized by specifically defined steps; rather the individual school context impacted the means and methods of implementation. Furthermore, the development of a collaborative PLC culture is dependent upon the individuals within the school begetting leadership implications in generating a cultural change in schools. Conclusions shared in Hord's account demonstrate that implementation of a PLC process is not simple, but when the culture changes to align with the core principles of a PLC improved student learning results.

The collaborative culture of PLCs is credited by many authors as impacting student achievement through teacher learning. Changes in working conditions to increase cohesiveness impact student achievement (Louis, 2003). Scribner, Madrone, and Hager (1999) found that teachers identified much of their best learning occurred through informal interactions with other teachers; however, the quality of teacher learning is dependant upon the strength of the PLC (Smylie & Hart, 2000). Teacher learning is an important component of improved student achievement. Sparks asserts "in just one academic year, the top third of teachers produced as much as six times the learning growth of the bottom third" (Sparks, 2004, p. 47). The job-embedded professional development exemplified through collaboration is considered high quality professional

development (Costa, Lipton & Wellman, 1997) that produces better teachers resulting in better student learning.

Lee and Smith (1996) found that greater student learning and engagement was associated with higher levels of teacher collaboration and collective responsibility. Joyce (2004) purports that when teachers engage in continuous precise talk about teaching practice school improvement is achieved. Fullan (2000) found the collaborative culture of a PLC makes a difference in student success. Chrisman's (2005) work on sustaining success found that "teachers at successful schools spent between one and four hours weekly in collaborative lesson planning" (p. 18). Creating a stimulating workplace for teachers including professionally enriching work groups is associated with the potential to improve student learning (Louis & Marks. 1998). However, Schmoker (1999) warns, "success depends on the interdependency between collaboration and goals" (p. 9). The literature is clear that PLCs have evidenced improved student achievement in schools with various student populations, demographics, and contexts. This evidence backs Schmoker's (2006) call to action claiming the opportunity to create schools better than we have ever imagined is here, if only schools would adopt the professional learning communities model.

Conclusion

Small pockets of success that developed naturally can now serve as models for schools across the nation to reach high levels of student achievement. Schools are searching for solutions to meet the requirements of No Child Left Behind. This literature review suggested that whole-school reform was an appropriate place to begin to address the need for school change. District-level support and encouragement in making the changes necessary to impact student achievement can serve as the impetus for real

improvement. The professional learning community model for school improvement is suggested as a strategy that can improve all schools. With a strategic focus on student learning, a collaborative work culture built around a shared vision and values, educators can positively impact student achievement in a dramatic way. This type of change is not easy and requires teachers to leave the isolation of the traditional school and embrace an open sharing environment characterized by reflective dialogue and deprivitization of practice. When schools embrace the core principles of PLC, student achievement improves. The development of a PLC process in schools is recommended as a means to create a learning environment where all students are successful.

Chapter 3

Research Design and Methodology

Ample research exists on the improved student achievement results that have occurred in schools demonstrating the core principles of professional learning communities (Louis & Marks, 1998). As a result many schools are implementing reform initiatives that reflect the professional learning communities model to meet the standards set for student achievement by No Child Left Behind. These schools often make a commitment to a reform initiative, begin the work, and then wait for results. The purpose of this study was to explore the development of professional learning communities (PLC) model using an evaluative inquiry approach in order to provide feedback to enhance the development of the PLC model in the five schools in one district in rural Missouri to increase the probability that the PLC model will result in improved student achievement.

Through evaluation of the implementation process, staff members gleaned information useful in making decisions regarding the modification of support structures to ensure the likelihood of attaining the desired impact on student achievement. Many times program evaluations are a summative evaluation to determine if the program achieved the goals of the reform. This inquiry was a formative evaluation (Gabel, 1995) in that by studying the implementation phase and utilizing the findings, the Dogwood School District was more likely to achieve the desired summative results.

This formative check on the implementation process was important as noted by Louis, Toole and Hargreaves (1999). The authors note that the problem of change in schools is more than adopting a new innovation, but rather offers several opportunities for inquiry around a single innovation. Six areas were identified for exploration of an innovation:

- 1) Implementation – Did the implementation actually occur?
- 2) Fidelity – Did the implementation maintain the integrity and purpose of the innovation?
- 3) Impact – Did the innovation achieve the desired results especially as it relates to students?
- 4) Institutionalization – Did the innovation become incorporated into the mission and structure of the school/organization?
- 5) Maintenance – Did the innovation continue to exist over time?
- 6) Replication – Did transfer of the innovation occur from one school context to another (Louis, Toole & Hargreaves, 1999, p. 254)?

This inquiry focused primarily on the first level of exploration presented by Louis, Toole and Hargreaves (1999); although, preliminary insight was also gained on other levels as well such as institutionalization. Future inquiries will be necessary regarding the innovation of PLC to explore beyond the implementation into impact and maintenance. The focus on implementation was supported by Guskey and Sparks (1991). It was recommended that evaluation should be conducted through the implementation process and further noted that “some consider ‘program implementation’ a separate factor, we see it as a dimension of program quality” (p. 73). As the Dogwood School District was in the first year of implementation of the professional learning communities model, the inquiry explored the development of the core principles of a PLC in each of the schools as an effort to ensure the impact evaluation will find the intended results (Louis, Toole & Hargreaves, 1999). The broad questions that guided this inquiry were:

1. To what extent were the core principles of the professional learning community model evidenced in five schools in the first year of implementation?

2. What did school staff members identify as supportive of the development of professional learning communities in their school?
3. What did school staff members identify as barriers to the development of professional learning communities in their school?

Design

This study was grounded in the research design concepts of evaluative inquiry. The foundation for the study relied on the work of Preskill and Torres (1999) because of the evaluative nature of the inquiry. This was supported by the works of Patton (1997) on utilization-focused evaluation to frame the skeletal structure of the study. The concept of utilization-focused evaluation demanded a participatory design involving members of the organization. According to Merriam (1998), a qualitative study design would ideally be emergent and flexible in response to the study in progress. The goal of this design was to develop meaningful, applicable improvements within the study setting (Patton, 1997) resulting in organizational learning (Preskill & Torres, 1999).

Evaluative Inquiry

The use of evaluative inquiry was supported through the works of Preskill and Torres (1999), Sirotnik (1999), Kuhne and Quigley (1997), Stuart (1998), Stevenson (1997) and Reason (1994). Evaluative inquiry allows educators to improve their practice as well as create a better understanding of the nature of their practice (Kuhne & Quigley, 1997). Preskill and Torres (1999) assert, “Evaluative inquiry is about practical wisdom and organization members deliberating about what is good and expedient, with an emphasis on using data to inform learning and action” (p. 2). They further contend, “learning takes place through the collective creation of meaning” (p. 49).

Preskill and Torres (1999) identify three phases of an evaluative inquiry. The first phase includes establishing the focus of the inquiry including determining the issue, the stakeholders, and the evaluative questions to be answered. The major focus of this study was the development of the professional learning community model in a K-12 school district. The stakeholders included in the study were the certified staff in five buildings in the Dogwood School District. More specifically, this inquiry included the building-level administrators and director of instruction in cooperation with the researcher to create the inquiry team. The evaluative questions were related to the PLC implementation process for which each school received outside technical assistance. The focus was on the extent that the three core principles of a PLC emerged in each school setting. That was consistent with the concepts presented by Preskill and Torres (1999) and Patton (1997) focusing on the use of the evaluative information for the learning of the organization.

The second phase of an evaluative inquiry as defined by Preskill and Torres (1999) involved carrying out the inquiry. This included designing the inquiry by determining the methods and procedures for data collection, analysis and interpretation, and communication and reporting followed by carrying out the plan. In conjunction with the analysis and interpretation of the data, recommendations were made and communicated. A two-step data collection method was utilized for this study. The first step included ten focus groups, two from each school, to rate the perception of staff on the development of the core principles of a PLC in the school and to identify barriers and facilitators to PLC success. This was scaffolded with interviews of staff members from each school providing a deeper understanding of the underlying concepts that emerged from the focus group discussions.

The third phase of an evaluative inquiry is defined as applying the learning. This was the culmination of the previous work resulting in new learning. The major activity during this phase was the development and implementation of an action plan based upon the recommendations from the findings. While this may seem to be the final step in an evaluative inquiry, it can also serve as the beginning of the next inquiry cycle thus exemplifying a cycle of continuous learning. The inquiry team continued to guide the work of the evaluative inquiry during this phase. The inquiry team was responsible for the development and communication of the action plan. The Dogwood School District administrative team as well as the Leadership Teams utilized the findings from the inquiry in planning for the future in correcting areas where implementation encountered barriers and to enhance support structures of PLCs. These efforts focused on the targeted result of improved student achievement, the focus of the next inquiry related to PLCs in the Dogwood School District.

The inquiry team's involvement in an evaluative inquiry is important to the process because they ensure the study will result in findings that are helpful to the organization. A utilization-focused evaluation (Patton, 1997) is designed to provide findings that can result in program decision making and planning for improvement. By including members of the organization in the evaluation process, the likelihood of an evaluation actually influencing the organization is greatly increased. Stevenson (1997) suggests a participatory approach to research is particularly appropriate in schools because "educational practitioners work in a complex situation where most practices and circumstances are filled with a rich set of particulars (and even conflicting information) that [traditional] researchers are unable to take into account" (p. 105). Preskill and Torres (1999) contend "learning takes place through the collective creation of meaning" (p. 49)

that is created through the use of an inquiry team. Stevenson (1997) asserts this type of research is especially applicable when studying organizational practices, student performance, and attitudes. Including participants as co-researchers engages them in a dynamic process that not only changes the individual but also helps them feel committed to the process. Patton (1997) states “active participants in evaluation, therefore, are more likely to feel ownership not only of *their* evaluation findings, but also of the evaluation process itself” (p. 98). Preskill and Torres (1999) claim that an evaluative inquiry is characterized by “organization members deliberating about what is good and expedient, with an emphasis on using data to inform learning and action” (Preskill & Torres, 1999, p. 2) resulting in organizational learning.

Adopting the Professional Learning Communities Model

The Dogwood School District began the quest for improvement by analyzing district student achievement results in comparison to Missouri School Improvement Standards (MSIP) standards. In 2005, the District’s Annual Performance Report from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education indicated that although the District was not in jeopardy of losing accreditation, there was an urgency to improve student achievement on the state standardized tests. Furthermore, as the accountability standards increase for NCLB subgroups, the District could be facing future concerns in relation to meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Particularly of concern were the Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) results in math at all grade levels that were below state average at grades 4 and 10; in communication arts scores at the high school level scores were falling; and the district did not meet the standard for AYP for the subgroup of special education. Furthermore, individual buildings had subgroup concerns in the areas of IEP students and free and reduced lunch students at the Middle School. These data

were used to develop Building Level Improvement Plans involving all certified staff members in the process. The final diagnosis was a collaborative understanding that the District needed to focus on improving student achievement results on the state standardized assessments.

The District engaged in many activities to determine how to address the problem of increasing student achievement. The administrative team participated in study groups, attended professional conferences to learn how other schools are addressing the same problem, listened to consultants, and engaged in collaborative discussions around the problem over a period of months. In the spring of 2006, the administrative team came to the consensus that implementing a professional learning communities model in each of the schools would be the best strategy for improving student achievement. The next steps included engaging more of the teaching staff into the discussions of PLC. A consultant from the regional professional development center met with the staff of each school to share about the PLC process prior to the District committing to implement PLC district-wide. The superintendent hosted voluntary meetings at each building to hear concerns and or support for the proposal. Ultimately, the decision for a district-wide implementation was made coupled with the adoption of a new professional development model utilizing one-hour late-start meetings weekly for all certified staff members.

After a vote of consensus was taken in each building, the district committed to a full implementation of the PLC model. The Dogwood School District applied and was accepted into the Missouri PLC project supported by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Technical assistance for the implementation process including training for a Leadership Team from each school is being provided through a regional center located approximately 45 miles from the District. Each school

selected three teachers to serve with the building principal to compose the Building Leadership Team. A week-long “kick-off” training for all Missouri PLC project schools implementing in 2006 was attended in July by all District Building Leadership Teams. Monthly meetings continued as the schools worked through the implementation phase of the PLC process during the 2006-2007 school year. The Leadership Teams in turn led the implementation of the PLC process at the building level by using the one-hour weekly collaboration meetings each Thursday morning. This was time the certified staff members had during contracted time to implement the PLC model. The technical assistance continued through the monthly trainings as well as in the form of site visits from the PLC consultant. The implementation of the PLC process was in full swing in all five buildings in the Dogwood School District by the spring of 2007.

Setting and Participants

The innovation of the professional learning communities model has been studied in several single school settings; however, it is rare to find a study of an entire district implementation. The Dogwood School District was selected as the focus of this inquiry because of the commitment to implement PLC district-wide beginning in the fall of 2006. Although the district may have had pockets of PLC-type activity, the culture of a PLC was not noticeably developed at any of the buildings. Furthermore, this district was providing the support of a consultant for the implementation of a PLC through a regional professional development center sponsored by the state department of education. It is rare to find a multiple building district at the implementation stage of an innovation in this manner. The opportunity to study this district provided the ability to compare development across buildings at all levels from K-12 with the same consultant group and the same central office support.

This district was considered a typical district because at the time of implementation it had not been recognized as a high performance district nor was it in jeopardy of provisional accreditation. The 2005 MAP standardized test scores were, for the most part, near the state average varying from slightly above to slightly below. Through studying this district the research may inform other districts in the process of implementing a PLC model while also assisting the District in their own development.

This inquiry was conducted in a participatory manner by the involvement of an inquiry team. While the primary researcher was already an insider in the District, the entire administrative team of the district was included in the inquiry team including principals, the Director of Curriculum, Federal Programs Director, Special Services Director and Assistant Superintendent. This team assisted in the evaluative inquiry by providing guidance on the needs for follow-up interviews as well as the analysis of the data. The inquiry team participated in the development of the overall findings for the inquiry and their use. According to Weiss (1998) this model had an extra benefit because “staff who participate in defining and framing the evaluation begin to think more deeply about what they are trying to accomplish” (p. 25). Thus the administrative team, as inquirers, enhanced their own leadership practice through the process of serving on the inquiry team.

All certified staff members in the five buildings under study in the Dogwood School District had the opportunity to voluntarily participate in this inquiry into the PLC development. Participants signed a consent form (see Appendix A) indicating the voluntary nature of their participation. Phase one of data collection included the building Leadership Team members, the principal, and up to six randomly selected teachers from

each of the five buildings in focus groups. This involved 49 staff members in focus groups. A total of ninety minutes was allocated for completion of each focus group.

During the 2006-2007 school year, the Dogwood School District had 157 certified teachers serving 2,141 students in five buildings organized in grade-level groupings, with all involved in the PLC project. In order to capture the context of the inquiry this paragraph includes some statistical data about each school. The Dogwood Primary School's 30 teachers served 389 students from birth to first grade. This school's staff averaged 9.8 years of experience. The 2006-2007 school year was the fourth year the principal had been in the district all as an administrator. The Elementary School housed 451 second to fourth grade students and was led by a second-year principal native to Dogwood. The average years of experience of the 36 teachers at the Elementary School were 12.3 years. Students transitioned to the Intermediate School for fifth and sixth grades. The third year principal was promoted from teacher in the same school. In the 2006-2007 school year, the Intermediate School had 23 teachers serving 311 students. The average experience of the staff was 11.9 years. The 342 student Middle School had 27 teachers serving seventh and eighth grades with the most veteran staff having an average of 12.4 years of experience. The principal was a third year principal that had been in the District for four years. The Middle School was operating in a more traditional junior high model during this inquiry. The High School was under the direction of a first-year principal with 11 new teachers out of 42 total certified staff members. The 668 student high school's teaching staff had an average of 13 years of experience. The High School had dabbled in a PLC implementation three years prior, but few actual PLC characteristics were identifiable at the end of the 2005-2006 school year.

Accompanying the beginning development of the PLC process was the implementation of weekly late-starts at all District schools. Each Thursday for the 2006-2007 school year the students reported to class one-hour later, thus creating one hour during contract time for teachers to work collaboratively through the PLC process. This was in addition to the seven full days contracted for professional development throughout the school year. The commitment of time for the PLC implementation was one example of district-level support of PLC.

Phase two of data collection involved a smaller sampling. Interview participants included the Director of Instruction for the District, the PLC consultants from the regional professional development center, as well as building level certified staff members. Interviews were based on the findings from the focus groups and were conducted by the primary researcher.

Data Collection Methods

The researcher led the inquiry team in an evaluative inquiry regarding the development of the professional learning communities model. The evaluative inquiry included two phases of data collection as well as the opportunity to review documents necessary to better understand the findings. By better understanding the findings it was possible to answer the inquiry questions regarding the extent the principles of PLCs were perceived to be evident in the schools as well as accurately identifying the barriers and facilitators of the PLC development. The evaluative inquiry process was based on the works of Patton (1997) and Preskill and Torres (1999).

This inquiry was focused on the implementation of PLC, particularly the development of the core principles of a PLC in the five schools in the Dogwood School District. There were two phases of data collection during the evaluative inquiry. A total

of two focus group sessions were held in each of the five buildings for a total of ten focus group discussions to collect data on the PLC implementation. Data was collected regarding perceptions of the development of the core principles along a continuum with the understanding that few schools would have full development of the principles after only six months of implementation. The focus group participants were requested to reflect on their experiences in relation to the PLC implementation. Members were requested to provide supporting examples of activities occurring in each building. The focus group questions (see Appendix B) were developed by the researcher. Analysis of the data included looking for concepts within the data based on the literature reviewed in chapter 2 (Louis, Kruse & Marks, 1996; Louis, Toole & Hargreaves, 1999; Roy & Hord, 2003; Preskill & Torres, 1999; Hord, 2004; Wenger, 1999; Fullan, 2002; McRel, 1993; Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1998; Schmoker, 2004; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker and Many, 2006; Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2001; Buffum & Hinman, 2006) related to the three core principles of PLCs. Qualitative data was collected to gather the descriptive data necessary to determine the development of the principles of PLCs as well as the specifics related to the barriers and facilitators to the development of a PLC model.

Focus Groups

Two focus groups were conducted in each of the five buildings for a total of ten focus groups. The first group included the building Leadership Team (teachers that attended summer and monthly trainings) and the building administrator(s). The focus group with building Leadership Teams was conducted in early May 2007. The data from the focus was transcribed and utilized to tailor questions for the second focus group conducted later in May 2007. This process was consistent with the flexible nature of an

evaluative inquiry (Preskill & Torres, 1999). Additionally, the primary researcher used a personal journal to document how the data was utilized to get better results as well as documenting personal reflections on the surprises in the data from an insider's perspective. The second set of focus groups consist of five to six randomly selected teachers from each building. These teachers were randomly selected through a random number selection process. The same focus group procedures and questions were used with both groups. Prior to participating in a focus group, participants were provided a letter of consent (see Appendix A) stating that participation was strictly voluntary and would not affect performance evaluations. A total of 90 minutes was allocated for each focus group discussion. The group discussions were audio taped and transcribed. The primary researcher facilitated the first focus group in each building consisting of the building Leadership Team and principals. At the conclusion of this focus group, the researcher asked for two teachers from each of the first focus group to volunteer to lead a focus group of teachers from their building. This was to preserve the anonymity of the teachers to provide unbiased comments without the presence of an administrator. The primary researcher trained the volunteers to facilitate the second focus group including how to randomly select the participants, procedures for maintaining anonymity, and procedures for asking the questions as modeled during their focus group experience. A statement from the primary researcher was read by the teacher volunteers prior to the focus group discussions (see Appendix C).

Interviews

After focus group data was collected, a second phase of data collection occurred. Phase two of the evaluative inquiry included follow-up individual interviews as necessary to clearly understand the information. Those interviews took place over the summer

months after analysis and reflection on the focus group data allowed the inquiry team to determine what interviews were necessary to make meaning from the data. For example, one interview was conducted to delve more deeply into matters that surfaced as important to the success or failure of the PLC development but were only vaguely described in the focus groups. This approach allowed a deeper look into the responses to gain a better understanding of the perceptions collected through the focus groups. The follow-up interviews occurred with teacher leaders, administrators, the Director of Instruction as the district-level person coordinating the PLC implementation, and/or the PLC consultant from the regional office. The primary researcher or a member of the inquiry team conducted the interviews. Interview questions are included in Appendix D. The purpose of the follow-up interviews was to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings.

Document Review

A final data source was supporting documentation from the schools used as evidence of the findings. These documents were provided by the representatives from each building on the inquiry team. The inquiry team requested each building to create a list of activities that occurred at the building level as part of the implementation of the PLC process. The data collected included focus groups discussions, interview data, and document reviews providing an in-depth picture of the implementation process of the PLC model to answer the inquiry questions. This was coupled with the primary researcher's personal journal including reflection on the process and the data. The concept of triangulation is accomplished by collecting multiple data sets to ensure research validity (Craig, 2004). Through these data collection methods, the inquiry team had data to inform future action in relation to the PLC development in the Dogwood School District.

Data Analysis

The inquiry team partnered with the primary researcher to analyze the data and compile the findings for this study. The data collection process was interwoven with the data analysis process as the data provided guidance for future inquiry. Stevenson (1997) recognized that involving the participants in the process increases the likelihood of the organizational use of the inquiry results. Through involving the participants in the process to refocus as necessary it is more likely they will embrace the credibility of the results. Creswell (1998) refers to a methodological assumption when the researcher uses inductive logic to utilize an emerging design for qualitative inquiry.

Phase one focus group data was analyzed to identify the level of development of the three core principles, the barriers to the implementation, and the factors that facilitated the implementation process in each school building. An open coding process was utilized to allow patterns to emerge from the data so that the inquiry team could determine if additional questions or focused questions were needed to better understand the data. The data collection process was designed to allow for a refining of the data as the process emerged.

The second focus group data was analyzed in a similar open coding process then further refined through axial coding. This allowed for connections among categories to become apparent. This data was then utilized to determine necessary interviews and document requests to complete the data collection process. The interwoven data analysis ensured that the team had the opportunity to inquire about areas that were ambiguous in the first stages of data collection thus providing better data analysis. The final stage of selective coding of the data occurred after all data had been collected and reviewed. This is when the team identified the common themes across all school sites. This process is

consistent with the concept Merriam (1998) refers to as “category construction” (p. 180) and reflects the more defined steps of Corbin and Strauss (1990).

These data were utilized by the administrative/inquiry team in their own collaborative learning community to learn from each other based on the findings in the same manner as a professional learning community. This was consistent with the intent of evaluative inquiry as presented by Preskill and Torres (1999) when they state “evaluative inquiry is about practical wisdom and organization members deliberating about what is good and expedient, with an emphasis on using data to inform learning and action” (p. 2). The inquiry team determined how to share the findings with the building staff as a means for organizational learning to enhance the development of the PLC process. Furthermore, the data was analyzed to determine any lessons applicable across settings that could be used to inform practices in other districts. The collaborative analysis of data was consistent with the steps identified by Preskill and Torres (1999) through the involvement of an inquiry team.

Researcher Role

A strength of an evaluative inquiry is the insider component allowing researchers to study within a context and setting to ultimately make a difference in the organization. Evaluative inquiry requires a strong design through collaboration with others that share similar interests in the organization’s success. This researcher shared a dual role as the leader of the inquiry and boss of the organization. As superintendent of the Dogwood School District, the researcher was vested in utilizing valid methods that result in findings to produce organizational learning. As Stuart (1999), points out, “the researcher must not just be cautious about the use of power, but must actively work to redistribute power and create both dialogue and equality in decision making” (p. 305). This researcher practiced

the principles of a professional learning community within the administrative team including the element of distributed leadership as the “normal way of doing business.”

This evaluation served to provide information on how to enhance the implementation process from the district-level. As identified by Preskill and Torres (1999), evaluative inquiry is “an ongoing process for investigating and understanding critical organizational issues” (p. 1). The Dogwood School Board of Education supported the adoption of the PLC model district-wide beginning in the fall of 2006. Furthermore, the approval of late starts to provide time for the process demonstrated the commitment to the PLC process. A primary role and duty of the superintendent is to evaluate district programs. By employing a utilization-focused evaluative inquiry as described in this study, the researcher accomplished key evaluative responsibilities of the position.

The use of an evaluative inquiry model for this study was appropriate according to Preskill and Torres (1999). They contend that evaluative inquiry is integrated into the organization’s work processes and is performed primarily by organization members. This type of evaluative inquiry is about organizational learning consistent with the underlying principles of a PLC. “Evaluative inquiry for learning in organizations strongly relies on the democratic processes of asking questions and exploring individuals’ values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge through dialogue and reflection” (Preskill and Torres, 1999, p. 185). Accordingly it is “fully integrated with an organization’s work practices” (p. 1).

To maintain the integrity of the study and reduce potential bias, the researcher informed the staff of the voluntary participation in this study. The data and findings of the study were not used for performance evaluations of the teachers or administrators. Stuart (1998) contends participatory researchers “are obligated to use their power for the direct advantage of individual participants and to incorporate the principles of an ethic of care

into the guidelines that they follow for an ethical research journey” (p. 313). As superintendent, the researcher was invested in the success of each employee and district program. The purpose of the PLC implementation process evaluation was to support the staff as they strived to improve student achievement. This inquiry did not ultimately judge the success of the PLC but rather was used to enhance the development process for greater success. The goal of this study was to inform practice within the school district to achieve better results. This inquiry was a normal duty of the researcher in serving as superintendent of the Dogwood School District.

Limitations

The evaluative inquiry methodology utilized in this study focused on creating an in-depth look at one district’s implementation of PLC. The particular context within the setting as well as the focus on one time within a process of change makes replication of the study impossible. However, Wiess (1998) contends that an evaluative inquiry provides “important information about what happens in the sites studied, and we can use that information as illustration and metaphor of what can happen under similar conditions elsewhere” (p. 29). The second group of focus groups at each building was led by a teacher from the building. This may have added bias depending upon the relationship the teacher had with the randomly selected teachers from the building. Furthermore, the analysis of data included participants with a vested interest in the outcomes may have also biased the findings. As noted by Stuart (1998), the collaborative interest in the results can at times be a conflict of interest. Since the primary researcher is also in a position of authority over the teachers, it could have resulted in socially appropriate responses with the potential to bias the findings. Particularly, the Leadership Team focus groups were led by the primary researcher creating two reasons for painting the picture of

PLC successful including a person of authority conducting the focus group and the vested success in the implementation by being a member of the Leadership Team. Finally, the timing of the inquiry in the final month of school may have either positively or negatively impacted results. Both focus group data were collected in the month of May. Some of the teacher leaders conducting the random teacher focus groups delayed the data collection to the point that some focus groups were held the last week of school for the 2006-2007 school year. This is a particularly busy time for teachers and may have impacted the results. Additionally, some staff members who had decided to leave the district for various reasons participated in the data collection. This includes members of the Leadership Teams, four administrators, and possibly some of the teachers in the random teacher focus group. This variable may have contributed to more candid remarks regarding the barriers and facilitators at some of the buildings. The low staff retention rate may also impact the usefulness of the recommendations because a PLC is dependent upon relationships. New staff members will need to build relationships to continue the PLC implementation. This will be particularly important for the three new building principals. These variables may impact the findings yet many of the lessons learned are still applicable for other district-wide PLC implementations.

Summary

This inquiry was designed to enhance the implementation process of the professional learning community model. This evaluative inquiry explored the development of PLC in five schools within one district in rural Missouri. Substantive research exists on the characteristics of successful professional learning communities. The Dogwood School District was attempting to maximize the positive impact on student learning by focusing attention on the implementation process. As a result, the

organization responded to the information from the inquiry by reducing the barriers and sustaining the support measures when possible to ensure a successful implementation of the PLC process in alignment with the current literature on the topic.

Chapter 4

Findings and Analysis of Data

Becoming a professional learning community (PLC) is not as easy as following a recipe. The commitment of individual members of the school team and the ability of the organization to change determines the speed and success of a PLC implementation. This evaluative inquiry was designed to focus on the implementation phase of a PLC model in five schools in one district in rural Missouri. Implementing the PLC model has resulted in improved student achievement as evidenced in the literature, although it is clear that PLC is a reform effort that is context specific. While there are recommended actions to complete, the work of implementing a PLC reform effort is more about “becoming” than simply “doing.” Louis and Marks (1998) concur that it is the presence of the elements of a PLC that distinguishes a school-wide professional learning community from other forms of school culture. The way people work within a school is what characterizes it as a PLC. The findings of this evaluative inquiry were aimed at identifying and enhancing the cultural congruence with PLC principles at each site through studying the process of the PLC implementation.

Chapter Structure

This chapter will provide an analysis of the findings in each of the five sites in the Dogwood School District. The first part of the chapter presents a within-school analysis exploring the cultural congruence with PLC principles during the first year implementation. PLC principles targeted in this evaluative inquiry included shared vision and values, a culture of collaboration and a focus on learning. As noted earlier, the context within the school impacted the implementation and development of a PLC.

Through an analysis of each school, the data demonstrated the varied journeys toward becoming a PLC experienced with similar support and technical assistance.

Data from each school will be shared separately in the first part of the chapter followed by an analysis of common themes across schools, thus highlighting the similarities and differences in the implementation of PLCs in the various school contexts within the same school district. The major themes across the sites include the concepts of collaboration, time as a resource, and the function leadership for a PLC. Identification of motivating factors as well as barriers to the implementation of a PLC will be examined. This analysis of findings will provide the opportunity to compare the PLC implementation process of five buildings within one rural school district.

Cultural Congruence with Professional Learning Communities at School Sites

Dogwood Primary School

Dogwood Primary has embraced the PLC process almost as if it was simply the natural progression for the kindergarten and first grade staff. A comment from the Teacher Focus Group (TFG) captured the essence of the change that is reflected in the majority of comments from the data.

I feel like it has been something that in an elementary or primary building you see every day, and it is stuff that we always do, that's how we do business, but it [PLC] has taken that to the next step, that next level, to where we have become more cohesive and more focused on kids and more focused on the things that make good programs great.

The data from the primary school reflected the ease of transition to the PLC process and involved very few comments that indicated challenges or obstacles. Several structures present prior to the PLC implementation contributed to the transition toward a PLC

culture including the prior use of reading achievement data as part of the Reading Recovery program, after school meetings focusing on specific students with concerns, and grade level common planning time that had been in place for a few years. Overall, comments regarding the PLC implementation were generally positive often referring to perceptions that the staff had worked together before PLC but are now focused on student learning in their collaborative efforts. The staff recognized the changes that have occurred through PLC and identified the changes as being embraced rather than resisted. Dogwood Primary is the only site that did not share information in the evaluative process about major hurdles or conflicts through the PLC implementation.

Shared vision and values. The PLC principle of shared vision and values was evidenced in the findings at Dogwood Primary School. A member of the TFG captures this concept when she stated, PLC “focuses on how it is just not my students and my classes, the whole school and building and all teachers are responsible for all the kids.” The staff was unified around the concept that each staff member is collectively responsible for all of the students. A member of the Leadership Team identified this as a change that occurred during the PLC implementation year. She held,

There was a tendency of, these are my kids, but now as a building, even auxiliary staff and support staff, it’s our kids, and the PLC has offered a venue for teachers to have that common time to go, these are the children that we are working for in regards to their well-being, how can we do this together?

Prior to the PLC process, a team of teachers met occasionally to discuss student progress, at the time of the inquiry a Leadership Team member described that “it seems like there have been continued conversations versus just here, there, and everywhere.” The

alignment of focusing on student success with everyone sharing the same vision emerged into powerful conversations regarding student achievement. This change in structure was consistent with the formally developed school vision that articulated a focus on “student success” (Dogwood School District, 2007).

Another component of shared vision and values emphasized in the data was the role of goals in a PLC. The primary staff reflected on the change in the importance of goals, particularly the use of “smart goals.” The teachers shared that while goals were developed in the past, those goals were not an integral part of teachers’ daily work. Through the PLC process, the teachers helped develop SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-oriented, and Time bound) goals (Conzemius and O’Neill, 2002) creating ownership and responsibility. The Leadership Team reported that teams of teachers are responsible for monitoring the data relevant to the SMART goals. Subsequently, the PLC process has moved the goals from an administrative task to something all teachers have as a collective sense of accountability. This operationalized into a shared belief system that drives their work. One teacher commented, “I feel that it gives everyone in the building ownership of what goes on. You have a vested interest in the programs, in the things that go on for kids, and that changes your viewpoint.” The new viewpoint at Dogwood Primary was characterized by a focal point on student learning.

Focus on learning. The primary school instruction has been focused on assessing smaller, more specific, targets for learning. This is evidenced by the objective-based report cards that are specific down to how many letters a student knows and identifies the ones they need to learn. This focus on learning specific skills tracked by quarterly grade cards may be a key component that made the transition to a building-wide focus on

learning easier at the primary school. A member of the Leadership Team characterized a change that occurred with PLC implementation was “using our grade card assessment for more than just grade cards.” The primary school staff already held a significant amount of student data that had always been perceived as information for parents. Through the PLC process, the staff members were able to look at that information differently. A member of the TFG commented that PLC “has changed our focus off of what we do and changed to seeing achievement.”

Many comments in the data related to the building improvement plan. This formal plan involves the school’s SMART goals being written along with the timeline, resources and individual(s) responsible for them. The building improvement plan process had been in place as a tool for improvement for several years. Through the PLC process, the staff perceived a change in the role of the building improvement plan from something the principal did to something involving shared ownership and development. As a PLC, the plan was collaboratively developed and defined the focus on learning for the building including what data indicators would be monitored for success. A member of the Leadership Team shared how the change in perception of the building improvement plan demonstrated the PLC principle of a focus on learning.

In the past, our building improvement plan was always written in regards to teachers, what were teachers going to do, and now we pass that ownership to how are the students going to learn this, or how are the students going to be held accountable? So it’s not that pressure of a teacher making these changes directly in regards to their teaching, but now it is a focus on how do we improve student achievement from that integral part for students.

The conversion from a teacher focus to a student focus was also articulated in the TFG, “I feel like the thing that has been the most beneficial to me is keeping that focus on student achievement, and taking the focus off of teachers and putting it on what we are doing for kids every day.” When the focus shifted from teacher actions to student performance a change in perceptions occurred. The primary staff realized and celebrated this change.

Culture of collaboration. A renewed focus on learning as a result of the implementation of PLC at the school influenced how late start times have been used. For example, a first grade teacher noted that the use of their meeting time changed from merely “taking care of business” to a shift toward accountability to accomplish tasks. This was characterized as a shared responsibility among team members. In both focus groups, teachers and administrators utilized a collective “we” to describe their work. The use of “we” was characteristic of the collaborative culture that was enhanced at Dogwood Primary through the PLC implementation. This was coupled with a new level of accountability that was manifested in the collective “we.” The teachers expressed a new sense of accountability for their work. A member of the Leadership Team reported, “we are accountable to ourselves and to our smart goal team and our grade level and the building and [the principal] and accountable to more people I guess.” This is congruent with the characteristics of a PLC as collaborative groups worked on goals to improve student achievement.

The primary school year-end-report indicated that the primary school was one of the few buildings in Dogwood that embraced the concept of shared responsibility. In September, the staff identified responsibilities for activities throughout the school year. Each teacher agreed to take responsibility for at least one of the activities scheduled during the year. The PLC consultant explained, “that has worked very well for them. I

don't get the sense in that building that there was the stigma around; this is that special group of Leadership Team members. [Instead] everybody in our building is responsible." The shared leadership experienced by all teachers may be a crucial step that facilitated the implementation of PLC at Dogwood Primary.

Prior to the implementation of the PLC process at the Primary school, the school would have been characterized as a place with happy people; however, at the time of this inquiry a TFG member believed the school was better described as "a cohesive group focused on student success." The PLC consultant noted this too in her comment, "I think that they developed a positive culture for the work quickly. . . . I think a lot of it was there in its own sense, even before they became a PLC." The consultant further concluded that the primary staff "saw the benefit that it [PLC] was going to have on students, and school community, and it wasn't a big transitional issue with change for them."

Any visitor who entered the doors of Dogwood Primary School could sense the welcoming feeling. The friendliness of the building may have been the premise that both the Leadership Team and Teacher Focus Groups referred to when discussing the concept of collaboration prior to PLC implementation. However, the staff differentiated the collaboration of the PLC as more focused as reflected in this comment from the Leadership Team Focus Group (LTFG), "I think the building would possibly agree in regards to before we were a fragmented effort, trying to do a lot of things and now we have that unified approach." The PLC consultant concurred that the primary school was unified as a group. When asked about the development of a collaborative culture, the consultant commented that most first year schools reported "having all these people that are not on board. And I never had that come up as a challenge in that building, not that they have shared with us, anyway." The usual trials that occur as a collaborative culture

is developing were not reported in the data or identified by the PLC consultant. Thus, this evaluator concluded that Dogwood Primary easily transitioned to the collaborative culture associated with a PLC where all staff members are involved in the collective efforts of improving student achievement.

The data from Dogwood Primary demonstrated that the efforts of PLC engaged more than just classroom teachers in the collaborative processes. Teams including all staff members were developed to address goals in the building improvement plan. By including auxiliary staff members, there were enough people to create small teams focused on many important areas. Altogether, seven teams were operating in the building: kindergarten communication arts, kindergarten math, first grade communication arts, first grade math, early education, and an at-risk group. The small groups focused on building improvement plan SMART goals during the late start PLC time with occasional whole group meetings interspersed. During the small group time, the teams created common assessments, analyzed data and worked on curriculum. The process engaged all staff, creating empowerment and investment. The ownership and accountability for the improvement process has shifted from the building improvement plan being the principal's project to a shared responsibility.

While Dogwood Primary is only in the first year of implementation, evidence of the collaborative process of a PLC is strongly demonstrated through the data. The staff identifies itself as collaborative, describing a strong sense of shared vision and values focusing on student learning. It is clear that Dogwood Primary is well on its way to becoming a strong PLC. Dogwood Primary has always been regarded as a good school, but a member of the Leadership Team shared that she perceived their school to be different in a better way.

I think I have always thought I work in a great school. I thought that last year and the year before and the year before, I was like, man we do great things, but then after this year, we're really a good school. I feel like it's that step beyond. It's like it kind of makes everything just fall into place. It makes you feel like, okay, we're all working together. I don't know if you can put that in words, but just the feeling of this year feels different than the other years. I think that is the main thing for me and what I would want another school district to know. It is just going to change the way your school feels. It's not all on me; it's not all on our team. This is everyone, and if I'm having trouble, I can go to someone and if they're having trouble, I feel we are tighter that way.

The implementation of PLC changed a school, already doing many things well, into a school with a unified purpose for student success. The collaborative processes in place at the primary provided evidence of a successful implementation process that will continue to grow with the positive attitudes apparent in the data.

Dogwood Elementary School

The Leadership Team at Dogwood Elementary expressed that the PLC implementation has been a success while also recognizing the bumps along the way. Specific examples were provided that characterized the principles of a PLC as well as information that exemplified the typical roadblocks identified in the literature. The journey of the first year implementation of PLC at Dogwood Elementary will be described in this section including the development of PLC characteristics as well as an exploration of the struggles that may still linger for second year implementation at the building serving second to fourth grades.

Shared vision and values. A component of first year implementation as identified by the regional PLC consultant is the development of a school vision including all stakeholders in the process. Dogwood Elementary invited any stakeholder to engage in this process by placing advertisements in the area papers. Students, parents and staff members provided most of the ideas for the development of the school vision. The visioning process caused staff members to discuss the important attributes of their school and resulted in a statement that each person agreed to support. Dogwood Elementary celebrated the development of the school vision at an evening parent event and at a Board of Education meeting. The vision was posted in the school and added to the school web site. The vision has become a tool in keeping the school focused on what they have determined is important.

Developing a written vision is an important step in the PLC process; however, living that vision is more important. A key component of the Dogwood Elementary vision statement is the concept of partnership. Through the PLC process, the Elementary staff has seen a change in ownership of the school's results. A member of the Leadership Team commented, "In the past, we have kind of thought about the kids in our classroom and the kids in the classroom across the hall, and now we are thinking about the kids as 'our' kids, and not just what's best for my classroom, but what is best for all classrooms." A comment from a written survey regarding the PLC process administered by the district professional development committee exemplified this partnership when asked about the strengths of the PLC. The response was simply "changed attitude from 'my' to 'our'." The transition in perception to a focus on the good of the whole was a critical step in becoming a PLC.

The regional PLC consultant noted that the Leadership Team recognized a shift to a collective ownership of students and celebrated it at one of the monthly meeting sharing times. The conversion from “my class” and “my students” to group ownership of student success was also evidenced in the activities of the PLC time. The responses in both focus groups referred to analysis of student data for all students not just for “my students.” While the activities demonstrated the behavior of living the vision, it is important to note that comments from a special education teacher revealed frustration with not looking at the data for only her students. Thus, the data indicate a development toward a shared vision and values, yet all staff members may not be at the same level of commitment at this point in the first year of implementation.

The PLC consultant indicated that her work with the Leadership Team has led her to believe they are very goal oriented. Each monthly training session ends with planning time. She reported the elementary Leadership Team always “go away with a very specific goal of what they want to do, and where they want to take their staff next, and where they want the school community to be.” When the elementary team shares at the regional monthly meetings, the PLC consultant noted that they are doing things and moving forward with the process by the actions they reported. She commented, “The feedback we have gotten from them as a team has been very positive.” The common commitment of the Leadership Team has resulted in changes in the school as identified by the development of the other core principles of a PLC.

Focus on learning. A PLC is exemplified by a strong focus on student learning that staff members at Dogwood Elementary identify as a change. A member of the Leadership Team described a transition in her thinking regarding the PLC focus on learning. She said,

I think . . . we have had more [of] a focus on learning, instead of so much on ‘What can I do for my teaching?’ Which is what I always thought before. . . . I thought that was a good thing, but I think we have switched to ‘What can I do to improve learning?’ And I think that makes you look at it a little differently.

The transition from a teaching focus to a student learning focus goes hand in hand with the transition from “my” to “we.” When conversions in outlook such as these are shared among colleagues it has the power to change schools.

The focus on learning at Dogwood Elementary was more than just staff members speaking of a transition. The actions including the development of a pyramid of interventions that led to the establishment of a “success classroom” demonstrated a real focus on learning. Dogwood Elementary restructured the workday of some teachers in order to provide for an immediate response when students are not learning classroom objectives. Furthermore, a review of the artifacts from the PLC implementation revealed strategic efforts to address student learning through identification of at-risk students in order to meet their academic needs. A comment in the end-of-year report to the Board of Education stated that one of the outcomes of PLC at the elementary was “significant advances in adapting teaching to the students, accomplished more quickly due to weekly late start.” This is evidence that the elementary staff used their collaborative time to focus on ensuring the learning of their students.

To provide a context on the student achievement results at Dogwood Elementary a broad glimpse will be provided. This is not intended to represent that Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) achievement is related to the PLC implementation, just to provide a data-based picture of the school. The MAP results (see Figure 1) over the last

four years indicate the percentile rank in the state based on MAP index scores have been improving in math and falling in communication arts at Dogwood Elementary. While one subject and grade level is very high another has been sliding for three years. The need for consistent student achievement is evident. The MAP results for the PLC implementation year of 2007 demonstrated slight to dramatic improvements in three of the four areas.

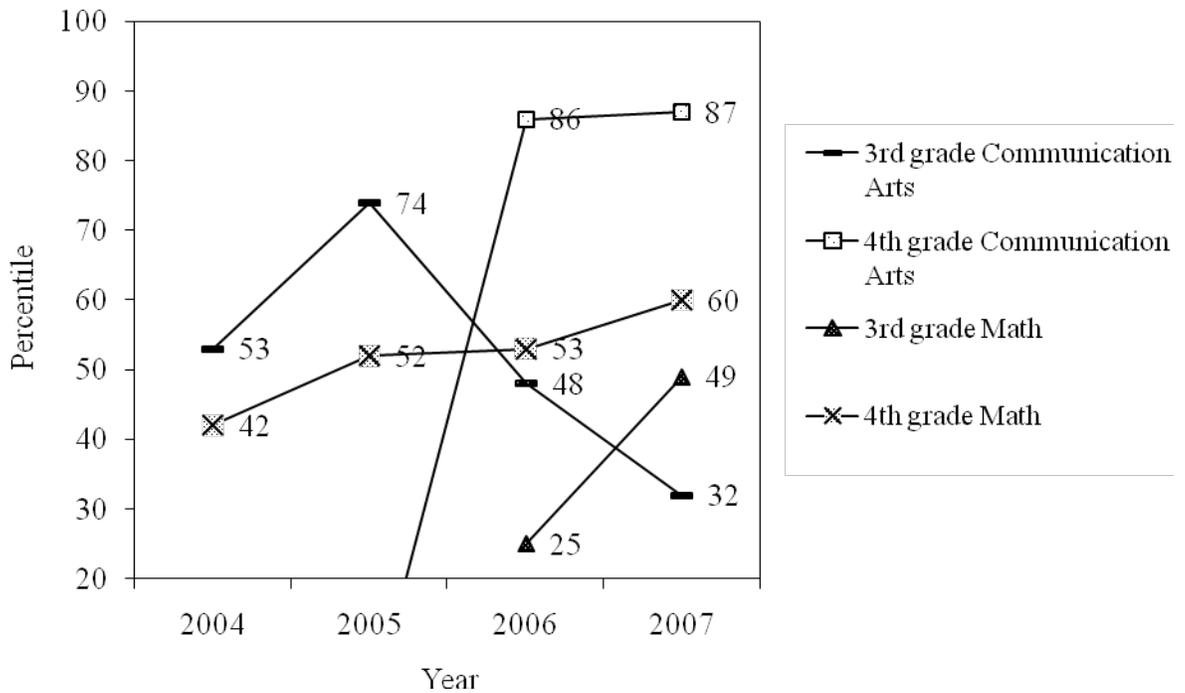


Figure 1. MAP percentile rank in the state for 3rd and 4th grade in communication arts and math from 2004 to 2007 (Ferguson-Florissant School District, 2007).

Culture of collaboration. Evidence suggested that as a result of their participation in the PLC reform, Dogwood Elementary staff had begun to collaborate more to ensure their students were learning. This did not, however, occur overnight and still has some room for future development. The transition to a culture of collaboration for Dogwood Elementary staff involved teambuilding activities at the beginning of the year and transitioned to data analysis and SMART goals at the midpoint of the year. This followed

the recommendation of the regional PLC consultant for the first year implementation to flow from a large group setting to more small group activities as the year progresses. The data demonstrated the teacher's perception about the importance of collaboration as well as the subgroups that have room for further development of this principle.

The teambuilding activities utilized at the beginning of the year were identified as important in reinventing the current school culture. A teacher member of the TFG recognized the habits of the school culture that needed to change in order to become a PLC.

You know, to me a community should be something that, well, everybody is working together and stuff like that. I hate to say it, but in our school, we have the history that I have seen in fourth grade, for twelve years, the fourth does their thing, third grade does their thing, second grade does their thing, the special people do their things, and to try and break down those barriers and walls, it is difficult, because we tend to revert back to what we have always done.

One of the tenets of PLCs is the learning that occurs from reaching outside the traditional groups within a school. Several comments from both focus groups mentioned this benefit. A TFG member comment indicated the teambuilding opened communication across school subgroups, "I think it has helped a lot with the team work, being able to open up to other people, work with other grade levels and groups." A member of the Leadership Team observed that some teachers were surprised at what they learned that other teachers in their building were doing,

They were in their comfort zone, and they were doing what they thought was just fine, and then, as they started collaborating with teachers, which

we never had before. They were, “Oh, really?” And they were shocked that someone would even be thinking of doing that. So I think it really laid on the line what we are here for.

Teambuilding was important for the elementary staff because they needed to get past the traditional groups into teams working toward goals. The time investment in teambuilding was identified by some teachers as too much and recognized by others as an important step in raising the bar.

The collaborative time did stretch beyond teambuilding activities; however, some teachers felt it was too late to be digging deep into data analysis in February prior to the testing in April. In the TFG, teachers recognized the focus on instruction and data analysis within grade level teams as more relevant to the goals than getting to know each other. The Leadership Team acknowledged how the SMART goals transformed the collaborative efforts into group accountability, “It was kind of all of us taking accountability for...or you know, the grade levels coming together, saying, ‘At the third grade, this is where we are at.’” The principal explained how she tried to protect the anonymity of the teacher in sharing the scores on the state assessments, but commented,

This year, probably before they had left the meeting, they had already figured out who everyone was, and wanted to discuss what they had done. It wasn’t “my scores.” It was “our scores, and what can we do to get them up?” I found that amazing looking around the room.

This is one example of voluntary deprivitization of practice that occurred in the collaborative process. The regional PLC consultant remembered the elementary Leadership Team eagerly sharing at a monthly meeting “about how exciting it was the first time the collaborative team started really looking at common assessment results, and

that they weren't afraid to talk about them openly together, and to ask each other for help." The Leadership Team understood the magnitude of the step toward deprivitization of practice and the movement toward collaboration as described in their trainings. A teacher in the TFG shared that in grade level meetings her team looked at the textbooks and assessments "and I felt like for the first time in a long time that we were actually at least, if not always on the same page, at least in the same book and headed in the same direction." Another teacher on the Leadership Team commented on the growth she had seen in herself and others through the collaboration in the PLC,

I think I have grown from the opportunities to work with other teachers and seeing what they are doing in their classrooms. Before, we had a grade level meeting, but that was filled with so much day-to-day stuff, that we didn't get into curriculum stuff, like we wanted to. And I think we have all grown that way, not just myself.

Comments in both focus groups indicated collaborative groups did not have clear direction at times especially later in the year. Confusion existed among the teams on what they were to accomplish on certain days. The LTFG discussed the concept of giving more power to guide their own work as small groups in the future. The Leadership Team members felt that they were directing each meeting without providing the autonomy to the groups to guide their work toward the goals. As a Leadership Team they planned to empower the team more in the future than they did this first year. The controlled meeting agendas when everyone did not share the big picture caused some teachers to feel they were not accomplishing the tasks they believed were important causing negative feelings because the groups felt they had other activities that would better utilize the collaborative time.

Another issue that arose from the data was the curriculum writing activities that occurred during late start time. Both the Leadership Team and the teacher focus groups at Dogwood Elementary mentioned that the curriculum work sidetracked them from PLC activities. A disconnect existed in the relationship between curriculum work and PLC. Since curriculum is closely linked to student achievement, this data suggested the need for a second training on the connection between curriculum and the focus on learning and has implications for how the curriculum activities were explained to the building-level staff. Curriculum work is an important component of a high functioning PLC.

The culture of collaboration was evident yet has room for continued development at Dogwood Elementary. Collaboration in a PLC is a challenging arena that develops over time and can still have bumps along the way. The issues identified would be considered normal in the first year of a PLC implementation.

The overall findings for Dogwood Elementary demonstrated varied views of the PLC implementation process. While focus groups with the Leadership Team and a random selection of teachers were separate, the positives and negatives of the first year implementation emerged. Discontent about specific components of the implementation was evident in the data, however, the general sense exhibited progress along a continuum of development in all three of the core principles of a PLC. If Dogwood Elementary can continue to build upon the foundation that was laid in the first year implementation, there is little doubt that the PLC process that will materialize will benefit student performance.

Dogwood Intermediate School

Dogwood Intermediate School may be the most changed school from the 2005-2006 to the 2006-2007 school year. Many things contributed to those changes including a large staff turnover between the two years. The new staff serving grades five and six

coupled with the PLC implementation process may have been the right combination to create a new culture at Dogwood Intermediate. This school staff is proud of its accomplishments including the improvements in the MAP results. While this evaluator is not claiming PLC caused improved student achievement results in the first year, the intermediate school has accomplished just that. In this, the second year of statewide assessments in fifth and sixth grade many factors influenced achievement improvements one of which was PLC implementation. The MAP results (see Figure 2) for the PLC implementation year of 2007 demonstrated dramatic improvements in three of the four areas with the fourth area actually showing a slight gain in the MAP index points from 2006 to 2007 while dropping slightly in percentile rank. The use of a percentile rank comparison assists in reducing the impact of 2007 being just the second year of testing since all schools have only experienced the test one time previous to the 2007 administration and the percentile rank compares achievement both years for all schools in the state.

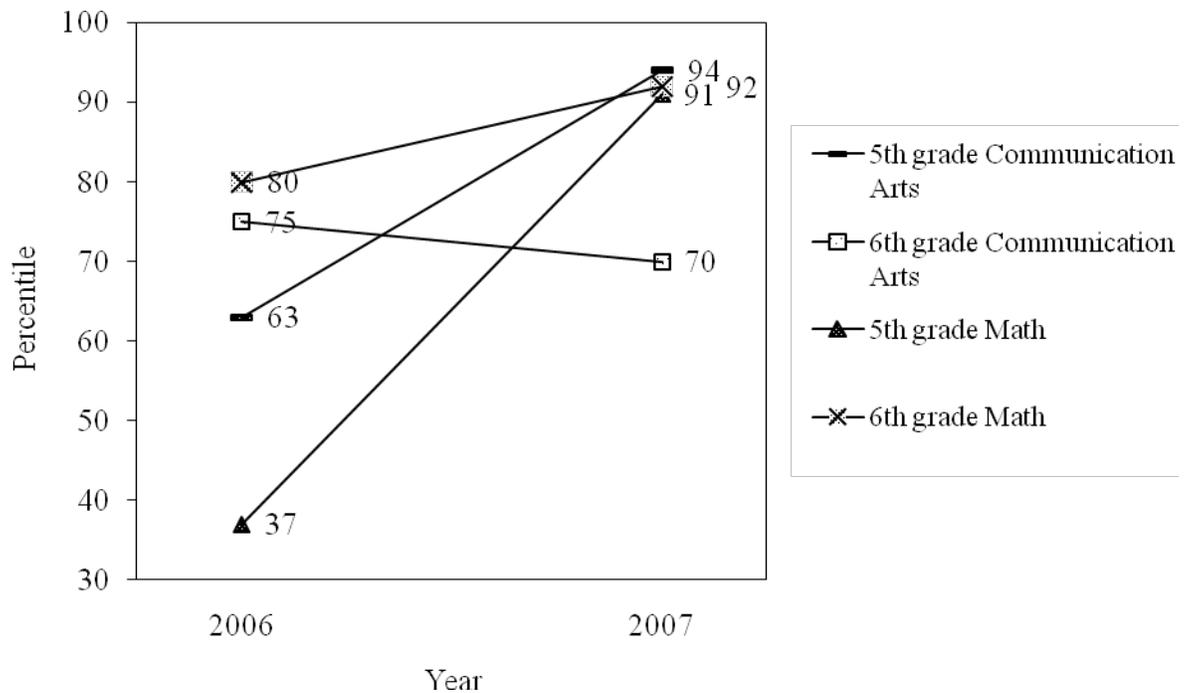


Figure 2. MAP percentile rank in the state for 5th and 6th grade in communication arts and math from 2006 to 2007 (Ferguson-Florissant School District, 2007).

PLC implementation at Dogwood Intermediate, coupled with the relatively new addition of statewide assessments in this grade span, created a positive synergy for students and staff. Even the regional PLC consultant noted, “They seem to be real excited, and energized about the work. They are really excited about where they have come and gone. They are. They celebrate, and they are very proud of the work that they have accomplished.” The energy is evident to others, as they have been asked to present information on their work in several venues including a presentation request from the regional consultants for the state PLC conference. This being said, the PLC implementation is just beginning at the intermediate school. A review of the data will provide a clearer picture of the process including celebrations and stumbling blocks from the first year.

Shared vision and values. The Leadership Team reported that they spent time and worked “very hard to make everybody aware of what this [PLC] is about and what it was going to yield in the future, and I think that made a huge difference in what we were able to accomplish this year.” The team saw the importance of buy-in to the process from the start. This did not prevent them from struggling with creating it.

The development of the vision statement serves as an example. When the Leadership Team first began the process of developing a school vision statement the staff came to quick consensus on a statement. In many cases, this would have then become the school’s vision statement, but not at Dogwood Intermediate. The Leadership Team knew that the vote to approve the vision statement was not coupled with a commitment to make it happen on the part of the staff. They then took a brave step to revisit the already approved vision statement. The team recognized the lack of staff input and interpreted that it could result in lack of commitment. They reflected, “You could just tell, they didn’t have a whole lot of buy in it. We had to really go back and rework it and present it again for them, and ask for their input.” The team anticipated there would be rocky times and admits they hit some, “I think we might have anticipated that we were going to make mistakes, even though we had a plan. We had to regroup and rethink.” The maturity of this team to take a step back when they really wanted to be forging ahead is an example of the strong leadership that led to a school vision that will drive school improvement for the future.

When the team was working through the plan provided by the regional PLC consultant, it would have been easy to take the quick consensus and move ahead; however, this team was aware of the importance of all staff members supporting the PLC process. Others would agree as noted by a member of the TFG, “I think we all probably

have made that commitment, that personal commitment, to making this all work and making it more meaningful for every member of the staff.”

In addition to the vision statement, more practical commitments were made as staff members in the form of common commitments. A member of the TFG shared, I think specifically things like our common commitments are things that we would not normally have made as a staff together in order to commit to three or four things that we listed that we would do each week or begin next semester. Those kinds of things have brought us together in a way beyond our classroom.

The common commitments are examples of a staff that is willing to put the team ahead of their own ideas and agree to change their practices so that all team members are working together. Shared vision and values have developed through the commitment and focus on student learning.

The bond among the staff from going through the trials of the first year of PLC has created a new obstacle identified by the LTFG,

I think an ongoing obstacle might be, now that we have developed a culture in our building, we are going to be having new people come on board, and we've got to include them and, you know, here we've had a year, but if we've got people that are coming in and have not been in the Professional Learning Community, that you know, we've got to include them. That's going to be ongoing. If you develop this culture, you've got to include them.

The perception that things are different enough that they will need to provide guidance on how to belong to the PLC to new teachers verifies that the teachers identify a difference

from the previous way the school operated to a new way of behaving in a PLC. The tenacity that staff members are approaching the focus on learning with is evidenced in their actions and their collaborative practices.

Focus on learning. Dogwood Intermediate School has become a school where data matters. Not just any data, but data on student performance. One example of the energy and focus came from a member of the LTFG when she noted,

I had a teacher come in, I mean, the bus students hadn't even left yet, and we had tested her kids that day, and she had the papers with the beginning score, and she wanted to know what those ending scores were, and she wanted to see if they had met their target of growth.

The concern over data being tracked as part of the school improvement plan is not the only data they are watching. Another teacher on the Leadership Team commented,

I don't think I've looked at my kids' data as hard as I have this year. I've graded things in the past, gone over it, but we really, really have analyzed, . . . I'm writing notes about which kids and what they're struggling with and I am trying to adjust my day so I can meet with those kids. I think I have more of a passion for trying to get those kids to reach those goals...I have never been so goal driven I guess, and I do it myself, not just because we're doing this PLC, but I just see the connection there, how our data is helping us.

A teacher identified that both she and her building have changed because of their focus on students that is coupled with the self-efficacy that they can make a difference. She said, "Nobody is looking for excuses. It doesn't matter if we're in a poor, rural area. We can be just as great as anybody else, because we have the power inside us to make that

happen, and I know it will.” A member of the Leadership Team acknowledged that with the excuses gone, the picture of success changed,

The change that has meant the most I think to me is the fact that we have a high expectation for our students, that we enable ourselves to visualize them doing the very best that they can, not just settling for getting by, but just really believing in what they can do and being the ones to help that happen, and just across the board, taking everything we can to pull that out of those kids.

The time spent through PLC focusing on student learning is important for several reasons. “It’s not only the frequency of the discussion, but it has raised the level of the discussion and the quality of it, just that focus on learning,” commented a member of the LTFG. She continued, “Personally I think it is satisfying to people as professionals. I think it has raised the professional identity as educators.” Another teacher concurred,

I have been in education a long time, and in those 23 years, I have seen a lot of innovative ideas come about, but I can truly say that this has been one of the most impacting philosophies, it has just changed our whole viewpoint on a lot of different things, the way we present reference to the children, the way we are interacting with each other, and it has made us become more of a team. Whenever we are thinking of anything, we are looking at the impact on the children and the parents and us.

The focus on learning is the reason collaboration blooms at Dogwood Intermediate. The collaborative culture that developed is an important characteristic of a PLC.

Culture of collaboration. Collaboration is an important component of a PLC that is part of the foundation that must be present for a PLC to be successful. Dogwood

Intermediate School had both pictures of success and struggles shown through the data of this inquiry. Members of both focus groups acknowledged the disconnect at the beginning of the year in the way the staff worked together and likewise recognized the positive results from the collaborative culture that has developed.

The collaborative culture did not emerge without a fight. The Leadership Team invested the better part of three months to whole group activities including an emphasis on teambuilding. A member of the Leadership Team reported, “We spent a long time, what, three months probably, on just developing that sense of trust and team work with the staff, and we needed to do that. We needed to spend that much time on that.” The team acknowledged that a sense of mistrust was present beginning the year probably because of all the changes with staff.

A member of the TFG identified that the PLC process “has brought us together as a team where we can rely on each other and work with each other, instead of feeling isolated in our own classroom.” The value of time spent teambuilding is sometimes questioned, although that was not the case for the intermediate school as LTFG member explained that PLC has brought something they have been striving for in years past.

The way I think this has really changed me and also our whole building is it provided a structure to really do what we wanted to do forever. We’ve wanted to have that authentic contribution of everybody’s opinion, but we haven’t quite known how to plug it in, in a way that was realistic. This [PLC] provided . . . enough of a framework for us.

The structure provided by PLC is an important distinction when thinking about a culture of collaboration. Often we consider only how people are engaging with one another and

what topics they are discussing. This teacher captured the importance of a structure of collaboration in a PLC. The structure provided for the opportunity for all staff to have a voice. In order to have a culture of collaboration, all persons must engage with each other and commit to being part of the process.

The intermediate school team experienced teachers involved in conflict. In fact, during one activity two teachers squared off and refused to compromise resulting in not completing the activity. This was a turning point for the staff as these two teachers shared with the whole staff the experience of not accomplishing the task because they failed to work together. This set the stage for openness and the willingness to learn from mistakes. A member of the TFG described her feelings at the end of the year,

I feel like each of us have a more secure feeling, we feel safer to be able to share things with each other, so that we don't feel afraid that people are going put us down whenever we share things that we have had success with or things that have not been so successful.

A feeling of safety developed over time as exemplified by a story from a Leadership Team member. She shared one of her greatest challenges that impacted her personally admitting that she struggled to lead her team during the meetings. She shared that she was so excited about PLC but was upset by the second meeting because her group was not following the norms and she felt responsible. Through support from her colleagues along with the PLC process development, she reported that things are different now,

We trust each other. We stay focused now. I had lack of confidence not knowing if I was going to be able to handle the strong opinions, the strong

personalities that were in my group. We have come a long way. I was in tears in the first two meetings, but we are okay.

The challenges and conflicts of collaboration are found in the literature. The issues that go along with creating a collaborative culture are the big hills that a school must climb in order to become a PLC. Many times schools experience a little frustration and quickly resort back to the old way of operating. This was not the case at Dogwood Intermediate. The strong sense of team and common commitments to the process carried them through the storm to a better way of working together. The PLC consultant noted that the intermediate team acknowledged some struggles early on with getting people on board, “but they are dealing with it. With some schools, it’s month-after-month, and ‘Woe is us. We just can’t do it because....’ I don’t hear any of that blaming going on in the intermediate at all.” The natural conflicts arising, as schools become a PLC are to be expected. Concerns arise when the schools ignore or can’t get past the conflicts. The PLC consultant noted that the intermediate school Leadership Team acknowledges they are experiencing conflicts, “but they are not letting it interfere with the work.”

The Leadership Team modeled how to deal with the struggles as evidenced by the issue with the vision statement. The Leadership Team felt something was wrong because the staff had not participated in the development. They boldly decided to reintroduce the vision development process admitting that they may not have involved enough people for true collaborative development. This created a culture where trail and error was accepted, failure was an opportunity to try again together and every persons voice was important.

The collaboration that was happening at Dogwood Intermediate for most of the year focused on the goals that were set in the collaborative groups. The content area collaborative groups really dug in and analyzed data and developed curriculum and

common assessments. Although, as mentioned earlier, they had a few growing pains in the beginning, they focused and went about the business of their content area. The at-risk team, however, struggled with the process. According to the LTFG, the members of the at-risk team “never took ownership . . . and you have to have ownership of what you are working on. I think that’s part of why things kind of take off.” The at-risk team members were teachers of subjects that are not state assessed at the time such as physical education and science. They established goals for the entire building for attendance and parent involvement, but demonstrated little genuine interest. The topics seemed out of reach and unrelated to their daily work, thus the team was not very productive. A member of the Leadership Team who also served on the at-risk team commented, “We really tried but we weren’t really sure where we were going. . . . I wish we could find a little different direction . . . I don’t think we had quite the content to grab a hold of.” The importance of working on things that matter is evidenced by this group’s lack of accomplishments. When teams are working toward goals they have established and believe they can impact, their investment in success is much greater as seen in the other teams active at Dogwood Intermediate.

As collaboration was becoming the norm at Dogwood Intermediate School, the PLC implementation was progressing. The struggles in developing a culture of collaboration at the intermediate school was right on track for schools embarking on the major change of becoming a PLC. The intermediate school staff kept their focus and worked through the challenges to become a stronger team. This is a positive sign for the future development of the PLC process at Dogwood Intermediate.

The differences at Dogwood Intermediate are evidence of the development of the principles of a PLC. Teachers are working together with common goals to improve

student achievement. While the development of this collaborative culture required some backtracking to move ahead with all staff members, the Leadership Team had the insight to take a small step back in order to launch farther ahead. The process of becoming a PLC is evidenced in many ways through this inquiry.

Dogwood Middle School

The PLC implementation at Dogwood Middle School is in contrast to the implementation journeys experienced at the elementary buildings. The focus group data demonstrated mixed feelings about PLC among staff members. The principles of PLC were less developed in the artifacts and described behaviors, yet the Leadership Team had the sense that they were moving in the right direction. Thus, the inquiry has resulted in curious findings at Dogwood Middle School. The data demonstrated some positive results and some very negative feelings from some staff members toward the PLC implementation.

Shared vision and values. Dogwood Middle School Leadership Team had the same access to the recommended activities from the consultant for the PLC implementation; however, they did not choose to utilize all of the resources at hand. The PLC consultant noted that developing a PLC at a middle school is different, but the middle school Leadership Team had a “that wouldn’t work for us” attitude. She said, “there was a little bit of sense that the principal kind of felt like they were step above normal, knowledge-wise.” The Leadership Team approached the work of PLC in a different way than the other buildings.

Most of the collaborative time at Dogwood Middle School was spent in whole group activities rather than breaking into smaller goal-oriented groups like the elementary buildings and the high school. The activities included both presentations of information

as well as group problem solving. In the beginning, when the other schools described teambuilding activities as a use of PLC time, the middle school Leadership Team chose a different approach. A member of the Leadership Team characterized it this way,

I think one thing that worked well in meetings that I felt really good about in the beginning were the introductory meetings and when I think we really laid the gauntlet down for the staff, and I think one thing that has worked really well is making everybody feeling like they are important and all they do matters. I thought in the meeting when we came up with our definition of it being a systemic process in which we worked interdependently, I think, we have hammered that home pretty well this year that we are very interdependent, and just some of those activities that we did, like the team work versus collaboration and when we did the pyramid of numbers and just some of those that aha moments were pretty powerful. I think the staff feels more familial (sic). We know each other more and we're more all for one and one for all. I feel that more this year than in other years.

The middle school Leadership Team approached the building of unity by laying down the gauntlet rather than activities to model collaboration. They claimed their approach did include trying to make everybody feel important, yet the TFG identified a feeling of disconnect because some staff members were not included in the collaborative meetings. These staff members were assigned to student supervision instead. A member of the TFG identified this as a barrier to the PLC process when she commented, "Obstacles that the staff encountered were that not everyone participated. Some were always in student supervision."

The data demonstrated that the members of the Leadership Team had a different sense of the development of a staff that worked together. One Leadership Team member reported that she had “been here for a while and I’ve seen the cliques, and I don’t think I can identify one now.” Another Leadership Team member added,

We clarified in the beginning that everyone would have a voice and no one could hog the meeting, and that we were going to work together. I think our meetings have been more pleasant than some of our staff meetings in the past, because in the past we’ve had people that wanted to argue and complain more than I have seen this year, so it has been more positive.

This is contrary to other comments from Leadership Team members who reported that some teachers were not included and appeared even more negative than the past. The teacher reported,

that not all the teachers or the paras [paraprofessionals] are involved on a regular basis. There is that isolation concern, they are not free to share as much as some of us. We are always in there, and there are some that are not in there or very seldom in there. They feel left out, and rightly so.

Another member of the Leadership Team reported that a few staff members have become more discontented throughout the PLC implementation. She said,

I’m aware of two, maybe three faculty members that I think have almost become more negative because of the process and are not happy with the late start format, not happy with the student supervision piece, and not always being in the meetings, and because the concerns, were listened to, but not responded to in the way they wanted them to be responded to, they

are still not on board, and I think that is part I what I said initially. This made me more aware of the importance of making people all feel a part of it, and that is something we are still struggling with, because we do have two or three that are very vocally still against it [PLC].

This comment is congruent with a comment from the TFG. A teacher reported, “We as a faculty have become more frustrated with PLC. The late start has taken away from our unity, due to the fact that most teachers were absent supervising students within departments. Items discussed impacted my teaching very little.” The frustrations were expressed with vigor while the Leadership Team appeared pleased with the implementation process although admitting they still had room to grow.

A member of the Leadership Team recognized that frequently they were making decisions without the involvement of the whole staff. When asked what advice they had for another school implementing the PLC process, she reported,

I would encourage them to keep all their teachers involved. I think sometimes we’ve even missed that because we have to plan for that meeting coming up on Thursday, and we say, oh, that’s a good idea and as a consensus we think that’s really good, but we’re not really waiting for the buy in for the rest of the faculty. So it’s . . . really we’re telling them what’s coming up next . . . We’ve often done a type of a, do you agree with the way we’re going with something, but I would certainly encourage them to get the whole faculty in the decision making process all the time because then you get a lot more buy-in.

The Leadership Team gave reports of what they knew were examples of PLC in action, yet they also reported changes they would make in the future to increase the staff

acceptance of PLC. They discussed the investment and belief in the PLC process as well as their desire to continue the implementation. The conflicting representations of how the staff worked together led this researcher to conclude that the unity necessary to have shared vision and values in a PLC were not evident at Dogwood Middle School at the time of this inquiry. Shared vision and values require a connectedness among staff members willing to commit to each other and the vision. This common commitment was absent at Dogwood Middle School at the time of this inquiry.

Focus on learning. Dogwood Middle School approached the PLC implementation differently including their focus on learning. They invested time in whole group activities around many topics that had a connection to student learning; however, the link to data around student achievement was not mentioned in the focus groups. In fact, the discussion of SMART goals found in the data from all the other schools is absent in the findings at Dogwood Middle School. Instead activities with a learning focus such as a book study on literacy skills and work on writing curriculum were the major connections to a learning focus found in the middle school data.

The curriculum work at Dogwood Middle School was similar to that at Dogwood Elementary in that the teachers identified it as separate and even competing with PLC activities. A member of the Leadership Team explained this by saying,

The thing that we have done right along side PLC is we have worked on curriculum writing, and those have been together but separate, and I think that has kind of hurt us a little bit in that we are kind of building two airplanes in the sky.

She also reported that more time has been given to curriculum work in the second semester resulting in less work on PLC. A member of the Leadership Team identified

that curriculum slowed them down and are the excuse that the PLC common commitments are not completed.

The Leadership Team also responded to concerns they have heard in the building. One concern mentioned was that teachers were complaining about the “assignments” they were getting in PLC time. They reported the teachers wanted more collaboration time to meet vertically with other teachers instead. One LTFG member shared, “It seems like we go for weeks and weeks and all we are doing is more book study or we’re getting an assignment to go do something else we have to turn in, and documentation of what we are doing.” The data did not mention what happened with the assignments or documentation just that they had to do it and the teachers did not like it. The analysis of student achievement data was not referenced in the focus groups either.

The data reflected activities and presentations during PLC time as well as a book study. The only ongoing activity that was mentioned was the book study on literacy. The greatest challenge mentioned repeatedly in the both focus groups was the issue that all teachers could not attend PLC meetings in the mornings. The student supervision for late start time was solved at Dogwood Middle School by rotating non-core teachers in supervisory positions. The middle school maintained the smallest student to teacher ratio for late start time thus requiring more staff members to be with students instead of in the collaborative meetings. By including core classroom teachers in all PLC meetings and creating a rotation of non-core teachers the collaborative processes and teambuilding activities were not strongly embedded among all staff. The concept of rotating staff was theoretical and in practice resulted in some teachers rarely participating in the rotation and instead remaining either in or out of the collaborative meetings resulting in either positive or negative feelings accordingly. Additionally, teachers leading student clubs

elected to meet during late start time drawing even more staff members out of the meetings.

The principal shared another factor influencing the time spent focusing on learning. She admitted that she utilized the PLC late start time to eliminate faculty meetings that were held once or twice a month in previous years. These managerial tasks took time away from the focus on learning characteristic of a PLC. The principal stated,

Perhaps we have compromised our PLC time sometimes by doing things we would have normally done in the faculty meeting If we put the faculty meetings back in for those managerial pieces, then maybe that would solve one problem, but then I can see the whole other side of complaints with, what do we have the PLC for if we are having to stay until 5:00 today.

Dogwood Middle School Leadership Team was challenged with balancing maintaining a positive school culture while also pushing the staff to change. Often the path of least resistance was utilized to attempt to keep staff happy. For example, the entire hour of late start time was provided to respond to a survey instead of asking teachers to complete it during their plan times. Often times the PLC time was utilized for sharing of information rather than collaboration about student learning.

Members of the Leadership Team recognized the need for more time to develop a real focus on learning. One member shared, "I've got so much hope for it [PLC] over the next two to three years and what we can do with it to establish that interest on student learning." She referred to the need to get everyone on the same page heading in the same direction. Another member predicted that in order for this to occur they will have to

address the issues of including all staff members in the PLC meetings. This will be necessary for the development of a culture of collaboration characteristic of PLCs.

Culture of collaboration. Dogwood Middle School had been afforded the opportunity to have one hour per week for collaborative time; however, there are mixed reviews regarding the value and extent of that collaboration. The teacher focus group was clear that problems existed in the use of collaborative PLC time while the Leadership Team acknowledged some concerns yet identified that they believed collaboration was occurring.

Members of the Leadership Team stated, “We have all started collaborating more and talking to each other more about situations at hand.” While talking to each other is an important first step, it does not rise to the level of collaboration in a PLC. Another member stated, “I have seen it empowering subject teachers to come together and work together, saying, we want you to do this, it’s okay to do this.” When teachers work together on projects that is also a beginning for collaboration, but does not meet the characteristics of collaboration in a PLC where there is a distinct focus on student learning and goal-oriented data.

The principal at Dogwood Middle School reflected that she received criticism at times because staff members wanted to have old-time faculty meeting time rather than the activities planned by the Leadership Team. She recommended that schools keep the focus on student learning and elaborated that “it’s a purposeful decision sometimes on my part to keep it about instruction, and there’s pressure to not keep it about instruction, but I would say, hold the line as much as possible.” A member of the teacher focus group commented on the lack of faculty meetings, “It has meant that we have not had a real faculty meeting all year. While I appreciate not staying after school, there has been no

sounding board or group discourse on how the building is functioning.” The principal made the decision to forego the traditional after school faculty meetings for the PLC implementation. She explained that it may not have been a good decision but in “trying to sell the program [PLC]” she eliminated after school faculty meetings by either putting information in writing or taking a few minutes here and there at the weekly meetings.

Teachers strongly voiced their lack of approval of how the PLC late start meeting time was utilized. A member of the TFG stated, “I feel the time spent in PLC could have gone better. I had no grade level meeting time. I had no content area meeting time.” This comment exemplified the desire on the part of a teacher to meet with smaller more meaningful groups typified in a PLC. Another teacher supported this thinking when she stated, “I believe our group dynamic could have improved with more group work, not activities.” This comment captured the feeling that the weekly meetings were disconnected and more about doing an activity instead of ongoing work. PLC time should include continuing collaborative conversations focused on SMART goals not mentioned in the middle school data.

The Leadership Team recognized a major struggle in developing a collaborative PLC culture at Dogwood Middle School was the exclusionary procedures for PLC time. The principal noted, “I think it has highlighted to me even more the importance of getting everybody on board and trying to make everybody feel a part of the process, which I think is still a challenge that we have in our building.” The Leadership Team identified two major factors that have contributed to the lack of development of a collaborative culture at Dogwood Middle School.

First, the need to supervise students during late start meetings required many teachers be excluded from the meetings in order to oversee student activities. The manner

that was used to determine which teachers went to the meeting and who supervised students created a divide and implied importance or lack thereof for certain positions. The building principal explained,

If I have a choice between putting a core teacher in PLC time, particularly if we are working on literacy strategies, or what not, and a librarian or computer teacher or half-time teacher, somebody that is not here all day nor coming back next year, I'm going to choose that core person. So, that has alienated some people.

Several months into the first-year implementation the Leadership Team recognized that some staff members were feeling separated and expressed a lack of communication. A member of the Leadership Team explained how they addressed the issue,

We realized that the people who were not attending the meeting were not always apprised of what was going on at the meeting, so we have started doing an attendance, basically so that we know who isn't there, and getting them copies of minutes so to say, or notes as to what went on at the meeting so they don't feel left out. I would advise someone new starting out to do that from the beginning.

This attempt to include staff members created more work for those not included in the meetings. They spent the meeting time supervising students then had to take time to read about what happened in the meeting they were not allowed to attend. This could be the root of the negativity about PLC exhibited by some staff members.

The second factor impacting the development of a collaborative culture was the number of teachers who were not in the building full-time. Both part-time and traveling teachers have the same struggle to stay informed without attending the meetings. The

Leadership Team utilized the same strategy for these teachers as the ones supervising students.

The collaborative culture of a PLC at the middle school was not as developed as the elementary buildings in the Dogwood School District. The positive characteristics indicated in the data included comments that teachers were talking with one another about classroom activities. For instance, a member of the Leadership Team reported, “Mr. [Evans] just asked me about doing a research paper in science and wanted to know what format they wanted to follow. That door was initially opened through PLC.” This type of activity is a beginning because as teachers experienced benefits they would continue to engage in collaborative activities. One LTFG member commented, “I feel that I have personally changed in becoming more aware of what other teachers are doing in the district and in the building, and just understanding how we can all work together.” This is another example of growth but not the type of ongoing meaningful collaboration found in PLCs.

Dogwood Middle School has not moved along the continuum of developing a culture of collaboration at a pace expected for a first year implementation. Several factors have been identified as barriers to collaborative processes. Additionally, the Leadership Team has implemented a few strategies to reduce the barriers; however, a careful look and planning will be necessary to move this school toward a collaborative culture. The principal and the Leadership Team see value in PLC and perceived they are making strides to becoming a PLC. The Leadership Team may need to take an honest assessment about where they are in order to move forward. One member of the Leadership Team expressed that she thought they were right on track for the first year,

I think because we got to present at the Missouri Middle School Conference, and I think that that nailed it down for us that we knew, I mean that kind of we were masters of the first year. We have a long way to go, but I feel like that that was an incredible honor for other people to then evaluate us and we helped them to buy in to, and I think that hopefully we will be able to help these other people buy in.

The invitation to present was encouraging to the team and may have served as rose-colored glasses in assessing what was really occurring in the building. The activities listed as use of the PLC time were not bad activities it was just with a percent of the staff and did not focus on student data. This evaluator encourages a strong look at the processes and procedures at Dogwood Middle School to reduce the barriers and build a collaborative culture by creating an inclusive environment rather than an exclusive one.

Interestingly, while the development of the core principles of PLC are lagging behind that of the other schools, the student achievement results reflected a positive learning process at Dogwood Middle School representing a change from previous years. This evaluation is not claiming that MAP achievement is related to the PLC implementation; however, the data did refer to “assignments” the teachers had to do when going to the meetings. One member of the Leadership Team reflected,

I’ve heard a lot of concerns from other teachers that it seems like sometimes we need focus in what we are doing with PLC time and they are seeing it as nothing more than more time to get another assignment. There are things that we have to do anyways with certain evaluations and testing and things like that, and sometimes I think they don’t understand, but we are giving you that time during the day now to do that. But, again,

they are saying we want more time for the collaboration, for the vertical, and that kind of thing, . . . I've heard some of those types of complaints. That may be something that is just prior to us getting the PLC started and not quite having that figured out yet, but there are a lot of things that have to be done I think to get your PLC to that point, the vision, the mission, and all those things that do take some time, so maybe the second year it may be better.

This is the only comment that refers to collection of data; however, it is apparent that the teachers do not know the purpose of the data or spend time as a group analyzing the data for improved instruction. They do, however, desire to meet in smaller work groups with subject-alike peers. It seems that the Leadership Team was directing activities without providing all staff members with the connections to make them meaningful. The assignments included turning in assessments of student work on constructed response questions to the principal. The missing step was teacher analysis of the data to inform their teaching. In spite of that, the MAP scores showed an improvement over previous years. This could be the result of the concept that what gets paid attention to gets done and since they were collecting information from each teacher in the form of “assignments” then the students were engaged in activities that aligned with the Missouri assessment.

To provide a data-based picture of the school MAP results are included in this finding section. The MAP results (see Figure 3) over the last four years indicate the percentile rank in the state based on MAP index scores have been inconsistent in communication arts and falling in math at Dogwood Middle School until 2007. The MAP results for the PLC implementation year of 2007 demonstrated dramatic improvements in

all four areas. The 2007 assessment was the first year to test both grade levels in both subjects. Because the percentile rank is a comparison with all schools in Missouri, the positive trend in increasing the percentile rank demonstrates that Dogwood Middle School was improving at a rate faster than other schools in the state. This evaluation does not declare that PLC resulted in improved achievement just that the implementation of PLC occurred in the same timeframe.

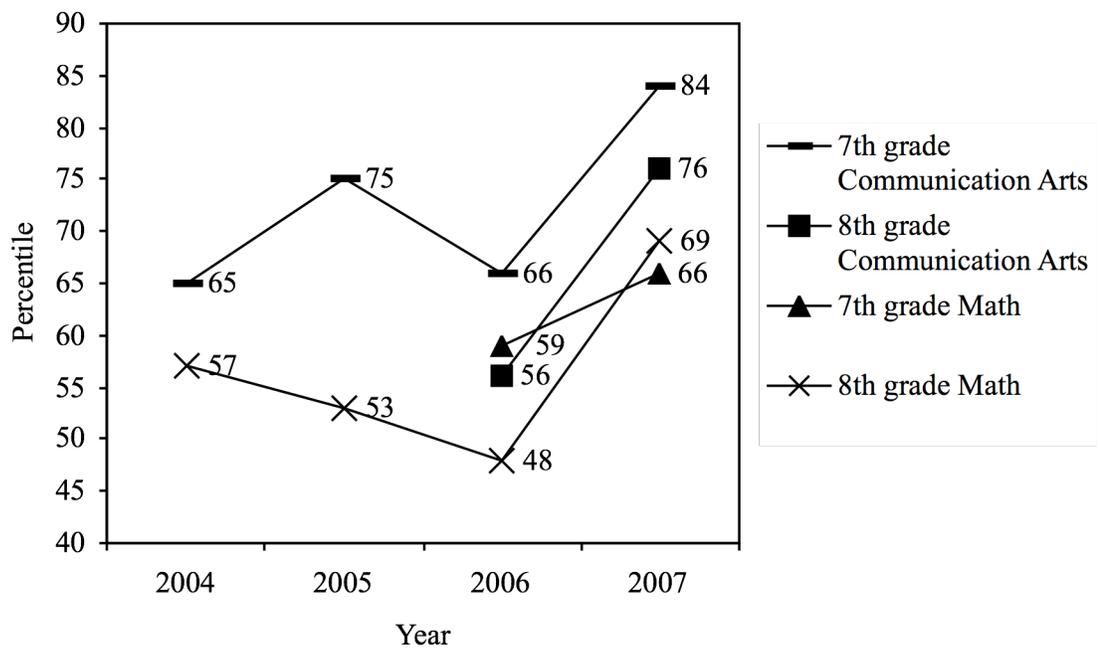


Figure 3. MAP percentile rank in the state for 7th and 8th grade in communication arts and math from 2004 to 2007 (Ferguson-Florissant School District, 2007).

This inquiry was aimed at evaluating the development of the characteristics of a PLC evident in Dogwood Middle School during the first year implementation and demonstrates some pockets of PLC-type activities but also showed that a divide existed among staff members. The Leadership Team recognized some of the challenges ahead and yet maintained a positive attitude that they have accomplished great things so far.

This may be a case where the context of the school at the beginning has had a major impact on the development of the PLC core principles. Where the principles are not as developed as one would hope in a first year implementation, the Leadership Team perceives a big improvement. This could be a reflection of the school culture prior to PLC implementation. The Leadership Team is supportive and hopeful about the continuing journey of PLC.

Dogwood High School

Dogwood High School was the first school in the district to begin exploring the concept of PLC. The staff began learning about PLC in the 2003-2004 school year when a majority of the staff was provided the opportunity to visit a PLC high school in the Chicago area. From that trip, the staff began their quest to become a PLC by implementing a freshman mentoring program, an extended lunchtime for guided study hall and a late start for thirty minutes of staff collaborative time resulting in a longer day of instruction for the entire district. Therefore, many teachers at Dogwood High School believed they were already a PLC school because the programs were in place. This was noticed by the PLC consultant at the summer training academy, “High school brought the baggage of their past experience, and it wasn’t negative, it was just sort of a sense that I think they started out thinking they knew more than they did.” After the first monthly meeting of the school year, one of the high school Leadership Team members contacted the PLC consultant. The PLC consultant shared,

I got an email from one of the coaches saying, ‘I think we are an accelerated PLC. Could you maybe send us the materials for the training through, like December? Because, we are ready to move ahead.’ As if we were holding them back at the first meeting. Then at the first training

meeting, that same coach came up to me and handed me some crumpled up old things that she had brought back from Stephenson High School. . . .

You know, she just needed to get across that, since she had been there, she thought she had a handle on this. But, there has been a real turn-around on that.

The current principal also recognized the challenge of the history the high school had with PLC.

We have the group that felt they had been involved with PLC and we know what PLC is, and we're trying to reeducate into the model that we want . . .

. So you've got a group that felt they already knew and didn't want to be re-educated, and we've got the new group, and that was a big obstacle for us.

Teachers on the Leadership Team agreed the previous history created struggles for the current implementation process. Additionally, after a year of training they can see how the beginning work that had been done at the high school was not implemented in a manner that resulted the development of the PLC principles. A member of the LTFG reflected,

I think when we started this process three to four years ago here at the high school, . . . we jumped in too much at one time, put everything in, tried to do all components of it at one time, instead of taking one component at a time and building on that. I think everybody was just scattered . . . I think if we would have taken it one step at a time, it would've worked out a little better.

The PLC consultant noted the transition in the Leadership Team's approach when she identified the challenge with the secondary staff was creating the understanding that

becoming a PLC “was not just a check-list It is, each year, taking it deeper and deeper, and understanding more and more. I think they finally realized that they had a long way to go.”

The Dogwood High School staff has experienced a large turnover between the beginning of the PLC movement and the district-wide implementation in 2006-2007 most noteworthy was a change in leadership. The principal leading the implementation of PLC in 2006 represents the third principal in three years. It is also important to note that at the time of data collection for this study, the staff knew that their current principal was also leaving the district setting the stage for the fourth principal in four years. A member of the Leadership Team referred to the changes in staff as a roller coaster, “I think there has been a lot of frustration. We took a step forward and then we seemed to take a step back.” He reported that each new administrator would change things each year to the point that they feel like “we’re going to do everything we’ve done before and we don’t feel like we’re taking steps forward.” The PLC consultant noted how this principal dealt with the history of PLC as the Leadership Team began their training, “His approach at the beginning was, you know, we’ve got to set aside what has happened in the past and we’re starting today. That was the distinction I saw at the academy.”

The history of PLC is an important component of the development of the implementation in 2006-2007. The PLC consultant noted that the high school has a ways to go in becoming a PLC, however, they recognize the challenges of another new principal and the lack of progress this year.

I give them credit for the fact that they have been humbled by their original thinking that they were so much further ahead than the other buildings in the district. They are reflecting, and saying, “We are actually further

behind, and need to get off the woe-is-me thing, and move forward. How can you help us?" You know, all of that is a good thing, that they are recognizing that.

A look at the student achievement data from 2004 to 2007 (see Figure 4) demonstrated that the PLC implementation has not yet resulted in an upswing in assessment results. While it was not expected that a first year implementation of PLC would result in improved achievement, the high school's journey has yet to yield such results. This may be due to the lack of consistency in administrators and teachers and/or the lack of integrity in the implementation process. The prior implementation of PLC did not involve technical assistance other than a one-time workshop in Chicago. The data-based picture of the school is provided as context. The MAP results over the last four years indicated the percentile rank in the state based on MAP index scores have been declining in math and communication arts at Dogwood High School. While MAP index points were actually improving from 2004-2006, the improvement across the state outpaced that at Dogwood High School thus resulting in falling percentile ranks. The MAP results for the PLC implementation year of 2007 demonstrate a drop in MAP index points as well as the percentile rank. This trend is the opposite of the desired results.

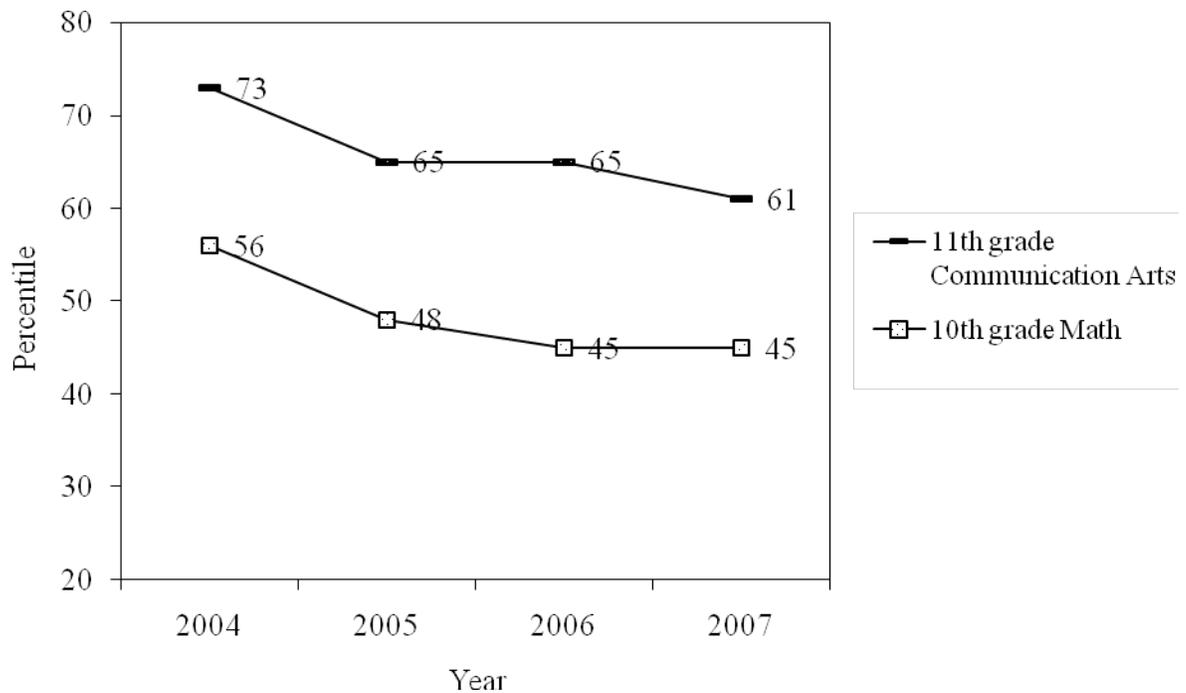


Figure 4. MAP percentile rank in the state for 11th grade in communication arts and 10th grade in math from 2004 to 2007 (Ferguson-Florissant School District, 2007).

Shared vision and values. It is clear from the previous section that the PLC implementation was met with challenges at Dogwood High School. These obstacles impacted the development of the core principles at the high school. The Leadership Team recognized that their previous thinking emerged into a new way of looking at becoming a PLC,

It is correctly called a process. It is not a checklist that you can accomplish in one year or two years. It is a living entity of itself. This year has been a roller coaster with ups and downs more than we ever expected, but the PLC process, you can see some milestones along the way, and you can see some people beginning to open up to a process and that's great. Are we on our

way? Yes, we're on our way. Are we halfway there? I don't think we're halfway there. But you have to start your journey with one step.

The Leadership Team reflection is on track with the data analysis of this inquiry.

The staff at Dogwood High School developed a mission and vision as part of the PLC implementation in 2006-2007. This is a tangible artifact that the staff can look at as a result of their collective efforts. This may be an important document for the new principal to support since the whole staff was involved in developing the vision. A member of the BLT characterizes the importance of the process of vision development.

I think the process we used for our vision in developing the vision was a very big celebration. Our people put a lot of time into it, and effort, and I think we had a very good cross section of new teachers, older teachers, the different departments involved in that committee and it was a true process in getting there and the high school felt very strongly that we had a vision that said what we were trying to reach.

The vision adoption may be the first whole staff collaborative effort where the voices of all staff were heard at Dogwood High School. A member of the LTFG shared, "I think the teachers appreciated having the mission and the vision when it was completed and thought that that was a process that they took part in, and they had ownership of that."

Overall, the implementation of the PLC process has been slow at the high school. The development of the core principles was behind that of the other buildings in spite of their head start on the process. A member of the Leadership Team explained, "there was the excitement in getting started, and we saw the ebbs and flows that they said we would see, and then kind of reached a point where I really feel like we plateaued." The PLC consultant describes the implementation year as a "humbling experience and not in a bad

way. I think that they feel kind of like they are going to get support from the other buildings . . . to try and keep that up-draft going to push them forward.” The Leadership Team as well as the members of the TFG maintained the attitude that PLC will be a success at Dogwood High School while recognizing the shortfalls during the current year. The unity of a positive attitude toward PLC was an important foundation for the future work toward becoming a PLC.

Focus on learning. The data from most other schools in Dogwood School District include comments about student learning. This focus on student learning was almost totally absent from the focus group discussions at the high school and when it was referenced it was most generally inferred rather than an explicit connection to student learning. The one comment that indicated a teacher understood the PLC focus was on student learning came as an explanation about why guided study hall was developed in the TFG, “That’s part of putting the students first; we’re doing this for the students so that was a reward for them for having a grade, that they don’t have to stay in study hall.” A second comment about keeping a student focus was not exactly about student learning, but rather a general comment about students and dislike for the activities they have been engaged in during late start meetings. A member of the TFG commented, “I would agree, I think it should be more student-oriented than just interest in data, data, and paperwork, instead of what is best for the kids.” Another teacher concurred, “We need to know what our end goals should be. . . . keeping in mind that our main objective here is to do things for the students. Keep the students at the top of the list, not the paperwork.” These comments indicate a focus on students; however, the learning aspect may not be present.

The SMART goal work within departments was also implied as the focus on learning. While members of both focus groups mentioned SMART goals, they did not

mention student achievement. The comments focused more on instruction and curriculum objectives that were shared. For example, during a whole group meeting the SMART goals for each department were presented to the staff. At that time, the math department discovered that the science department was focusing on graphs for their SMART goal. This was an area that both areas could support thus helping the science department reach their goal. The question remains whether the goal was about instruction or student learning. An action step on the process of instruction can result from analysis of student data; however, the goal should be about student performance.

The data does indicate that pockets of activity focused on learning. An example from the math department demonstrates the team analyzed previous student achievement data and developed a pre-test to use as an assessment for determining future instruction for weak areas. According to a LTFG member, “They felt very strongly that that helped their kids on the MAP test.” This indicates that at least one department engaged in activities that focused on student learning.

A member of the Leadership Team commented about the development of SMART goals.

I think we saw our biggest gains . . . When we decided to slow down and just do one thing at a time and focus on, okay we’re going to focus on what is a real, solid, smart goal, and we really saw some gains when we did that, because we brought the smart goals back, we looked down and talked about it, and said no, this isn’t good, that idea is good, but let’s expand on this, and we did this as a group. Then they would go back to their departments and they would re-evaluate the smart goals, and then we’d bring them back and we talked to each other about what we were doing with the smart goals.

I think we started to see some gains when we started to slow down and just really focus, let's do one thing really well right now, instead of trying to do so much.

The guided practice presented on SMART goal development provided a foundation for future development in this area.

The proclaimed focus of the Leadership Team on SMART goal development may have resulted in a focus on student learning or may not have had that impact. The PLC consultant indicated that the high school had not developed common assessments or corollary testing. She stated, "I think there has continued to be some resistance to that. A lot of teachers were new and didn't even have a handle on the curriculum themselves, let alone working with other teachers." The PLC focus on learning ultimately becomes the purpose of teacher collaboration around student achievement data. Dogwood High School data did not reveal the tight focus on student learning characteristic of PLCs.

Culture of collaboration. The Leadership Team had the task of determining how to structure the one-hour late start collaborative time. At the beginning of the year they engaged in team building and then moved into time within departments. The Leadership Team reflected "when we were doing team building things, we saw good things happening but once we got the initial stages of the departmental time with the collaboration, then we started going downhill." The team building activities were appreciated by members of the TFG as demonstrated when they commented that they knew teachers better and that it was helpful especially for those new to the building. One teacher commented, "I do think we feel more a part of the team for the whole building . . . having us meet with everybody once a week." Another teacher added that the lack of time in the normal day for getting to know each other hinders the type of relationship

necessary to work together for kids. She claims she needs “to know kind of how your brain works so that we can get on the same keel to help kids, you know, the common ground of helping friends.” For her, building a relationship is important to digging in deep to work and share with one another in the interest of students.

The departmental collaboration had its ups and downs according to the data. The high school staff had engaged in time for PLC collaborative activities for several years, yet as the time was extended to a full hour and the directions were being given from a Leadership Team, the departments seemed to struggle with what to do. Interestingly, one teacher commented that before PLC she “never got a chance to talk with [the other math teachers] . . . , so it’s been really useful as far as getting together and being able to go over different things in the math.” Through regular communication doors were opened that allowed for conversations about student learning and instruction.

A teacher shared that during the first semester the Leadership Team would give an assignment to the departments one week then another one the next week without giving time to complete the tasks. The Leadership Team concurred, “no one really knew what they were supposed to do within their department because there were so many things going on at the time.” The Leadership Team then directed departments to focus on SMART goals resulting in more positive experiences. They reported, “When everybody has something to work on, they can do it and they feel more successful with it then.” The Leadership Team developed a focus on an attainable goal rather than several tasks at once. The tasks, however, were considered by members of the teacher focus group as paperwork that was not necessarily connected to students or teaching. A teacher shared, “I felt a lot of the stuff we did was data, instead of what is going to help the kids.” The disconnect between data analysis and a focus on helping students is important because it

indicates that at least some of the department meetings were not focused on student learning in the eyes of the team members. The department teams struggled with what to do then struggled with tasks they were given. Members of the Leadership Team perceived that when department teams were given direction they were more effective in their work. The Leadership Team reported they improved on this aspect throughout the year.

While the data in some instances do not support that a collaborative culture focused on learning was developing throughout the building, there were examples of collaborative time being used effectively. A member of the Leadership Team highlighted the physical education department.

I was really pleased to see that, a lot of time you will see physical education teachers get a bad rap. Our phys ed [physical education] teachers had two terrific smart goals for PE and health. They were very proud of what they did. They put time in and really worked at it. I think they bought into it. We had teachers that bought in, and I think they were proud to get up and present and put the smart goals to work. I saw people taking ownership, like Janie said earlier; they were taking ownership in what they were doing.

Another benefit occurred because the librarian served on a departmental team. She realized a cross-curriculum relationship and was able to facilitate a connection between the health and science teachers. When departments shared their information with the staff as a whole then other positives resulted ranging from the PE teachers being seen as leaders in the process to ways departments can support other departments. These steps are important beginnings to the type of collaborative culture characterized in a PLC.

In general, Dogwood High School collaboration is still fairly directed by the Leadership Team. The development of a collaborative culture with self-direction and ownership of the process to improve student learning has not yet occurred. A member of the Leadership Team stated, “I think there is a lot of the staff that still need to buy in to it for it [PLC] to be successful . . . It may still take awhile I think it will eventually work out.” The positive attitude from the Leadership Team members is important as the building transitions to yet another leader. The Leadership Team communicated that they are not at the point they had hoped to be by the end of the year; however, they believe there is movement in the right direction.

You’re seeing other departments having aha movements by learning from other teachers. Well, we can do something like that. I think that you’re seeing teachers learning, and PLC is about learning. You’re seeing the teachers that are there and learning from their other staff members. You said across curriculum and it had been a slow process, but we’re seeing those steps come along. I think the culture is changing slowly.

Time will tell whether Dogwood High School will be able to create the culture of collaboration necessary for effective work as a PLC. The new principal has worked in a PLC school and will bring first-hand experience to efforts.

Analysis of Common Themes

Through analysis of the data across all five sites, three themes emerged: concepts of collaboration, time as a resource and the function of leadership for PLC. These themes are relevant to the implementation of the PLC process and serve this inquiry through comparison among the buildings. The implementation of PLC is process-oriented; therefore, consider the themes as categories so that the data can be analyzed along a

continuum of development or as components that can support or block PLC progress. The concepts that emerged across the buildings will be synthesized into categories within the theme to provide the opportunity to associate PLC development with activities at the building level.

Concepts of Collaboration

The theme of collaboration refers to the various ways the teachers work together in PLC related activities. For the purposes of this evaluative inquiry, consider a continuum that ranges from a) teachers working in isolation to b) a level of collaboration characterized by teachers knowing each other on a personal level to c) teachers working together on shared activities about student learning on to d) a level of collaboration that would be characterized as a deprivitization of practice. The first year implementation of PLC would not expect a school staff as a whole to exhibit the complete characteristics of deprivitization of practice; however, a goal could be that the school staff in a first year PLC would be moving beyond the step of getting to know one another to focused conversations.

Collaborative activities that would be characterized as on the right track for a first year implementation could include analysis of data in whole or small group teams, development of SMART goals (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2002), and cooperatively developed activities toward specific goals to characterize a few. The critical element of collaboration is the use of the collaborative time for PLC objectives with a focus on student learning. In the findings, the data demonstrate variance on the continuum for collaboration among the buildings. While all buildings referred to activities to get to know each other better, some moved from teambuilding to the more meaningful collaboration about student learning.

Teambuilding. The regional PLC consultants recommended time be spent in the beginning on teambuilding activities; however, the efforts needed to move to a more complex collaboration among staff around teaching and learning. The teambuilding efforts were designed to build relationships based on trust and respect in order to move to deprivitization of practice.

The Leadership Team in each school site approached teambuilding in a manner that they believed matched their school staff's needs. For example, the high school spent the least amount of time on teambuilding while the intermediate school spent the most. There is a direct relationship between the time spent teambuilding and the development of a culture of collaboration at the two schools although the amount of time spent teambuilding is not the only variable. Furthermore, the middle school conducted teambuilding activities but many staff members were not present at the meetings. This created a sense of alienation, the opposite of teambuilding.

Dogwood Intermediate's Leadership Team dedicated more time than any other building to teambuilding and reflected that they felt the pressures to be at the same place as the other buildings until they realized each school was different. The Leadership Team realized they needed to determine what was right for their school. One member reported,

I think that as we came back, you had to base what you're going to do with your staff. You know, we met once a week, and that is why I think every building is so different, just because the staff is at different levels. You know, I heard a lot of other buildings talk that their staff was already maybe collaborating, and we had some groups that weren't used to that at all, and that was a big step, to bring that collaborative piece into play.

Several areas in the data show that the process of getting to know one another better was important in developing the strong collaborative culture. A Primary Leadership Team member concluded that through the teambuilding activities “we understand each other so much more, and we can work better because now we understand personalities and that people are different and we know who is good at what now.” Another member added, “It brings down those walls and barriers around those teachers that maybe aren’t quite so willing to branch out. I think those walls and barriers come down when it becomes a team versus an individual teaching situation.”

One elementary teacher expressed discontent with the teambuilding activities, “It is frustrating to me, because I tend to want to keep the walls up . . . and work with the fourth grade people and . . . get everybody on the same page.” This is an example of the desire to remain within the comfortable groups that naturally emerge rather than becoming part of a PLC with small groups organized around goals. Each school has groups that naturally occur in the social realm, in a PLC new purposeful groups are created. In the first year implementation, teambuilding is utilized to get all teachers to embrace the new structures. By remaining within naturally occurring groups a school can have pockets of collaboration; however, through a structured plan collaboration can be grown into a school culture.

The PLC consultant would concur that knowing each other is critical when working together as characterized by a PLC. A teacher from Dogwood Intermediate School Leadership Team captured the change in how people work together now compared to before the PLC implementation. She said,

The people want to work together; the people want to talk to each other.

When I first started in Title I, you know, I would go between classrooms

and I would go, “Oh this is what so and so is doing and it’s really cool and we could do it.” People would look at me and go, “what? —oh, oh, well I’m doing this.” It was a competition kind of thing, and it’s not that way any more, people don’t compete. It is much better, just the camaraderie is better and the feeling that we are all working toward the central thing, and that’s what I see different.

A PLC collaborative culture would exemplify the notion that a win for one team member is a win for all team members. During a teambuilding activity at the intermediate school, two teachers refused to cooperate providing a learning experience for the whole staff. A member of the Leadership Team shared about it,

I think one of the obstacles was personality. . . . We did an activity where you put a tube together and it just so happened that two of our really strong personalities ended up in that same group and it just really proved that if you don’t give in a little bit to the person next to you and respect their opinions, you won’t complete the task, and they didn’t. That was a huge lesson for the whole group, and they stood up in front of the whole group and said, “Here’s what happened to us. We did not think the other one knew what they were talking about, and look where it led us.” So I think that learning the strength of others and respecting their strengths and listening. . . . It was an obstacle at the beginning.

The Intermediate school staff faced this challenge directly by owning it and learning from it. That activity served as a building block for the great heights they climbed in working together.

The high school staff spent a small amount of time conducting teambuilding activities at the beginning of the year. Some comments indicated that teachers new to Dogwood appreciated the activities while other comments saw a need for additional teambuilding. Members of both focus groups mentioned the need for more activities aimed at building relationships among the staff members. A member of the Leadership Team commented that staff at the high school “feel disconnected from other content areas as well as from other teachers in our same group, . . . there could be more relation teambuilding type activities scheduled in all levels.”

An auxiliary teacher at the primary school commented on the value of teambuilding in making her feel connected,

I feel it has made me feel much more part of the group, much more part of the staff, especially after being split in two buildings last year, I felt I didn't know anybody very well and I didn't understand exactly what was going on in the classroom. Now I feel that I am a part of a bigger group that is working for those kids and their achievement.

Through involving auxiliary staff such as music, art and special education teachers a synergy developed creating a feeling that everyone was focused on the same thing. This was occurring for the staff at the Primary school; however, some auxiliary staff still wanted to only engage with their job-alike peers. A comment from a librarian expressed that librarians wanted to collaborate with other librarians not with teachers. In her comments she shared the work of the larger group “doesn't relate to her work.” The obstacle identified in this data provides insight into the challenge of including teachers outside the core academic areas and in newly formed groups. The middle school also struggled because they did not include non-core teachers at the same level of

participation as core teachers. The PLC consultants recommend teambuilding to break down barriers and create a feeling of interconnectedness. This takes time and is impacted by the personalities of the individuals in those positions.

All the schools in Dogwood School District utilized the tool of teambuilding activities to begin building a collaborative culture in their schools. The reaction of staff members and the amount of time dedicated to these activities impact the development of a culture of collaboration characterized in a PLC. Teambuilding activities, however, do not meet the standard of the desired activities for collaborative time in a PLC. This time should be focused on improving student learning. Teambuilding is the first step that is usually necessary to get to the high function of collaboration around student achievement.

Focused collaboration. The transition in a first year PLC implementation from teambuilding to a focused collaboration is a delicate dance. The Leadership Team must gauge when it is appropriate to send groups out on their own or whether they still need the strong leadership of the whole group. The teams in Dogwood School District utilized varied approaches for this step. The middle school continued the most whole group activities and likewise had the least developed collaborative culture. This may be caused by the large group activities or because of the number of staff members not included in the meetings. The high school and the elementary both had reports that small groups did not understand what was expected of them. Both Leadership Teams also recognized they were holding tightly on the reins by controlling what the groups were supposed to be doing each week rather than empowering the collaborative teams to direct their efforts based on goals. Finally, the intermediate school and the primary school had a more trusting approach. Their collaborative teams were working directly toward SMART goals they had established. These teams engaged in activities to develop instructional activities,

assessments and analyzed data. They were the highest functioning PLC collaborative cultures in the district.

The manner that the primary school team jumped right into the smart goal development may attribute to the development of the collaborative work more quickly. According to the timeline of activities the staff engaged in writing smart goals in November by dividing into small groups to review the building improvement plan from the previous year and develop goals for the next year. The work being done in small groups engaged everyone in the process. This contributed to new and auxiliary teachers feeling more connected. One member of the primary LTFG shared,

Before we worked, the whole staff worked on all of the smart goals. When you meet with a whole staff, there are some people who sit back and won't say anything because they don't like talking in front of a group, they don't want to sound like a know it all or whatever, whereas how we have done it with the small group, you work with people maybe you hadn't ever worked with before, and it's a small group where everybody is contributing, and I think we came up with so much greater ideas this year for our smart goals, like vehicles to our goals, and that was because people felt comfortable enough to share and contribute and didn't feel like sitting on the sidelines at our faculty meeting, or I'm the quiet one. Even myself, I don't like talking in a huge group and getting lots of ideas, but when we are in our small group, I feel like, we are all sharing and it's a more friendly way to brainstorm those ideas.

The strategy of utilizing small groups focusing on several issues at once was effective and efficient in working toward improving student achievement.

The primary and intermediate school teams developed common assessments and analyzed the data together. This was a big difference from one of the reported

celebrations at the high school where a member of the Leadership Team shared,

It has been a slow process as far as changing but more people are willing to get up and discuss things with other departments and with other people within their department where before I think we were at school, you would just go into your room and teach in your own and you don't get out and share with other people. I've seen some people do some projects together over the year, and across curriculum, where before nobody was doing any of that. . . . We just went our own ways and did our own things and more people are sharing their tests and different methods of teaching.

The random occurrences of collaboration about student learning at the high school do not rise to the level of a culture of collaboration exemplified in a PLC.

Deprivitization of results. As described earlier, collaboration in a PLC that is high functioning will embody the concept of deprivitization of practice. When teachers can be open with both their strengths and weakness in addition to genuinely trying to help one another a true culture of collaboration exists. While it is unrealistic to expect this level of collaboration in the Dogwood School District after only one year of implementation, it is important to identify seeds that may be planted for future growth. The concept of deprivitization of practice is a characteristic of a PLC as found in the literature; however, in the first year implementation it is more likely to find deprivitization of results. When teachers begin to share the results of their work in terms of how their students have achieved, they begin working toward the deprivitization characterized in the literature. This inquiry found the deprivitization of results in action in some of the building, thus, it

is reasonable to consider that a first step toward deprivitization of practice would begin with sharing of student achievement results at the teacher level.

The intermediate school Leadership Team has grasped the concept of deprivitization of results. A member defined true collaboration during the focus group by stating,

True collaboration where you trust each other enough to say, “My kids didn’t get this. I didn’t teach this right. Your kids did, how are you doing it?” To me, that’s true collaboration. If you can admit your weaknesses and have that trust within your staff and be able to respect each other’s opinion and come to a consensus on what is best for all of the kids, that’s true collaboration.

While they admit they are not completely at that level, they have a clear vision of where they want to be. Teachers at the primary school also identified the concept of deprivitization of results. A kindergarten teacher discussed how the kindergarten team has developed the relationships so that it is safe to expose their weaknesses.

Well, kindergarten is more comfortable with sharing our children’s shortcomings a lot more than we have in the past. We’ve also bragged about our good ones, but now we’re willing to share those ones that are really not achieving and going and asking for help in getting those ones to achieve.

The collective ownership of student success through helping one another is a critical attribute of highly functioning collaborative teams.

At the high school, a member of the Leadership Team identifies how sharing among team members used to be offensive and now is an accepted activity,

I see others able to have an avenue or a process, a prescribed way to dialogue about how to improve teaching, which they didn't necessarily have before. We might have ways to discuss about things, but now with PLC in place, at least they feel like there is an avenue for discussion, . . . at least there was something there to do and the right to say something which before they didn't have the right, they didn't know they had the right to say, because they felt like they were fussing out of line possibly. So I see that that is a change.

When a culture is established that embraces deprivitization of results and then extend that into deprivitization of practice, all teachers are working for the common good of all students. The vulnerability to put personal pride to the side in order to help students be successful is an excellent example of a collaborative culture in action that all Dogwood Schools should be seeking.

Challenges of inclusion. In order to develop a culture of collaboration, all staff members need to be involved. It cannot be voluntary participation nor should any person monopolize the process. Collaboration involves a partnership of give and take on the part of all team members. Several of Dogwood's schools identified challenges in the area of including all staff members. The middle school was the most blaring example of a staff that did not have at least a critical mass in the meetings. Middle school staff members were assigned supervisory duties or hosted other activities like clubs during late start PLC time. This often significantly reduced the number of staff members attending the meetings. The lack of a majority of teachers created a divide between core and non-core teachers. Furthermore, the staff did not develop a sense of team that typifies a PLC.

The Intermediate School developed a strong culture of collaboration for a first year implementation, yet they also identified inclusion of staff as an issue. In particular, there was a feeling that the paraprofessionals responsible for supervising the students during late start were missing out on the PLC process. The value of being included in a collaborative culture is important. This example demonstrates that being on the team is a show of respect for their opinions. By not including the support staff, they were not informed and had feelings of not being valued.

Being included in the meeting is the first step; however, really being involved makes a difference too. In large groups some people do not have to engage because they are allowed to sit back quietly with no requirement for participation. In a small group, that is a much more difficult challenge. In a PLC structured with small groups more voices are heard. A member of the Intermediate School Leadership Team explained,

I think one of the advantages I saw was that everyone had a voice, and people that were maybe too shy or didn't have the confidence, had a voice this year but also people that maybe didn't want to leave their easy spot on the sidelines, they had a voice because they were required to have one. It's pretty hard to sit in a group of three or four and not be a participant because there is a little more pressure in those smaller groups to be a contributor and to do your part. That was really a good, good thing about it, because I think we got a much wider variety of things to try because more people were offering their opinions and their voice.

Dogwood schools were at various stages in the development of small collaborative teams. The data reveal a challenge for the administration is to find a way to allow all staff members working with students to participate in the late start PLC

meetings. Including everyone is a critical component. The recognition of the need for all staff members to participate is important. Now the staff and administration need to work together to tackle this challenge.

Impact on teacher orientation. An interesting component that came from the primary data creates implications on teacher induction. The teachers shared that now that they operate as a PLC, new teachers to the district should be provided information about PLC at the district orientation meetings. The comments included in a PLC new teachers were engaged differently on more equal footing than in the past when new teachers had to earn respect over time. The collaborative culture that required all teachers to play a role in small collaborative groups engaged new teachers equally in the process. A member of the primary Leadership Team shared, “I think another big change has been like first year teachers and first couple of year teachers, I feel like they have more of a chance to have input and like, they just feel more part of the team.” A second-year teacher who served on the primary school Leadership Team reflected

I guess for me being so new and young, I was really worried I guess about how people would you know have a 23-year-old, second-year teacher, come back trying to teach them what I’m learning or whatever. I was really concerned about how they would feel. I just feel like they were really welcoming . . . so I feel like from my perspective personally, I didn’t feel like people thought, oh you don’t know what you’re talking about. They really embraced me.

The collaboration that occurs in a PLC puts teachers on mutual ground to address goals and improve student learning.

Another new teacher at the high school stated, “As a new teacher coming in to the school, it made me feel more welcome because without those meetings, I probably would not have gotten to know the teachers that have been here longer.” The gain from getting to know her colleagues was good; however, she also identified an area for possible growth,

I think another obstacle with having so many new people in the school this year, maybe during new teacher orientation, if they expect an hour or so, we all have a basic understanding of what PLC is, but if they kind of let us know where the school is trying to go with it, and a little bit what the system would be like, maybe we would have been more prepared, because I know in my department, all but two of the teachers are new, and so if those two happen to be gone, we just sit around and look at each other, and think, what are we supposed to be accomplishing here?

The idea to provide an introduction to PLC to new teachers might help to build the culture of a PLC within the district. One teacher suggested training on PLC should become part of the new teacher orientation.

At the time of the focus groups, the issue of teacher retention was getting a lot of attention because several key people were leaving the district including the primary school principal who was leaving to become a college professor. She reported that involvement in PLC

made it very, very tough to even consider leaving because the beauty of the work that is going on here is immeasurable. I think when you have that investment in a place, and you’re like, wow, I have contributed so much, and I have such a great collaborative team, and wonderful friendships and

that professional atmosphere that you want to be in, it really makes people think twice before they depart. I mean, it was a hard decision to go, this is my last year, but the flip side of that from a principal's perspective, is the fact that those things that you wanted to see happen, you know will continue to happen because it's a building effort, it's not a principal effort.

Another teacher on the Leadership Team travels a long distance driving through four other school districts to work at Dogwood concurs that the PLC and the collaborative culture of the primary school is important in keeping her in the district. So, while the need for an induction program for new teachers exists, the PLC culture may actually impact teacher retention rates. Dogwood Schools should track teacher retention data to determine if this is an accurate assumption.

Teacher personal growth. The purpose of collaboration in a PLC is ultimately improved student achievement; consequently, reports from several buildings identified that teachers perceived themselves as better teachers because of the PLC process.

Therefore, it is possible that through collaboration individuals and the team become stronger. When asked how they have changed as a result of the PLC process, one member of the primary TFG replied, "I think has helped me to be more of a team player and know that I can go to first grade if I need help with anything and vice versa, and ideas that we can bounce off one another." Another teacher believes she has personally improved,

As an old teacher, . . . I really think it has improved me as a person and as a professional to now focus on that and be one of those ones willing to say, "I really stink at writing. [Sally], could you help me with some writing tips or could you help me with some mini lessons or could you do something like that." Where before, my personality type, I was never going to admit my

weaknesses or my vulnerabilities, but this has really made me feel like I can, made me more comfortable, more safe. . . . It's more of a team approach now, versus "ha, ha, you can't do that" approach.

The focus group discussion at the elementary indicated that through collaboration the bar was raised on some teachers because they saw a gap in their personal performance and that of their peers. One teacher leader commented that she believes she is a better teacher, "I have picked up a lot of things from other teachers, and just going to all of the meetings... It has been a motivator for me, and I feel that I am a better person and teacher because of it." One of the powerful components of a PLC is that the expertise to meet goals exists within the school rather than needing experts to come provide the answers.

At Dogwood School District, through collaboration with peers, teachers perceive they have become better teachers. A synergy has developed that can continue to grow into fully developed PLCs. Teachers are relying on each other for assistance to help students achieve. The intermediate school principal reported that the benefits and focus of PLC has spread into hallway talk and times not designated for PLC. She said,

Well I can tell you that just by walking through the hallway, teachers are talking in the hallways about kids but not behavior, about academics. . . .

It's not just in those meetings, it's happening in the lunchroom, it's happening in the hallway, and as I go about the day, I see it a lot. I like that it's carried over into other areas.

This shift to a culture of collaboration is possible by keeping in mind a continuum of development from teambuilding to focused work on goals to deprivitization of practice. Many of Dogwood schools have built a foundation to grow into collaborative PLCs while others can still take steps to move in that direction.

Structuring Time

The concept of time as a resource in a PLC implementation is the second theme that emerged from the data. An effective implementation of a PLC process is time intensive. This includes time for training for the Leadership Team as well as the staff. There are expectations for collaborative work that take time when teachers can work together on data analysis, curriculum and instructional planning. The work is ongoing and needs to be frequent enough to have continuity for projects. The Dogwood School District anticipated the need for time prior to the PLC implementation and initiated a district-wide late start for collaboration. By providing the time for the PLC work, the likelihood of a successful implementation was increased; however, it is not that simple. Time was a controversial component in the evaluative inquiry that emerged at all the buildings.

The power of allocated contract time. The Dogwood School District was proactive in adopting a late start initiative to begin at the same time as the PLC implementation process. The late start concept allowed a minimum of one hour weekly for the teaching staff to have contracted time dedicated to the implementation of the PLC process. The data demonstrated mixed reviews on the late start initiative varying from it was an important component of the success of PLC to the concept that students would be better off if they had been in class during that time.

Collaboration is the most critical component of a PLC followed not far behind by the resource that allows it to happen: time. The resource of late start time was valued as important to the PLC implementation by many of the participants in this inquiry especially members of leadership teams. Creating space for collaboration in the form of contracted time dedicated to implementing the PLC processes during a first year

implementation is very important to the progress of a PLC implementation. The Dogwood School District created the space for collaboration through the weekly late start initiative. The Building Leadership Teams had the opportunity to utilize this time to teach the processes and shared knowledge necessary to create the culture of collaboration characteristic of a PLC.

A member of the intermediate TFG said, “I think it is very important that we did have the time set aside every week, the same time every week to have the meetings so we had to be there . . . which I think is very important.” Another member added that “having that time the first thing in the day was helpful for attendance and for energy level and to get our work done.” A Leadership Team member tied time for collaboration to a successful PLC implementation.

I will have to say that has got to be the number one reason why it will be successful or won't be successful and why we are successful, because there are schools that do go to those monthly PLC trainings with us, and they don't have the time, and they're still back at figuring out their vision, where we were eight months ago or seven months ago. They are having to meet after school on their own time. They are just not there, and I don't think they will be there because teachers are so time-strapped because you take things home with you all the time any way. It would just be one more thing to do after school and have one more pack on your back. I just don't think it would be as successful, even if you believed in it. You just wouldn't be able to devote the time to it that you wanted to, because you have all these other duties, not only school, but your life.

The elementary Leadership Team concurred that having the late start time was very important when they shared, “Other districts have not had that, and they feel that they are at a real disadvantage” in the development of the PLC when they compare what we are sharing to what they are doing.

The time provided by Dogwood School District to do the PLC work is obviously important to the success, but one teacher on the Intermediate School Leadership Team sees added benefit,

I would agree that the late start is such a powerful thing, because not only does it give us a time, but it sends a very important message to everybody in our school system. It is, we think that what you are doing is so important. We are giving you school time to do it. We don't expect you to do it when you are tired at the end of the day and all the kids are gone and you are ready to do something else. We have set aside this time for you because we realize what you can do with this time. It's not just the fact that we have it, it's that trust given to us, that, yes, we are going to use this time in a great way to do good things for kids. When you know that the people, when you know your administration believes in you enough to give you that kind of trust, that's a powerful thing because it really inspires you to do your best and to give everything you can to make it successful and to meet their expectations.

Teachers at the high school associated the late start provision with being appreciated and respected. A member of the High School Leadership Team said, I thought the consistency of the weekly meetings was respectful to teachers' times. They didn't ask you to stay late, and they appreciated that.

With that in mind, they didn't mind being here because they knew they were going to get out on time. They felt respected for that. I think that brought some cooperation and brought some positive connotation.

The concept that is was contracted time mattered in addition to it being in the morning. A primary school teacher leader noted that afternoon meetings are complicated with distractions where the late start timeframe provided focused time to do the work of a PLC.

And I think not to be in a hurry to go pick up their kids from day care, and not to be, you know, because at the end of the day a lot of times you're thinking, I need to get this done, and this done, and this done, and this done. You know, I need to get out of here, come on, let's go, let's get this done, and I don't think we're giving it that quality. Now, we're here for 8 hours, so we might as well spend this hour to our best, you know, to the best we can.

Two intermediate school teachers mentioned that early in the year parents had expressed concern about the lost learning time as a result of late start.

I had a couple of parents say they were concerned about would teachers really be in meetings throughout the whole year, or was it just another chance to do something else. I didn't hear any other comments after school started, but I think parents knew that we really were in meetings and were doing something very worthwhile for our school.

While a few teachers mentioned that other teachers preferred an early release format so that student supervision would not be an issue, the consensus was clear that having time for collaboration was imperative to a successful implementation.

Utilization of late start time. The perceptions of the use of time allocated for PLC for activities was varied and is interconnected to the culture of collaboration that developed as well as the impact of having teachers out of the building for training. In an effective PLC, time used for collaborative activities would focus on student learning. During the first year implementation, the development of a culture where all time is focused on student learning is not attainable because some of the time for PLC should be spent on creating a shared understanding of the principles and procedures of a PLC. According to the PLC consultant serving Dogwood School District, first year PLC implementation should include teambuilding, professional development on the strategies for collaboration, data analysis and goal setting. The transition from whole group training on how to be a PLC to smaller collaborative groups working together as a subgroup of the whole PLC occurs as the core principles of a PLC emerge over time. The resourceful use of time allowed for PLC implementation can have an impact on the development of the PLC principles as shown in the school site findings.

All of the schools in the Dogwood School District accomplished some of the first year PLC expectations. These included the development of a school vision including various stakeholders in the development process and a celebration or publication of the new school vision. They also wrote SMART goals as part of their school improvement plan. Some of the schools connected these to small collaborative team work, while other schools did not make that transition during the implementation year. All of the schools engaged their staff in some teambuilding activities and analysis of student achievement data from the annual state assessments.

The Leadership Team at the Primary school discussed the difference in data analysis that occurred now that time was provided for the work of PLC. The principal

confessed that in previous years in an effort to protect teacher time she often conducted the data analysis and provided it to teachers in a condensed version,

in expediting that process, [you] rob them of experiences. So, it was one of those that it was a catch 22. If you put all that data in their lap, and say “we’re staying after school on Wednesday,” you would have been sacrificed. But on the flip side, taking that and trying to condense it and give it to them in a McDonald’s way, you know, fast and here it is, it robbed them of an experience to grow professionally and heighten that ownership.

A teacher on the primary school Leadership Team responded,

Last year, if [the principal] handed us that data before we did all this, we wouldn’t know what to do with that data. She could have handed it to us in the McDonald’s form last year, and we would have gone, okay. What am I supposed to do with this? But since we have done the PLC and since we’ve learned where our goal is to go to, now she can hand us the data and we know what to do with it.

The level of involvement in school improvement on the part of all staff members has improved with the implementation of PLC. The teachers share the ownership as demonstrated in this comment from a member of the primary school Leadership Team,

It’s not just [the principal] collecting the data and then telling us the data, it’s us, our group, working at our personal data, and then reporting to [the principal] and the staff, this is what we found, and them being able to collaborate with the other groups and say, what can we do in our group?

What other ideas are out there? So that data piece is like [the principal] was

the only one before that really dealt with that. So to have that staff participation you are like, okay, now I see what she was wanting for the past three years.

When teachers become active in data analysis, it becomes a goal they own and are invested in accomplishing. This is an important objective and an appropriate use of PLC time. This type of collaborative partnership sharing responsibility for improvement is characteristic of a PLC.

The intermediate and primary schools had very positive comments from focus groups in relation to the use of late start time. They held themselves highly accountable for a good use of the time and accomplishment of goals. One Intermediate School teacher commented,

I think the late start has been a positive experience. It is not just another meeting where you feel you are going there and sitting there and wasting your time. When you leave at the end of the meeting, you feel like that maybe you have gained a little bit more knowledge and a little bit more understanding of your colleagues.

As an added benefit, the PLC collaboration time has provided opportunities for teachers to learn new strategies for their classrooms as shared in the intermediate TFG, “I have used some of the games or some of the cooperative learning experiences that we have used in the PLC meetings in class. The class enjoyed these as much as I do.” Late start time was focused and designed to accomplish goals. A primary teacher responded, “I think it is helpful that we have had very structured time and it has been used very wisely. We are not all sitting around going ‘what are we supposed to be doing?’” Another teacher noted, “I think in what they do and they know is that this hour is there to better them

professionally, and I think they really embrace that, and I think they're really proud of themselves because of it.”

The elementary also used their time according to the guidance provided by the PLC consultant. They, however, had a few staff members that had negative comments about the teambuilding activities. In addition, elementary teachers along with high school teachers expressed concern regarding a lack of direction for collaborative groups. Both Leadership Teams reflected that they needed to empower the teams more to let them work at their own pace toward specified goals. The elementary teachers also shared a concern about curriculum writing with the middle school teachers. Both groups struggled with the connection between PLC and curriculum development as teachers expressed concern that curriculum writing was competing for time with PLC activities.

The middle school teachers had the most negative comments regarding the use of time including comments that late start was a waste of teacher time. One teacher remarked, “The PLC time has not been used to benefit the teachers.” A member of the Middle School Leadership Team shared,

I do feel like sometimes, and I have heard from other staff members, we go to the meetings and we come back with more to do as opposed to a way to help with what I am already doing. I think that is part of the process that we have to be careful to not overwhelm them with, okay now we are doing better answer form, and then you added this and then you added that.

There for awhile, we were really rolling with a lot of new things, and I think some of the staff felt like we were saying, you've got to do this, when we were just throwing out options for them to try. We have to be careful that we don't overwhelm them with new things all the time to try,

because if they are a good teacher, they are going to want to try them all.

They are going to feel overwhelmed with that.

The negativity expressed in the teacher focus group may reflect the requirement for work to be turned in without the opportunity for data to be shared. This was more about accountability to do something than an analysis of data to improve instruction. The fact that not all teachers were included in the meetings combined with the requirement for all teachers to implement the strategies and turn in student work could also be a contributor to the negative view of PLC time.

A strength that was identified as a support to the PLC time by the teachers was the use of agendas for the PLC time. The agendas served to focus the group. Some schools prepared the agendas a few days in advance and distributed them electronically so teachers could be prepared for the PLC activities while others had an agenda the day of the meeting. In addition to agendas, all schools established meeting norms to guide conduct for the meetings. The middle school began creating and distributing minutes so that teachers not in the meeting would know what had occurred. A teacher from the high school suggested this practice would be helpful to high school teachers as well.

The effective use of PLC time in the eyes of the teachers is difficult. While some teachers contend they do not have the necessary information to move ahead in their small groups, other teachers complain that the process has moved too slowly. Teachers in both the primary and elementary schools reported frustrations about moving too slowly in the process. The first year implementation has the component of building a foundation that is perceived by some as not related to the work they are supposed to be completing. This can be interpreted in that time for teambuilding and learning the big ideas behind PLC is in competition with time to work on student achievement. This could be because the staff

members have a strong sense of commitment to a focus on learning or it could be that they do not enjoy the teambuilding, big picture activities.

The whole staff activities were generally reviewed less positively in comparison to small group activities when grade-level groups were engaged in activities tightly connected to their daily work. A member of the elementary Leadership Team reflected, “some people were uncomfortable. They wanted someone to say, ‘Okay, we are going to do this, and then we do this.’” The concept of PLC as a process rather than a checklist has not become a common understanding at some of the buildings.

The Dogwood schools utilized the late start PLC time for many activities during the year. The activities referred to in the data include spending time on teambuilding, creating a school vision, development and analysis of common assessments, work on curriculum, department meetings development of a pyramid of interventions, planning for individual student learning, book studies, and working on SMART goals. A review of activities each building engaged in during PLC time is provided in Table 1.

Overall, each building has approached the PLC time in a manner that the Leadership Team felt was appropriate for their building. The differences were related to the Leadership Team’s view of how the staff would respond. The Middle school, for instance, used the time to for teachers to complete surveys and other tasks so that the staff would not complain about the tasks. The Intermediate school, on the other hand, created a synergy of positive attitudes that generated extra efforts beyond the PLC time to make things happen. The culture of the building and of the Leadership Team impacted the use of PLC time and the success of the first year implementation.

Table 1

Activities for PLC Time by Building

PLC Activities	Primary school	Elementary school	Intermediate School	Middle School	High School
Vision Development	X	X	X	X	X
Achievement Data Analysis		X	X	X	X
Curriculum Work		X	X	X	X
Pyramid of Interventions	X	X			
Individual Student Planning				X	
Book Study				X	
SMART Goal work	X	X	X		X
Teambuilding Activities	X	X	X	X	X
Common Assessments					X
Department Meetings					X

Challenges of student supervision during late start. The Dogwood School District established the late start time to provide for the PLC implementation. Because of the hardships this could cause for parents, the decision was made to provide a choice for parents to either bring their child at normal time or an hour later. This created the need for student supervision during PLC time. In the beginning, teachers were concerned with how this would work out. By the end of the year, only one building still had strong concerns regarding student supervision.

The elementary and middle school buildings provided for student supervision with paraprofessionals. Each school team developed creative solutions to keep students

safe and protect the teacher collaborative time. The primary school utilized support staff such as paraprofessionals along with some sixth grade mentor students to solve this problem as explained by a LTFG member,

I think at first it was a fear that we are wasting an hour of time, learning time, and they are going to be here just being babysat, or whatever. But, it has turned into a chance for them . . . they are all working, they are working on social skills, and they're learning how to cooperate with older kids, and it's given the older kids a chance to be mentors. . . .this is an hour that could have been a big waste, but has turned into a great experience, a learning experience for those kids that learn, we can play a game, I can lose the game, and I still have fun. They do need that at this age. . . . it's also engaging their brain, and you know all those things, and it just turned into a wonderful thing versus something that could have been crazy and a waste of time.

Just as any good teachers do, the primary staff had to work through what to do with their students when the teachers were collaborating for PLC. The staff developed a plan that was age appropriate and enriching for the students.

The staff members at the elementary schools did share one concern about the solution to the student supervision issue. Because the paraprofessionals were supervising students they did not get to attend the PLC meetings and felt out of the information loop. With this in mind, the teachers also recognized the power of teachers meeting together was preferential to not meeting at all. At times the buildings also utilized auxiliary teachers such as art, physical education and music teachers on a rotating basis, implying those teachers were less important to the PLC than core classroom teachers.

The middle school staff struggled from the beginning with student supervision. Even with using additional paraprofessionals from other buildings, they were unable to design a plan that solved the supervision issue without pulling teachers from the PLC meetings. To compound the problem, the middle school staff created a new program to address students with zeros in homework rooms supervised by teachers during late start time. They also held student club meetings during late start time requiring teachers to be out of the meetings. In spite of community volunteers working with kids and the paraprofessionals assigned to the middle school for late start time, many teachers were pulled from the meetings for student supervision. This created two problems related to the PLC implementation. First, the number of teachers involved in the collaborative time was reduced so significantly that a critical mass of teachers knowing what was happening was not possible. Secondly, the teachers assigned to student supervision on a regular basis felt less important and fostered resentment toward the late start time. This is apparent in the teacher comments, “The change in late schedule for late start creates more problems than providing any positive results.”

The middle school staff must address the issues that are pulling teachers from the collaborative PLC time if they are serious about becoming a PLC. The current structure will not provide the framework necessary for a strong PLC implementation. During the focus group, a member of the Leadership Team suggested hosting two PLC meetings so that everyone could attend. An analysis of how the procedures they have in place are competing with the PLC time rather than supporting it is warranted to ensure the future success of the PLC implementation.

The data was clear that concerns existed in what the students were doing while the teachers were meeting in every building except the high school. Suggestions included

models that would involve the students not being present during the PLC time. Some comments propose that an early release where the students go home would be a better model. Another proposed reducing the meetings to two times per month. The late start model where students are present and must be supervised is obviously a concern; however, the elementary school Leadership Team was clear to support having the time with the concerns was better than not having the time in regards to successfully implementing the PLC process.

Teacher time out of the classroom. Another issue related to the concept of time as a resource is the amount of time the members of the Leadership Team spend out of the building for PLC training. In addition to the summer training, the Leadership Team attended an out-of-district meeting one time per month. A member of the primary LTFG pointed out that being pulled out of your classroom was difficult, but necessary, “Monthly meetings are integral because they keep us on task . . . to line out what we are going to do for this month until we come back to our next meeting.” The Leadership Team needed to have time together as a group to plan for the implementation of PLC processes at the building. The time involved in the monthly meetings was hard, but seen as an investment for the first year implementation that will not be required the following year. Only the Primary, Intermediate and High school teachers mentioned this concern.

The number of substitutes needed in the building caused issues. An Intermediate school teacher commented, “We understood they needed to attend them [monthly training meetings], but those days were hectic for the ones that were left in the building.” The Leadership Team at the intermediate school did frequently take extra teachers to the training so they could learn about the process. One teacher commented in the TFG, “going to the monthly meetings was a positive experience because it helps you

understand where the whole PLC process was heading.” The staff recognized that monthly meetings were part of the first year implementation that will not be as frequent in the future.

Time is a valuable commodity that is often scarce. The late start time provided for the implementation of the PLC reform was perceived as a positive necessity by most school staffs. The use of that time has been effective and is resulting in the advanced development of PLC principles in the first year of implementation at all the elementary building and somewhat at the high school. The middle school, on the other hand, utilized time differently creating many concerns for the PLC implementation. The resource of time is critical to a successful PLC implementation. Providing time within the teacher contract is imperative to ensure all staff members engage in the PLC process.

Function of Leadership

The final common theme that will be explored is the function of leadership in a PLC. Any type of major reform initiative is heavily dependent upon leadership. The PLC reform model utilized in the Dogwood School District requires both formal and informal leadership from both internal and external sources. Four categories related to the function of leadership will be explored in this section: collaborative leadership, empowerment of teachers, technical assistance, and facilitation from district leadership. Relevant information from the data across at least some of the buildings will be shared.

The literature on PLCs reflects that the formal leaders in a PLC must delegate and empower staff members through shared leadership practices. (Louis, 2003; Hord, 2004). Furthermore, the power in a PLC is the teacher leadership that develops and carries the vision of the focus on student learning. Additionally, the assistance of an outside consultant is supported in facilitating school reform. This section will provide

information on the perceptions of leadership for a successful PLC in the Dogwood School District. The insight from the data will show a variance across buildings as well as some inconsistency of perceptions within buildings.

Collaborative leadership. The traditional role of school principal as the sole manager of the school is not congruent with the principles of a PLC. In order for a PLC implementation to be successful, the principal must be willing to engage in collaborative leadership by sharing power with teachers. Many examples exist in the data on the role of the Leadership Team exemplifying the shared leadership for a PLC, but some building staff members specifically recognized the shift in the principal's function that occurred with the PLC implementation.

The intermediate school embraced the PLC process from the start; however, the principal was surprised as to how things unfolded in her building. She shared about the transition in thinking necessary for collaborative leadership,

I can remember when this was first introduced at our admin [administration] team [meeting] last year. I was so excited because I thought we are going to have this committee, and this committee, and these committees are going to do these things, and I think you guys [Leadership Team members] that went with me, even to the summer academy, knew I was already planning, I was already planning for that. But, we had to take a shift, and we had to take a complete shift to, it wasn't about the committees that I wanted and the committees that I wanted to put into place or where I wanted them to go even. We had to make, I had to make that shift to totally give that ownership to the teachers and for them to say, these are the committees we need to have, the collaborative teams we need to have and

this is where we want to go. That is hard, as a leader of the building, to really, you have to have that trust in your staff to say, I trust you guys to go and do what you need to do.

This evolution of letting go and learning to be a collaborative leader is hard, but the intermediate school principal was able to empower her teachers so that they could develop into a PLC. The PLC consultant recognized this process in the principal as she was learning along side her team.

The principal of the elementary school also recognized a change in her role. She said, “The principal is looked at as the person who gets up and talks, and says, ‘We are going to do this and do that.’ And so, I took a back seat and was an equal player with all of them [Leadership Team members].” Through sharing the role of leadership, the principal expanded the influence of her power by creating a shared knowledge that was spread throughout the building. She did this by allowing the teachers to take the lead on late-start mornings. She was still there but sat among the staff as a participant.

The middle school principal shared how utilizing collaborative leadership helped gain buy-in from teachers,

It’s given me confidence to go ahead and do things that before maybe I would have been the lone ranger out there, trying to stand up and take the heat, and if for better or worse, now I’ve got other people taking the heat too. But, they can go out and be ambassadors among their colleagues, and I feel like that buy in to them is even better than me being the one to say, okay we are going to do this.

While this reason is more personal in that the principal is no longer responsible for unpopular decisions alone, the important reality is that through shared decision making

the leader also shared the role of developing support for an idea. By involving the Leadership Team, more people are able to defend and explain decisions helping the message spread more quickly.

The primary school Leadership Team also acknowledged the new function of leadership their principal had in the PLC. One member of the Leadership Team reflected on the lessons of learning the PLC process alongside her principal,

I really enjoy the fact that [the principal] was learning the same stuff that we were learning, so it wasn't that hierarchy, and I think the faculty felt that, that it wasn't the principal and then filtering down. It was this team which was made up of teachers, and [the principal], and the counselor, and then as a team, we were getting everybody else on board, so it is more-- more collaborative.

The collaborative approach taken by the principal was evident early on in the PLC implementation as even the PLC consultant noticed that the primary principal was “growing [her] learning with the team.” The principal commented on the value of sharing the responsibility of implementing PLC with the Leadership Team, “The beauty PLC gave me and our team was that direction on how do we get there and having that collaboration with that Leadership Team has made the value in this come to fruition.” When leaders partner for success rather than carrying the load alone, many people recognize it as a success for everyone.

Empowerment of teachers. The PLC process requires school leaders to empower the teachers to create the culture of collaboration. The principal cannot possibly direct all the meetings and accomplish the same work that many small collaborative groups can achieve. Therefore, the first step through the PLC consultant is to identify members of a

Leadership Team for the school. These teachers meet with the principal for training and are charged with the responsibility of the PLC implementation. The teachers are empowered as leaders in the building.

Across the board at all buildings praise was given to the Leadership Teams by the teacher focus groups. The teachers recognized the responsibility and time Leadership Team members provided to the PLC implementation process. While they may not have been pleased with all aspects of the implementation, the teachers without exception showed appreciation for the Leadership Team members. Even a middle school teacher who did not see value in late start or PLC reflected this sentiment when she said, “Our Leadership Team has been wonderful and have done the best possible with what is required of them and their time.”

The intermediate school staff viewed the Leadership Team in a positive light responsible for the success they have had as a building. One member of the TFG commented, “I think having a consistent PLC team that was energetic about the process and prepared each time we met on Thursday morning was very helpful.” Another added, “I think our leaders were very profession and very competent. They were our cheerleaders. They were always prepared and kept us pumped up and ready to go . . . I think our leaders were greatly responsible for this success,”

The perception was that the Leadership Team is an essential element in the success of PLC. At the primary school, the perception was that the Leadership Team was learning to help the staff as a whole learn. Additionally, as an insider they were able to enhance the implementation. A member of the TFG referred to the Leadership Team as “leaders embedded within our staff” thus having the ability to “explain things and make sure everyone is on the same page on a regular basis.” Having a Leadership Team

bridged the gap between the administration and the teachers in a manner that created one team.

Being involved on the Leadership Team was a commitment. This involved both time and a willingness to take risks. One member of the intermediate Leadership Team reflected on her personal growth through the process, “I think I built more self-confidence in myself as far as a leader. . . . it is not really, ‘I’m the leader,’ it’s more of a cooperative in trusting my colleagues.” The PLC collaborative style fits because she can share leadership with her peers to accomplish the goals much like her principal is sharing leadership with her.

Many of the comments found in the data are actually from members of the building Leadership Team. They are responding to the changes in themselves as they have become the ones leading the meetings and how they see leadership shared in their building now. A member of the high school Leadership Team shared that a sense of esteem has developed because of the work on the Leadership Team,

I think that is the thing for me, that one of the changes was the peer leadership has become something, not that I cherish, but that I have to value or esteem in a new way because I have become susceptible to attack or have come under the microscope now that I am “on the leadership” or executive committee.

The sense of honor also came with responsibility as captured in this comment from a member of the middle school Leadership Team,

I felt honored to be part of the team, to be seen as someone that would be able to be a leader, and I think that is something that we need to appreciate, that we were chosen for that and take it seriously.

Teacher empowerment is coupled with responsibility. The Leadership Teams gave extra time to the implementation process. The teams for all three elementary schools met weekly to prepare. Beyond planning, the team members often had to prepare for presentations. One elementary Leadership Team member reported, “We met after school and made sure everyone had a part on Thursday morning, not just a couple of people doing something. Everyone had to take a part.” Their leadership skills were developed over time. Another member commented, “At first, some were hesitant to jump out there, but then they became natural leaders and speakers.”

The time commitment of an extra meeting weekly for Leadership Team members was not the case at the high school. Their team rarely met outside the PLC time and when they did meet they reported the time was too short and often their principal did not attend. This caused frustration because the Leadership Team would develop a plan that was derailed by information the principal had not shared. The high school Leadership Team recognized they will be more successful if they meet regularly. A creative solution offered by a teacher was that the Leadership Team could have the same lunch period to allow some time during the day for ongoing meetings. Before and after school are difficult because high school teachers have coaching duties. Another strategy employed to assist the high school Leadership Team was to add members to the team. In November, they expanded the team to include teachers from all academic areas. This extended the leadership opportunities within the school.

The elementary Leadership Team also had specific notions on the design of the Leadership Team. They reported that a teacher serving on the team “has to be conscious and careful.” In making recommendations to other schools starting a PLC process they recommended, members of the Leadership Team must be respected by other teachers and

be people who “are able to get buy-in from others.” They believed their weekly meetings were important in their success; therefore, members of the Leadership Team should also be willing to commit extra time to the implementation process.

In a PLC teacher empowerment emerges as teachers become vested in the PLC process. The new notion of teachers as leaders in a PLC brings many opportunities. The Leadership Team is a formal means for sharing leadership. In addition there are informal leadership opportunities. An elementary LTFG member explained, “We have several leaders in the building, and not just the people who are sitting at this table [Leadership Team members], but that there is a mindset ‘What can we all do to make things better for our kids?’”

The empowerment that all teachers can lead is important to the success of the small collaborative groups within a PLC. Because the groups are smaller it is harder for teachers to sit back and let others do the work. A high school LTFG teacher commented, “I think for me I stepped up more and did more than I would have otherwise. Normally I would just sit back and listen to what everybody else is saying, and it has helped me to step forward.” When teachers accept responsibility and own the process a PLC will flourish.

The high school experienced the lack of empowerment resulting in lack of action during PLC time. A teacher explained that when the department head was gone they had trouble knowing what they were supposed to do. The high school teachers did not fill in for the department head because the structure of the meeting was not collaborative but directive. When collaboration occurs and teachers feel empowered then all teachers own the process and lead when necessary. The collaborative culture described does not emerge in schools naturally; therefore, in order to facilitate the shared leadership of a

PLC the Dogwood School District contracted for technical assistance through the Regional Professional Development Center.

Technical assistance. The term PLC is becoming widely spread and is used loosely in many circumstances. As with many strong research-based strategies, the trend is to put the strategy in place quickly for fast results. The Dogwood School District resisted the temptation to conduct a quick implementation and opted for a three-year commitment with a PLC consultant for technical assistance. According to the data, teachers perceived this decision as positive and necessary for the success of the PLC implementation. A member of the elementary Leadership Team responded, “I don’t know how anybody would do it without utilizing . . . [the consultants’] expertise.”

The Leadership Team attended summer training in addition to monthly meetings to guide the work the team would do in leading the PLC implementation. The monthly meetings provided a gauge to evaluate how they were doing in the implementation process. The Primary Leadership Team identified that the design of the training was effective in providing a big picture of the PLC process in the summer then walking them through step by step at the monthly meetings. They also recognized that the PLC consultant held them accountable for what they had accomplished.

The meetings hosted by the regional consultant were identified as very valuable to the participants including adding to the bag of tricks to keep the staff motivated to directing the next steps for the PLC implementation process. One Intermediate School teacher said, “The quality of their presentation was exceptional. A lot of times we would be about running out of bag of tricks, and then we would go, and they would present something” we could use. Another Leadership Team member added,

The meetings that we went to were so enlightening and so rejuvenating, for lack of a better word, to just help us take it to the next level, but provided the guidelines and the parameters, so we felt comfortable to go ahead and move in that direction, but yet have some safety too. It was the safety net that also gave us that freedom to explore, but within that confined paradigm.

The process presented and support from the regional consultants provided the team with the confidence and tools to lead the PLC implementation process in a manner that worked for their individual school setting. Most of the schools had comments along these lines verifying the value and use of the information from the meetings.

The high school, however, reflected that their Leadership Team could have shared more, “I think we as a group needed to do a better job at presenting information that we heard there. A lot of times we heard it and didn’t do a lot with it.” The high school teachers and principal expressed positive thoughts about the value of the technical assistance, but owned that engaging more of the strategies could have enhanced their implementation process. The PLC consultant shared that the high school team reported activities at the monthly meetings that made it sound like they were on track, but after the principal had announced his new position she discovered that was not the case. She said,

It was an interesting situation. . . . I’d hear reports that I thought sounded pretty good about how things were going, and the progress they were making. And then, toward the end of the year, when that administrator was no longer attending meetings with them, I was getting a different version of it... that things weren’t so good after all. It sounded good. We could talk the talk, but there wasn’t a lot of follow-through. At the very last

meeting, they were talking about...not that they were going to start from scratch next year...but again, there would be a lot of changes next year, and it was like, “Okay, what can you do to help support us in going through change again?” This is something we are very willing to do. But they are not feeling that they have made as much progress as they wanted to.

The lack of follow-through at the high school is directly connected to the poor development of the core principles of a PLC. The Leadership Team has an understanding of PLC and what they believe should be happening, but the structure in place was not facilitating that development.

Other staff members were invited to attend the monthly meetings with the Leadership Team members in order to help spread the word. Some buildings had a practice to always take extra teachers while other buildings did not capitalize on this opportunity. The buildings that did take extra teachers shared that it was very valuable. A member of the middle school Leadership Team reported, “I think that helped her buy in . . . I have seen her more positive since she has gone. I think that that should continue to help other people buy in.” Often it was reported that they returned with a better understanding of the big picture and a more positive attitude toward the work of PLC.

The intermediate school team usually took two additional teachers as guests to the monthly meetings. A member of the Leadership Team explained they “brought all different types of teachers from our building.” Members of the TFG stated that it “was beneficial because it helped you to see what the PLC team does and what they were, how they prepared for the meeting and it kind of gave it a little more focus where this was leading to.” Another teacher agreed,

It meant a lot more after I went to one of the training meetings, so I think that was an important part for me to actually know what the leaders did and where they get their ideas, that they just didn't get them off the top of their head.

The connection that was created with the Leadership Team when a teacher attended as guest appeared to have a positive impact on the collaborative process. The teachers gained a better understanding of the process while also seeing the Leadership Team as learners.

The PLC consultants worked with the whole building staff and/or the Leadership Team on-site a few times during the first year implementation. These varied and were at the invitation of the Leadership Team. The primary school utilized this service the most frequently while the consultant had to encourage her way into the high school late in the year. The visits provided differentiated assistance to the buildings that helped to move the PLC implementation forward. The consultant conducted whole group presentations on SMART goals and vision development as well as guidance on planning for the Leadership Teams.

Technical assistance provided through the regional consultant was indeed a facilitator to the PLC implementation. The expertise and knowledge that was shared helped guide the work for the Leadership Teams. The schools that utilized the resources and strategies most also had a stronger development of the core PLC principles in their schools.

Facilitation from district leadership. The Dogwood School District had a commitment to the PLC implementation from the Board of Education down the chain of command. Through committing to contract for technical assistance to the implementation

of late start time, it was obvious that the district leadership was supporting the PLC process. Teachers identified these commitments as facilitators to the PLC work. The arrangement for late start time for teachers to engage in professional development was signified as supportive when a primary teacher shared, “I think that as a district makes this plan, what they are really showing and telling is that, what you are doing in that meeting is so important that they are willing to make arrangements.” The paid contract time for PLC time sends a strong message about the importance of the PLC process to the district. This perception is met with responsibility and respect.

The teachers recognized the support from district administrators. Attendance at the weekly late start meetings by district administrators we perceived positively. A member of the high school Leadership Team referred to it as “a little bit of an endorsement . . . so you think you’re on the right path.” He continued that, “it gave me a little bit of freedom to say, okay, I don’t mind committing to this thing because I know there are other people that are committing to it as well.” The visual support from district administrators attending building level meetings sent the message that PLC was important work.

A few other comments regarding a district perspective to PLC were also mentioned. The flexibility in implementing the PLC process provided from central office by not requiring all buildings to “stay at the same page” was identified as supportive of the PLC implementation by the Elementary Leadership Team. This provided recognition that PLC is a building initiative that was context specific. An auxiliary teacher expressed approval for the vertical meetings where all teachers met in K-12 teams to work such as all art teachers together. She supported increasing the frequency of these meetings in the future.

The high school teachers had other suggestions for the future district level support. These included the ability for the high school staff to meet in a room that is more conducive to presentations and providing more substitutes for the team to take more teachers to the regional PLC meetings. Finally, a member of the Leadership Team suggested that in-district meetings with the other building Leadership Teams would be helpful. This would provide opportunities to learn what has actually worked in other buildings in Dogwood.

In general, it appears the support for district leadership was recognized as positive and supportive of the PLC implementation. The two major support decisions were made prior to the implementation as preparation for a smooth process including late starts and a consultation contract. While it is rare to have a flawless implementation, the success of a majority of the buildings demonstrates that many barriers were moved to provide for a positive PLC implementation process. It is also clear that if the buildings lagging behind had followed through on recommendations provided through the PLC consultant they might have had a better result.

Conclusion

Exploration of the themes partnered with the general analysis of the development of the core principles of PLC provides a picture of the implementation process of PLC in the Dogwood School District. Becoming a PLC results in a change in the operating principles of the school that reflect a collaborative culture focused on student learning through shared vision and values. The exploration of PLC at the school sites reflected the first-year of district-wide implementation of PLC in five schools in one district bringing to light the facilitators and barriers as identified by the school staff.

The findings of this evaluative inquiry demonstrated the concept that even with the same technical assistance, implementing a PLC process is context specific. The three elementary buildings had greater success in the development of the core PLC principles although they were not without conflict. The middle school had the lowest level of implementation followed by the high school. The data demonstrated that the Leadership Teams had a greater understanding of PLC in these buildings but the collaborative culture that signifies a PLC has not yet emerged except in pockets. Future implications for the PLC implementation will be discussed in chapter 5.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Implications

School districts across the nation have invested thousands of dollars toward reform programs to improve student achievement. The Dogwood School District is engaging in the same efforts through their implementation of the Professional Learning Communities (PLC) process. The difference is that they are not waiting for improved achievement to evaluate the success of the programs. This inquiry was designed to provide feedback at the implementation stage so that the district administration could monitor and adjust as needed to ensure the fidelity of the implementation and the likelihood of a positive impact on student achievement.

In general, the study explored the development of the core principles of a professional learning community within five schools. The broad questions that served to guide this inquiry included:

1. To what extent are the core principles of the professional learning community model evidenced in five schools in their first year of implementation?
2. What do school staff members identify as supportive of the development of a professional learning community model in their school?
3. What do school staff members identify as barriers to the development of a professional learning community model in their school?

This chapter will provide an analysis of the district results. Information will be shared about the extent that the PLC process is evidenced across the district. Specific implications important for other practitioners attempting such an implementation including the barriers and facilitators identified by the staff will be included. Finally, recommendations for the Dogwood School District will be shared.

District Analysis of Professional Learning Communities Implementation

In the result-oriented reality of today's educational system, it is imperative that accountability measures are in place when major decisions are made for schools. The Dogwood School District Board of Education voted to support a district-wide reform initiative with the expectation of improved student achievement. The PLC model adopted by Dogwood School District is research-based and proven to impact student learning. Three core principles of a PLC were identified as crucial components for a proper implementation. These include development of shared vision and values, a focus on learning, and a culture of collaboration. This inquiry analyzed all five school sites in relation to these principles.

Shared Vision and Values

The development of a written vision is easier than creating the culture of living the vision. At the completion of the first year implementation, each school had developed a school vision through collaborative efforts. The vision development process was important as a springboard for creating shared values. In a PLC, the shared vision and values unite the staff around a common message that defines their fundamental purpose and directs future decisions (Hord, 2004; Wenger, 1999; Louis & Marks, 1998; Eaker, DuFour & DuFour, 2002). A vital component of a PLC is the unwavering belief that all children can achieve at high levels (Stiggins, 2005; Lezotte, 2005; Saphier, 2005; Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2000) regardless of the barriers and obstacles "even if they are far behind academically and need a significant amount of time to catch up. Educators who carry this belief into their practice are not unrealistic about the obstacles they and their students face. They simply have not given up" (Saphier, 2005, p. 86).

The schools in Dogwood are at the first stages of developing a strong sense of shared vision and values. The primary, elementary and intermediate have developed the strongest notion of unity about student learning. They have experienced a shift in thinking from “my kids” to a sense of collective responsibility for the success of all kids. The middle school and high school have a formal vision developed and adopted, but do not behave the vision at this point. The lack of development of shared values is likely a result of the low level of collaboration found in these schools. It will be important for each school to keep the vision and values alive by revisiting them frequently.

Focus on Learning

PLCs demonstrate a focus on learning when time and resources are dedicated to improving student achievement. Schools operating as PLCs devote time within teachers’ contracted time to engage in activities focused on improving student achievement on a regular basis preferably weekly as a minimum (Louis, Kruse & Marks, 1996; Hord, 2004; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006). The Dogwood School District provided contracted time weekly for PLC collaboration. The building Leadership Teams had the autonomy to determine weekly agendas for the use of this time. The development of this core PLC principle in the five schools is related to how they chose to utilize their time.

All schools had activities from time to time that clearly focused on learning such as reviewing achievement data, but the ongoing collaboration focused on learning was not found in all five sites. Again, the elementary schools were more advanced in the development of this PLC principle. The high school and middle school teachers did not provide specific examples of activities related to student learning. They were not consistently engaged in activities related to student learning. In a PLC, educators’ will focus on teaching and learning including providing a guaranteed viable curriculum and

engaging in dialogue about instructional techniques and analyzing student work in a collaborative setting (Hord, 2004; Louis, Kruse & Marks, 1996; Marzano, Pickering & Pollock, 2001; Schmoker, 2006; DuFour, Eaker and DuFour, 2005). The high school teachers did work in small groups, but reported confusion on what they needed to accomplish. Rather than small group time, the middle school teachers who did meet were not engaged in ongoing collaboration in this manner. While they did do some curriculum writing it was not curriculum revision based on student data. The elementary school reached further than the middle and high schools yet did not achieve the development of this core principle like the primary and intermediate schools. The elementary developed some SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-oriented, and Time bound) goals (Conzemius and O'Neill, 2002) in February but the controversy about the goals was that it was too late. The primary and intermediate had teams of teachers focused on SMART goals with data. Their small collaborative teams had more focus on learning than any other buildings. The primary and elementary schools also developed a formal pyramid of interventions as recommend in the literature (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Karhanek, 2004).

A commitment and strategic focus on improved student learning is a keystone of a professional learning community (Louis & Kruse, 1995; Hord, 2004; Louis, Toole & Hargreaves, 1999; Wenger, 1999; DuFour, Eaker & DuFour, 2005a; Schmoker, 2006; Fullan, 2000; Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2001; Buffum & Hinman, 2006). All five buildings have room to grow on the continuum of developing a focus on learning. The middle and high schools may need to back track to first year implementation activities of learning how to write SMART goals. In the meantime, the elementary, intermediate and primary can continue to forge ahead taking time to do

process checks to see that they are on the right track. Developing a tight focus on learning is a process that develops into a culture of its own.

Culture of Collaboration

The culture of collaboration characterized in a PLC is critical to the success of the other core principles. It is almost as if the development of this culture then becomes the springboard for the other principles. In this inquiry, it was clear in the data that the lack of a culture of collaboration resulted in very little development in the other areas. The Dogwood schools took various approaches to the development of this culture.

The literature reflects that in order for a culture of collaboration to develop in a PLC, first the staff must have collegial relationships. Leo and Cowan (2000) define collegial relationships as a supportive condition necessary for successful PLCs. They are described as relationships of trust, respect, positive caring associations and norms of continuous critical inquiry and improvement, collegial relationships among staff members produce action toward a goal. The schools in Dogwood dedicated time to teambuilding activities to build this type of relationship among staff members. The high school spent the shortest amount of time in this type of activities while the intermediate school engaged in teambuilding activities the longest. The schools also developed norms for their groups to encourage positive behaviors that build strong relationships. This is consistent with the recommendations from Conzemius and O'Neill (2002) and Preskill and Torres (1999) that leaders should provide opportunity for team building activities including the development of team norms.

These activities build a foundation for further collaborative efforts in a PLC. The next step along the continuum of collaboration is when collaborative time is centered on student learning through ongoing development of curriculum, revision of instructional

strategies, and analysis of student performance. This reflective dialogue on teaching and learning is an important component of a successful PLC (Hord, 2004; Marks & Printy, 2003; Wenger, 1999; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many, 2006; Schmoker, 2006). This often includes the use of SMART goals in collaborative teams to focus the group on results (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2002; Schmoker, 2006; DuFour, DuFour Eaker & Karhanek, 2004). All of the schools had activities related to SMART goals during their first year implementation except the middle school; however, only some of the schools actually put them into action as an ongoing analysis of results. The primary and intermediate schools exceeded the other schools in this category as well. Teacher teams at the elementary developed SMART goals in February and did not have much time for data collection. The SMART goals at the middle school and high school while written did not serve as a central focus of activities.

A school exhibiting the culture of collaboration at the highest level would be characterized by a deprivitization of practice. When team members embrace the deprivitization of practice as a means to improvement, they can focus on student learning without worrying about egos, thus problem solving for better results (Louis & Marks, 1998; Kruse et al, 1995; Fullan, 2006; Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell & Valentine, 1999; Hord, 2004; Easton, 2004; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Karhanek, 2004). Data from the primary school indicated that at least among some teams deprivitization was occurring. This is a high-level skill not typically found during the first year of PLC implementation.

Developing a culture of collaboration in a PLC takes time. It usually involves changing the way teachers think about their roles. In a collaborative culture teachers are empowered to analyze data and take action as a team. The transition from passive implementers of someone else's plan to active team members with the power to develop

their own plans is an important milestone in developing a culture of collaboration. Some of the schools in Dogwood have pockets where this is happening. The PLC implementation process will be complete when this becomes the norm for all collaborative teams.

Professional Learning Community Principles are Highly Interdependent

The district level analysis reveals that while pockets of PLC-type activities exist at all buildings in the Dogwood School District a relationship exists among the PLC core principle development. The interdependent nature of the core principles is clear when a broad view is taken on the PLC development at a building. The next section will identify some of the major connections across the core principles layered with the concepts in the common themes found in the data.

Relationship between Shared Vision and Values and the Collaborative Culture

This evaluative inquiry revealed a relationship between the development of a collaborative culture and behaviors exhibiting shared vision and values. While each of the buildings created a formal written vision, the level of “living the vision” varied from building to building. The primary, elementary and intermediate school data provided the most examples of teacher statements that would be considered congruent with the formal vision statements of their schools. This was most evident in the shared ownership of student success. These schools also exhibited the most highly developed collaborative cultures, thus suggesting the interconnectedness of the two principles.

The high school and middle schools both struggled in the area of shared vision and values and in the development of a collaborative culture. Their approaches to collaboration; however, were opposite. The middle school utilized mostly whole-group

activities for collaboration while the high school spent a majority of time in department level collaborative meetings.

The middle school method of whole-group collaboration is deceiving because a several staff members were not regularly involved. The inconsistency of the group members engaging in collaborative activities may be the reason for the lack of development of a shared vision and values. It is also possible that at the middle school, the core group that did meet together developed a sense of shared vision and values that was not transferred to the building staff as a whole. It is clear in the data that both the area of shared vision and values and collaboration lagged behind other schools in their development.

The high school's approach to collaboration involved less whole-group time and more time spent in department groups. The activities and focus of this time, however, was not clear in the data. There was confusion with what was to be completed and an appearance of time spent off task. This may be an example of small groups developing their own ideas resulting in many shared ideas only among smaller subgroups of the staff or no shared vision and values at all.

Regardless, the data reveal the development of the principles of collaboration and shared vision and values lagged behind other schools at the middle school and high school which is contrary to the elementary data suggesting that an interconnectedness exists. This inquiry did not study other secondary schools; therefore, no assumptions can be made about secondary versus elementary. A commonality between the middle and high school buildings was that significantly less time was spent in these two buildings on teambuilding activities in comparison with the three elementary-level buildings. This

would suggest a link between the amount of time spent on teambuilding may have a direct relationship with the development of a strong sense of shared vision and values. The opposite could also be in effect that a strong sense of shared vision and values paves the way for the development of a collaborative culture. While this inquiry cannot answer which came first, it is evident that collaboration and shared vision and values are interconnected principles in a PLC.

Relationship between the Use of Time and the Development of a Culture of Collaboration

The development of a culture of collaboration in a PLC is highly dependent upon how time for collaboration is used by the team members. Focus group members commented about how Leadership Teams in other school districts at their trainings were significantly behind the progress their school had made. This was attributed to the time Dogwood teachers were provided weekly for collaboration. This time for collaboration was identified as important to forward the momentum of the implementation of PLC; however, within the Dogwood School District all schools were provided this time and the difference among buildings was in the use of that time. The data is clear that the less confusion about what to do and the more empowered the collaborative groups were the more advanced the development of a culture of collaboration.

The most developed PLCs in the Dogwood School District were at the primary and intermediate schools followed by the elementary then the secondary schools. A review of the data from the primary and intermediate schools reveals a clear purpose for their use of collaborative time. While the intermediate school began more slowly with more teambuilding and whole-group activities both the primary and intermediate transformed into a dependence upon smaller collaborative teams focused on SMART

goals. The unity of purpose among the teams was clear and proved to guide their time to reach their goals.

The high school and elementary also used small collaborative groups; however, data from both schools suggested times of unclear expectations. The Leadership Team Focus Groups in both schools discussed plans to be less controlling of the weekly collaboration time and to empower their teams more to move at a logical pace based on their SMART goals. This aligns with the methods utilized at the primary and intermediate schools.

The elementary school had a more highly developed collaborative culture than the high school, but was later in the year getting to the data analysis on student achievement results. The elementary Leadership Team spent more time on teambuilding and whole-group during the first half of the year. While the intermediate school also spent more time on teambuilding it was intertwined with data analysis. The elementary team is on track for the development of a collaborative PLC culture as they experienced the expected struggles of a first year implementation.

The high school and middle school on the other hand are behind in the development of a collaborative culture. The way they utilized collaborative time with a lack of buy-in from teachers on the SMART goals was more like they were completing tasks for someone else. The Leadership Teams maintained control telling the teachers what to do at each step of the way instead of empowering teachers with time to improve student achievement toward specific goals. This may have resulted in a lack of will to collaborate. At the middle school, more time was used presenting information to the teachers rather than engaging in collaborative conversations among teachers. In order to

establish a culture of collaboration, teachers must be allowed to converse about strategies and data related to student achievement. This evaluative inquiry revealed that schools that utilized their time to engage their teachers in activities that brought them together as a team, developed goals and empowered teachers to work toward those goals also developed a strong culture of collaboration.

Empowerment within the Collaborative Culture Impacts Focus on Learning

The ultimate goal of a PLC implementation is an impact on student achievement. As mentioned earlier, this inquiry was not designed to evaluate the improvement in achievement because it is a first-year implementation. With that in mind, it is important that the schools were developing a focus on learning characteristic of a PLC. The data revealed a relationship between the level of empowerment of teachers within the collaborative culture and the focus on learning. The schools with more highly developed collaborative cultures where teachers were empowered to guide their work toward improvement based on SMART goals also demonstrated a strong focus on learning. This was exhibited in many ways but was especially evident when teachers at the primary, elementary and intermediate schools referred to the change in thinking from how to improve *teaching* to how to improve *student learning*.

When evaluating a culture of collaboration, it is important to consider the degree to which collaboration focuses on learning. Schools often create time for teachers to work collaboratively, however, the structure and expectations for the time may or may not actually focus on student learning. A PLC is characterized by a collaborative culture that focuses on student learning. The degree to which the building leadership teams

empowered the smaller collaborative groups to work together to meet goals was positively associated with developing a strong focus on learning.

As mentioned previously, the elementary level buildings exhibited more fully developed principles of PLC than did the secondary buildings. This was clear in the focus on learning as well. While the middle school collected student work samples for constructed response questions, they did not analyze the data collectively. The focus on student learning was more of an assignment to do something rather than an engagement in a team effort to improve achievement. The high school similarly worked on the development of SMART goals, but failed to really engage teams in attempting to achieve them. The lack of empowerment at both buildings resulted in a less developed focus on learning. Instead these buildings were working at tasks which may result in improved achievement but do not exemplify the characteristics of PLC teams collaboratively working to improve learning. When the teachers were given assignments to do rather than being in charge of their efforts to improve student achievement, the focus on learning was not as fully developed. Likewise, when teachers were empowered to make collaborative decisions about how to improve student learning the focus on learning was evident in the data. Thus the empowerment that occurred in small groups was closely tied to the development of the core principle of a focus on learning.

Data from the intermediate school demonstrated the focus on learning coupled with the collaborative celebration of success. The example shared was of a teacher's excitement about results from a formative assessment in which she compared her students' current results with those from a previous assessment to determine growth. This targeted focus on growth of student learning was tied to a SMART goal for one of the

collaborative teams. In the example this teacher explains how she was so excited she shared the results with any teacher exemplifying the deprivitization of practice as it relates to student achievement.

At the primary school, the collaborative culture of the PLC changed the way the teachers looked at data. Before, they had data from some assessments or kindergarten screening information but always felt like they did not have data like the other schools because their students did not take state assessments. The change that occurred at the primary resulted in a new look at an old tool. Now the teachers were analyzing data from their grade cards. The collaborative teams set goals and looked at data regarding specific grade card skills such as knowledge of letter sounds. This provided relevant data focusing on student learning for collaborative teams to study for improvement.

The level of real collaboration as defined in the literature for a PLC directly impacts the level of focus on student learning. Collaborative teams that were wavering about what to do or the value of the work were significantly less focused on student learning. The use of goals by the collaborative teams dramatically impacted the focus on learning. When schools had small collaborative teams highly engaged in curriculum, instruction and assessment activities an obvious link existed creating a focus on learning.

Importance of Collaboration in Professional Learning Community

The findings of this inquiry expose the strong bond between the core principles of a PLC. The previous section demonstrates how the time spent to develop and maintain a collaborative culture is interdependent with the development of the other core principles. This inquiry did not intend to discover which core principles develop first; however, it is clear that without the development of a collaborative culture other core principles are

hindered dramatically. It bears repeating that a professional learning community framework is not about doing but becoming. The constant of a PLC is the role of collaboration. Developing a collaborative culture where teachers own the process of improvement creates a continuous quest rather than a “to do” list to check-off. The schools that empowered the teachers to work together to solve problems about student learning were found to be more highly developed PLCs than those schools that tried to stay together step-by-step with the process. The lesson is clear that an important type of collaboration in a PLC includes collaborative groups where it is neither an individual activity nor a whole-school process. Small groups working interdependently with responsibility to the whole operating to improve student achievement can utilize time in a manner that enhances the functioning of a school to develop PLC characteristics.

Implications for Practitioners

Many schools have tackled the challenge of implementing the PLC model. The district implementation on the other hand is more rare in the literature. This evaluative inquiry provides some guidance for a district-wide PLC implementation. The findings suggest some perceived facilitators and barriers in the implementation process. This section will provide information on both so that practitioners can determine what might work best in their settings.

One important decision made at the same time as the decision to implement the PLC was unanimously supported in the data. The contract with an outside consultant to provide technical assistance during the implementation process was supported by members of the Leadership Teams and other teachers. Dogwood Schools have contracted with this consultant for a three-year implementation process. The plan is front-loaded with more support the first year tapering off until year three. The consultant provided off-

site trainings for the Leadership Teams as well as on-site assistance and presentations. It was mentioned in the data that the consultant helped to hold the Leadership Teams accountable for the implementation. It is recommended through the results of this inquiry that a regional consultant can facilitate the process of implementation of a PLC. This allows the formal school leaders to be learners along side the teachers to share the responsibility of implementing the PLC process as the school culture changes.

Another decision made by the Board of Education that was supported by a vast majority of responses was the provision of late start time. Creating space in the form of time for teachers to collaborate is necessary in a PLC. All teachers must be involved in order to develop the shared vision and values characteristic of a PLC. The job-embedded time provided during contracted time is necessary for a successful PLC implementation. Several Leadership Team members shared that other area schools were significantly further behind them in the implementation process because they did not have weekly job-embedded time dedicated to the PLC. This important tool did not come without a barrier of its own. Four of the buildings noted concerns with student supervision during late start time. The district officials decided to skip the necessary step of gaining community support for late starts by allowing parents the choice to bring their child a normal time or an hour later. This relieved the concern that parents would need a babysitter for an hour one day per week and caused the school to need a plan for student supervision. The first few weeks provided some opportunities for troubleshooting, but then the procedures became normal for Thursday late starts. All of the schools developed acceptable strategies to supervise the students except the middle school. The strategies worked; however, staff members still suggest if possible finding a way not to have the students present during PLC collaborative time. This would allow paraprofessionals to join the

PLC meetings as well. The lesson for those considering a PLC implementation would be that finding time for collaboration greatly enhances the implementation keeping in mind that if possible not having students present would be preferred.

The district administrators supported the PLC implementation by always dropping in on one of the late start meetings each Thursday. This sent the message that what the teachers are doing is important and helped the administrators learn more about the process and how they can support it. Additionally, the understanding that not all schools will be at the same point is important. District administration needed to allow the buildings to begin the process of implementation one step at a time. This inquiry found that implementing the PLC process is context specific; therefore, even in a district-wide initiative the individual schools must be allowed to progress through the development with consideration of their current culture. It cannot be expected that from week to week each school should be doing the same activities. In Dogwood School District, the two most highly developed PLCs after the first year had allocated different amounts of time to whole group versus smaller group work. This was because the schools needed to begin where the school culture was and move toward becoming a PLC. District administration should have an understanding of the journey toward PLC and the PLC core principles so that as individual schools progress they can identify the milestones or lack thereof in order to provide adequate support for progress with the implementation.

Another important finding in this inquiry was the progression of developing a collaborative culture. The building leadership teams that empowered smaller collaborative teams within the school developed further along the continuum of becoming a PLC. Small collaborative teams working together to attain SMART goals took responsibility and owned the focus on learning characteristic in a PLC. On the other

hand, building leadership teams that tightly directed activities in small group meetings generated a perception that the teams were doing assignments rather than collaboratively involved in a journey to improvement. These findings suggest that training about the processes of collaborative work then allowing teams to focus on SMART goals on their own produced better results, ownership and shared understanding of the PLC process.

A district-wide PLC implementation is bound to disrupt the equilibrium of the district. In fact, that is the whole point of creating change to develop a new culture. During the process it is important to expect and anticipate some conflict. This can come in many forms from issues among teachers to teachers expressing discontent with PLC. This is normal in a change process. The implication is that celebrations are important. Finding ways to encourage teachers and let them know their hard work is noticed and matters can turn negativity around. A PLC implementation is a reform effort that can have a tremendous impact on student achievement as seen in the data, IF it is implemented with fidelity. The schools with the best PLC implementation also spent ample time celebrating the successes along the way. It is important to help teachers recognize the milestones of becoming to keep the motivation for the difficult work.

Finally, the data reveal that leadership matters. The high school has been engaged in the PLC reform movement several years longer than the other buildings. However, due to new principals each year, the PLC process is still lagging in development. Schools considering a PLC implementation should be alert to the impact on leadership style and stability necessary for success. PLC requires a collaborative leader who is willing to share the power. The changes in leadership in the Dogwood School District may impact the PLC implementation for year two. The administration should pay particular attention

to these schools and provide necessary professional development to those principals as necessary.

School boards and administrators considering a district-wide or school-level PLC implementation have several things to consider as a result of this inquiry. The time for collaboration is imperative including beginning with an appropriate amount of teambuilding transforming to smaller collaborative teams throughout the first year. Before making the decision, it is recommended to find a PLC consultant who can assist the process on a regular basis. Dogwood School had a minimum contact of at least one time per month with the leadership team. Principals in a PLC need to be able to share their leadership power with the Leadership Team and Leadership Teams need time to collaborate about the PLC process. Additionally, Leadership Teams need to be willing to empower the smaller collaborative teams to work on goals and report progress. Support from the central office administration is important for teachers to realize that this is a district-level initiative that is valued yet all buildings need not to be engaged in the same activities from week to week. One of the most important lessons is that any time a school is implementing a school reform there will be conflict. This is a natural part of the process; however, if the implementation is done with fidelity it will more likely produce the desired results.

Recommendations for Dogwood Schools

The Dogwood School District made several key decisions that positively impacted the PLC implementation process. With that in mind, it is important to recognize that three of the five schools have completed a strong first year implementation. Two of the schools need to take additional steps to ensure the PLC produces results as expected.

The first recommendation related to the late start time. If possible at some point, it would be positive for the process if the students were not present during PLC collaboration time. Until such point as this can happen, it is imperative that the middle school develop another structure for student supervision that will allow the teachers to be in the collaborative meetings. It is also necessary to eliminate activities that voluntarily pull teachers out of the meetings. In order to develop a collaborative culture, the teachers will need to meet together.

Secondly, since four new building administrators will be joining the team, an induction plan for these leaders is critical. The high school and middle school will essentially have the opportunity to begin again under new leadership. This may be the most positive approach to implementing PLC. The team may be able to save their vision but it would still need to be revisited. The opportunity with new leaders is that they will be able to establish their expectations. A strong knowledge of PLC will be important so that the expectations mirror the key characteristics of a PLC.

The primary school principal, on the other hand, will need to take a completely different approach with the exception of being very knowledgeable about PLC. Because the primary school had such a strong first year implementation, it will be important to work with the Leadership Team to learn the PLC culture herself. If the principal brings in many demands and new ways of doing business then the PLC could easily take a turn for the worse rather than growing stronger. The primary principal has a great opportunity to facilitate the growth of this staff to a high performing PLC.

An additional recommendation is to include an overview of PLC during new teacher orientations. Teaching about the expected school culture will assist new teachers in helping to carry forward the vision. It is also suggested that time be for the Leadership

Teams from all District schools to meet together to share on a regular basis. This will provide support to the Leadership Team by embodying the same principles of a PLC. Additionally, this would allow for specific district-level information to be shared at one time to key leaders who can disseminate the information in their own schools.

Continuity of the processes will be important to the further implementation of PLC. Maintaining the job-embedded collaborative time and the contract with the regional PLC consultant will facilitate uninterrupted development of the core PLC principles in all Dogwood School District buildings. Since many of the schools indicated an improvement in student achievement during the first year implementation, it is likely that through persistence and an unrelenting focus on a proper PLC implementation that Dogwood School District will achieve the expected gains in student performance. The Dogwood School District is well on its way to having a district PLC now that three of the five buildings have experienced highly successful implementations.

Future Research Directions

This evaluative inquiry was aimed at ensuring the fidelity of implementation of the PLC process in all schools in the Dogwood School District. The results were not targeting the improved student achievement that is the ultimate goal of the reform. Continued evaluation of the implementation and results would be recommended. The further development of the PLC principles in the schools would be interesting for study. Additionally, a comparison of the impacts of staff turnover on the implementation especially as it relates to the building principal. Finally, it is imperative that the Dogwood School District analyzes the impact of the PLC implementation on student achievement on the state assessments.

On a broader spectrum, continuing to study the development of PLCs in other schools is important especially as the concept becomes more popular. As practitioners learn that becoming a PLC within a school has a positive impact on student achievement, there is more likelihood of poor implementations and a watering down of the PLC concept. Future study of schools that tout themselves as PLCs is warranted to determine if the fidelity of the term PLC retains its meaning as well as if student achievement has been impacted by the PLC process. The implementation at Dogwood involved a state supported regional consultant. An additional study could expand to look at schools across many districts that utilized the regional consultants to determine if differences exist in regions of the state or within regions to identify facilitators and barriers to PLC implementations more broadly.

Final Thoughts

The completion of the evaluative inquiry provides a beginning glance at the vast changes that are possible in the Dogwood School District. The power of PLC as evidenced in the literature provides encouragement and lets the imagination run about what is possible. If the Dogwood School District continues to focus on the PLC processes in order to establish the principles of a PLC in each building with cultural congruence then there is no telling where things could end. In working with the teachers and administrators, this researcher has found them to have the heart for building a great school district. My recommendation would be to value each other as partners in the process to embrace the possibilities for your students. The staff has worked hard during the first year implementation and the students have reaped the benefits. Continue the journey and this will become your *way of doing business* or culture which will leave you unmatched.

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Appendix A

February, 2007

Dear Participant:

Thank you for considering participating in the study of the development of a professional learning communities model in your school. This study is being conducted as a research project in a doctoral program as part of the dissertation process. The study will be used to enhance the implementation process as well as to identify things that serve to facilitate and act as barriers to the development of a PLC model.

As a study participant, you will respond to questions related to the PLC development in a discussion format. The time allowed for the focus group is not expected to take more than one hour. You may also be invited to participate in a follow-up interview which will be limited to one hour. Please read below to understand how your input will be used in the study and how your rights as a participant will be protected.

*Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may withdraw from participation at any time you wish, including in the middle of the focus group/interview or after it is completed. If you decide at a later time that you do not want your input included in the study, I will respect that decision. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any concerns or questions about your participation. You may contact me at 417-272-8173 ext 4021. You may also contact campus IRB 573-882-9585 or umcresearchcirb@missouri.edu.

*Participation will not impact your performance evaluation. Your decision to participate or not as well as any information collected will not impact your performance evaluation as an employee in the school district. The purpose of this study is to enhance and support the PLC development. In no manner will it be used to evaluate individual employees. If you have concerns about this you may contact campus IRB 573-882-9585 or umcresearchcirb@missouri.edu.

*Your identity will be protected in reporting of the findings. Your real name may appear in public records as an employee of this school; however, a pseudonym will be used for the school district name in the dissertation document. No mention of the actual district will be included in the dissertation.

If at this point you are still interested in participating, please complete the consent form below. Keep the top part of this letter for future reference. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Angie Besendorfer

Consent Form

I, _____, agree to participate in the study of the development of the PLC model being conducted by Angie Besendorfer. I understand that:

- *the focus group and interview data is for dissertation use.
- *my participation is completely voluntary, and I may withdraw at any point in the study.
- *my identity will be protected in reporting of the findings.
- *no information collected will be used as part of your performance evaluation as an employee.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Appendix B

PLC Development Focus Group Procedures and Questions

In an effort to enhance the development of the professional learning communities (PLC) process in the district, focus groups will be held to discuss the implementation process in each building. Two focus groups will be conducted in each building for a total of ten focus groups. One group will consist of the administrator(s) and teachers on the building Leadership Team that have attended monthly trainings. The second focus group will consist of five to six teachers from the building. These teachers will be randomly selected through a random number selection process. The names of all certified teachers not on the building Leadership Team will be listed alphabetically and assigned a number. An invitation to participate in the focus group will be extended to twelve randomly selected teachers.

The same focus group procedures and questions will be used with both groups. A total of 90 minutes will be allocated for each focus group discussion. The group discussion will be audio taped and transcribed. The primary researcher will facilitate the first focus group at each building consisting of the building Leadership Team and principals. At the conclusion of this focus group, the researcher will ask for two teachers from the first focus group to volunteer to lead a focus group of teachers from their building. This will preserve the anonymity of the teachers to provide unbiased comments. The primary researcher will train the people that volunteered to facilitate the second focus group including how to randomly select the participants, procedures for maintaining anonymity, and procedures for asking the questions as modeled during their focus group experience. A statement from the primary researcher will be read by the teacher volunteers prior to the focus group discussion (see Appendix C).

Five major questions will be discussed in the focus group setting. The facilitator will obtain consent for participation and explain the ground rules. The following questions will be offered for discussion with a maximum of 15 minutes allocated to each question. The audio recording will be transcribed for data analysis.

Questions

Facilitator will state: *The purpose of this inquiry is to facilitate the development of the PLC process in the district. The development of a PLC is a process that does not occur overnight and requires the majority of staff members to actively engage in the process. As you respond to the following questions, please provide examples from your building of activities in which a majority of the staff have participated.*

1. How have you and others in your building changed as a result of the implementation of the PLC process?
2. What obstacles has the staff encountered in becoming a professional learning community?
3. What has worked well to help the PLC process emerge?
4. What has it meant to you to be a part of the PLC process?
5. How do you feel about your PLC experiences?

Appendix C

Statement to Read Prior to Focus Group led by Teachers

Teacher volunteers will read the statement below prior to beginning the focus group discussion.

“Mrs. Besendorfer is studying the development of the professional learning communities in our District as part of her work doctoral studies. The purpose of the study is to gather observations of the development of PLC core principles in our schools while also identifying barriers to the PLC process and things that helped with the implementation. As you know, we define “greatness” in our Good to Greater quest as doing our jobs so well that others will want to learn from us. The discussion you are about to participate in is one component of that study. Participation is voluntary and anonymous. The information from this focus group will assist the District as we continue the PLC development as well as serve to gather lessons we have learned to help other schools as they attempt to implement the PLC model in their schools. We will limit the time for this activity to 90 minutes. Please sign the notice of consent which confirms that participation is voluntary and that the information will not be used in evaluating your performance as an employee. Then we can begin our discussion of five questions. Mrs. Besendorfer thanks you in advance for your participation in the evaluation of the PLC implementation process.”

Appendix D

Follow-Up Interview Procedures

The inquiry team will review the transcriptions from focus group discussions to determine the need for additional information. This approach will allow a deeper look into the responses to gain a better understanding of the perceptions collected through the focus groups. The follow-up interviews may occur with teacher leaders, administrators, the Director of Instruction as the district-level person coordinating the PLC implementation, and/or the PLC consultant from the regional office. All interviews will be conducted by the primary researcher or a member of the inquiry team.

Below is an example of possible questions to use in the interview phase.

1. The focus group discussions indicated that _____ is occurring in your building. Tell me more about _____.
2. The focus group indicated that your building is/is not developing the PLC principle of _____. Evidence noted in the focus groups include comments such as _____. Tell me more about your perceptions regarding this PLC principle.
3. The focus groups identified _____ as facilitating the implementation process. Do you agree? Why or why not?
4. The focus groups identified _____ as barriers to the development of a PLC at your building. Do you agree? Why or why not?

Vita

Angela Besendorfer has served students in the field of education for eighteen years. Her career has concentrated in public schools serving disadvantaged students. She also served teachers through her role as a professional developer and school administrator. Her passion for public education is evident in all of her endeavors.

Angela Besendorfer has taught Title 1 preschool and fourth grade academically at-risk students. She has served various Missouri schools as elementary principal, director of special services and superintendent. She was selected as a STARR (Select Teacher as Regional Resource) teacher and served a year on sabbatical providing professional development on research-based teaching strategies. She has received several honors including the National Milken Educator Award and Finalist for Missouri Teacher of the Year. Angela holds a Bachelor's degree from Missouri Southern State University, a Master's degree from University of Central Missouri, and an Educational Doctorate from University of Missouri Columbia.