HOW THE IMPLEMENTATION OF
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES
CAN AFFECT SCHOOL CULTURE

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

For nearly two decades, academia has touted the benefits of the Professional Learning Community (PLC) construct, and it is not difficult to see why. At the very core of PLC exists the most noble and logical of concepts: working together to make sure students learn. How then, could any educator look at the model with disdain? Having worked in a district that adopted the PLC construct, I can say that, while I don’t know exactly why, many do just that. The reasons are currently unknown. I was not employed in the district when that decision was made, nor did I go through the transition of adopting PLC with them. I do know these truths, however: They adopted the model in its heyday, training (both by literature and by facilitator) was plentiful, and they have seen increased student performance in multiple areas. Add to that the recent honor of being named both a PLC Exemplary School and a PLC Exemplary District, and one would think they did everything just right. The question, then, is why do so many educators who were involved in the transition find their memories of that period so unpleasant?

It is my intent to explore this phenomenon by examining the cultural impact created by changing from traditional educational constructs to a Professional Learning Community (PLC). Using a funneled approach, I will present an introductory and somewhat generalized perspective of PLCs as they were intended: their goals, organization, potential benefits, and the like. This general discussion will serve as a base from which a more focused exploration of their impacts can be launched. To that end, I will also examine such things as potential dysfunctions, systemic limitations, and other pitfalls as identified in pertinent literature.
Narrowing even further, I will examine a particular school district (to be known as Riverside County School District) for a more in-depth and personalized account from those who have undergone the transition. I will begin with data reviews used to present cursory information about general demographics and will also examine student performance data from both before and after the transition. The most important piece, however, promises to be the qualitative data collected from those employees, past and present, who served in the district at the time of the transition into PLC. These interviews will be synthesized into an oral history of that time period and will attempt to tell the story in a single narrative that focuses on how the transition—and the years that followed—impacted their school culture and their human experiences.

Problem Statement

Area of Study

The research will focus on the specific cultural changes faced by school employees, the sources from which those changes were born, and how those changes have shaped their organizations. Specifically, I will explore the transition from traditional educational constructs to a PLC construct, paying particular attention to significant decisions made by district, building, and school leaders and what, if any, impact those decisions have had on the individuals involved and/or the district overall. Specific attention will be paid to one particular district comprised of four buildings to be known as Riverside County School District.
The significance of the problem lies in the abstract, but highly feasible notion that recognizing the factors that have shaped the past and present can help one contextualize the current state of affairs, and, quite possibly, make reasonable assumptions about what the future may hold, even if only on a localized level. In other words, the research will be conducted to determine how PLC-related decisions have shaped the school over the years. Up for consideration are the initial decision to become a PLC, adopting the requisite organizational constructs, the cultural impact of appointing teacher-leaders, and the examination of other cultural ripples, both positive and negative. Again, these considerations will be made in an effort to examine the past in order to better understand the present and better prepare for the future.

The location of the study is significant because of the school’s remarkable success (particularly as it pertains to PLC) in recent years. Student performance data is significantly higher than it was before the transition to PLC, and, for that very reason, the district is often examined by other schools in the region as a source of how things could be done in their own buildings. In fact, each of the buildings in the district received a PLC Exemplary School Award, and, at that time, it was the first district in the state to have done so. To hear the transition story from those who lived it, however, reveals that the steps taken were not always on the smoothest roads. By collecting the oral history from those who experienced working in the district first-hand, I hope to provide a more authentic perspective of the culture than simple artifacts can provide alone.

Because this research will be highly qualitative, I concede that the nature of the problem statement and the very direction of the overall research itself may change as a result of the human factor involved. The subjects involved may introduce emergent
themes that I choose to thread together in directions not initially foreseen in the planning stages. Therefore, the problem statement and overall direction of the research offered here are to be considered only starting points for the study.

Definition of Terms

Leadership Committee – A PLC team whose purpose is to examine, shape, and inform instructional practices within the building/district. “…In a PLC the view of leadership is extended to include teachers. In fact, teachers are viewed as holding the key leadership positions in a school” (Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, p. 23).

Professional Learning Community (PLC) – An educational construct focused on student learning and based on heightened collaboration within and between subjects/grades, designed to improve achievement. DuFour (2004) identifies the “big ideas” as follows: ensuring students learn, a culture of collaboration, and a focus on results.

Steering Committee – A PLC team whose purpose is to examine, shape, and inform policy within the building/district.

Paradigm and Assumptions

As for construct, I intend to build a narrative inquiry—a fitting approach as there is a story to be told. Clandinin and Connelly’s work on narrative inquiries offers both support and direction for this choice. “For us, life—as we come to it and as it comes to others—is filled with narrative fragments, enacted in storied moments of time and space, and reflected upon and understood in terms of narrative unities and discontinuities” (p.
17). It is my hope to transform these storied moments into a multi-faceted, flowing narrative that describes the transition as experienced by the study’s participants.

If narrative inquiry is the construct, social constructivism and pragmatism are the architecture—both of which are highly appropriate to the unique situations of this research: the subjective nature of interviewees’ contextual recollection of events, a researcher studying an organization familiar to him, and the mixed artifacts (both qualitative and quantitative) to be used in data collection.

Social Constructivism – This paradigm is appropriate because I will be relying heavily on the interviewees’ views of the situations in question. The focus in such a paradigm, as Creswell (2007) notes, is on the subjective meanings the individuals have associated with their experiences, related largely to the greater context of the situation and the interactions they held with other others. I will focus “on the specific contexts in which people live and work in order to understand the historical and cultural settings of the participants” (Creswell, p. 21). More specifically, I will be studying the events of the past, focusing particularly on factors that led to cultural change, as experienced and perceived by those interviewed.

This constructivist approach will allow me to weave the stories into a narrative tapestry that can reflect the history and culture more vividly than artifacts alone. While the artifacts may serve as support and verification of the field research, the narratives will allow me to understand more insightfully how the interviewees relate/interpret/assign meaning to their counterparts, experiences, and own decisions.

Additionally, social constructivism allows me to shape meaning based on my experiences and background. Because I have extensive familiarity with the targeted
district, it is seems inevitable that certain assumptions will manifest themselves either in choosing participants or in mapping the direction of the research. Employing the social constructivism paradigm will allow me, then, to “make sense of the meanings others have about [his/her] world” (Creswell, 2007, p. 21).

Pragmatism – This paradigm fits the nature of the research because I will employ whatever methods, artifacts, approaches, etc., are necessary to complete the task. That is not to say I will labor aimlessly an effort to “get the job done;” rather, I will not restrict myself by adhering to any one method of research. This is a necessary paradigm because I will be relying on both quantitative and qualitative methods to collect and interpret information. In short, and as Creswell (2007) says, I will focus on the practical implications of the research and will “emphasize the importance of conducting research that best addresses the research problem” (p. 23). To that end, addressing the research problem at hand will require mixed methods and flexibility. Some information will come from the interviews, some will come from artifacts, and some will come from literature. Analyzing and synthesizing the pieces will certainly require a toolbox of varied techniques.

I must concede that because of the human factor of this highly qualitative study, unpredictabilities are likely to occur. Therefore, it is imprudent to fully map the exact course of the research because emergent themes may dictate changes later. Therefore, I offer this commentary on paradigms only as a starting point in structuring the study. It seems certain that a level of flexibility will be required to effectively manage the unknown variables; but, as noted above, this realization simply justifies the choice for working from a pragmatic approach.
Research Purpose

The purpose of the study is to determine the cultural impacts created by a district’s decision to become a PLC school and the transition period that followed. Though an introductory focus will include general information about PLCs—design, benefits, goals, etc.—I will funnel down with a particular focus on Riverside County School District. To this end, I will attempt to contextualize the common themes (both targeted and emergent) from the literature and interviews in an effort to paint a cultural portrait of the interviewees, their respective buildings, and their roles in/reactions to undergoing the PLC makeover.

A secondary purpose, but one that serves the study, the community, and the district simultaneously, is to preserve the oral history of the individuals involved in the study. Mertens (2005) relies on the work of Yow (as cited in Mertens, 2005) when characterizing this type of work as one that “inspires narrators to begin the act of remembering, jogs their memories, and records and presents the narrators’ words through recorded in-depth interviews” (p. 268). Such is the case here. It is my intent to collect and synthesize the participants’ subjective recollection of the events of the past in order to not only answer the research questions, but to preserve this portion of the district’s history as experienced and perceived by the interviewees.

Research Questions

In an effort to guide the study, I will strive to answer the following fundamental questions:

- What factors initially led to the district’s decision to adopt and implement the
PLC Implementation & School Culture

PLC model?

- What impact did the transition have, specifically on the culture of the environments in which the participants worked?
- As either regrets of the past or advice for the future, what do participants now recognize as key components of PLC implementation essential for success?

Conceptual Framework

Burns (as cited in Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005), whose thoughts on leadership have become seminal in this field of study, eloquently states, “I define leadership as leaders inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and the motivation—the wants and the needs, the aspirations and expectations—of both leaders and followers. And the genius of leadership lies in the manner in which leaders see and act on their own and their followers’ values and motivations” (p. 19).

Accepting this definition of leadership, I seek to examine how leadership—from both administrators and those appointed as PLC leaders—handled the difficult task of identifying, prioritizing, and addressing the shared needs and motivation of those asked to make the transition to PLC. Further, I seek to paint a cultural portrait of the process from the perspective of those involved.

To establish perspective, I will present general thoughts from relevant literature designed to indicate what PLCs should be and what they should be able to accomplish. From that launching point, I will discuss the process of becoming a PLC with educators at Riverside County School District. I will explore their first-hand experiences by means of personal interviews that focus on a variety of discussion points chosen from the
literature. Such influences are likely to include the value of leadership in a time of
transition, cultural impacts to the district, and seeing the process through.

Both the review of literature and the qualitative interviews will explore the
transition process from multiple angles in an effort to contextualize schools’ (and more
narrowly focused, a particular school’s) evolution, decision-making processes, triumphs
and woes. As Brodinsky (1999) notes, “Against the backdrop of day-to-day reality are the
forces that shake the present and shape the future” (p. 4). Examining these forces using
multiple approaches shall be the focus of this study.

Design and Methods

The overall design of the research could best be described as a qualitative
narrative study or collective oral history. I will attempt to use qualitative research
methods to contextualize the quantitative data collected through historical artifacts
including performance and growth data, district profiles, and the like. A thorough review
of the aforementioned information, as well as an extensive literature review on related
areas, will accompany interviews with Riverside County School District leaders. The
intent is to lend context to the findings from the literature review and review of artifacts.

The heartiest portion of the research is likely to be derived from the interviews. In
terms of sampling, I will conduct interviews based on availability of those who can best
serve the study as determined by their level of involvement in the transition process:
teachers, administrators, trainers, etc. Interview questions will include standardized
questions that relate directly to the themes identified by the literature and artifact reviews.
However, it is likely that new themes will emerge throughout the interview process. It is
my hope that these emergent themes can be used to further guide the research and the related interviews.

I will conduct the interviews (likely 8-12 in number) individually and in accordance with practices set forth by the research institution’s accepted standards. Once completed, I will transcribe interviews and code for emergent themes that will make for meaningful discussion when juxtaposed against the overall themes exposed through the literature and artifact reviews. For all participants, confidentiality will be maintained (as established by their participation consent forms) and measures to insure accuracy (audio recordings, transcript approvals, etc.) will be in place.

It is possible that a sort of “reflexive literature review” may be necessary. That is to say, because of the highly qualitative nature of the study, it is impossible to predict what emergent themes may arise from the interviews. Therefore, as these themes emerge and are threaded together, I will likely choose to do a second review of literature to contextualize the interviewees’ comments, experiences, and opinions.

Significance of the Research for Leadership Practice

While significant research exists on the broad and usually positive impact PLCs can have in a district, this study will attempt to give a more focused, localized examination of the topic, focusing on culture, in particular. Doing so will serve multiple purposes. First, it will give current school leaders a greater theoretical understanding of the effect PLC-related decision-making can have. Specifically, it will allow them to see the power such things have carried in the past and the direct influence they have had on the district in terms of setting or changing policies, procedures, practices, and most
importantly, culture. Having a firm grasp on how such things transpired in the past may allow them to act more proficiently in the present, and, perhaps, even in the future.

Second, the study may lend context to significant decisions of the past that general stakeholders may find useful in understanding the changes their district has experienced. Often, stakeholders are privy to only the most public aspects of changes in their district, and not the inner-workings or mitigating factors that have led to those changes. I will attempt to expose the circumstances around significant decisions so that those who were touched by those changes can better understand why things changed the way they did. In other words, in addition to their understanding of what changed, they may better understand why and how things changed.

Finally, the study’s significance lies in its promise to preserve the oral history of current and past school leaders. This is a venture heretofore unattempted in my district. In addition to the practical implications discussed above, I believe the study will both add to and preserve the cultural richness of the district. Such a study could be a valuable first step in compiling an overall history of the district.

Summary

The research study proposed here will use primarily qualitative methods to describe how PLC-related decisions, and the overall transition, affected the district. While much of the information collected will come from the illustrative qualitative data collected from interviews with current and past school leaders, quantitative data will be interlaced in the study to add context to the commentary. This blended approach will be
employed in the spirit of the paradigm of pragmatism while focusing more naturally on
the social constructivist nature of the narratives provided.

In the end, I hope to add to the current body of literature by adding a more
localized and recent examination of the transition process. Further, I will attempt to
educate school leaders on the power of PLC-related decisions, and in particular, their
effect on culture. Finally, I will also seek to preserve the oral history of the district being
studied. The multi-faceted approach to conducting the study will, hopefully, allow for a
broad utilitarianism in that, because it came from a multitude of sources and methods, it
may also be applied to a multitude of situations for multiple purposes.
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Overview

Literature from basic readings associated with my course of study will be examined and discussed to serve as the underpinnings for the basic structure of the research. Of particular interest are works related to obtaining a basic understanding of PLCs (guiding principles, construction, goals, etc.) and derivative works that examine potential pitfalls related to PLCs. Galvan’s (2009) work on writing literature reviews will guide the construction of this section, specifically in analysis and synthesis of the literature, composing the review, and preparing a reference list.

PLCs by Design

While much has been written over the last two decades regarding PLC’s, clearly, the multiple works of DuFour stand out as the seminal foundation for all things related to the topic. DuFour and Eaker’s (1998) flagship piece, Professional Learning Communities at Work, is of particular interest as this seems to serve as the launching point from which others (and DuFour, himself) branch into closer examinations of what PLCs should be and the ingredients required to make them work as designed. Some of his later work, however, more eloquently captures the spirit of PLCs, particularly in terms of identifying the most rudimentary components.

For a basic definition of the construct, however, the following offering from Lieberman & Miller (2011) is presented for consideration based on its eloquence and
brevity: “Learning communities are best defined as ongoing groups who meet regularly for the purposes of increasing their own learning and that of their students” (p. 16).

While exceptionally basic, the definition does indeed capture the spirit of PLCs as envisioned by DuFour: “Educators create an environment that fosters mutual cooperation, emotional support, and personal growth as they work together to achieve what they cannot accomplish alone” (DuFour & Eaker, p. xii). Lofty and admirable, to be sure, but the ingredients that comprise that spirit are somewhat abstract and, therefore, elusive in realization.

What, then, makes the mechanism tick? “When a school or district functions as a PLC, educators within the organization embrace high levels of learning for all students as both the reason the organization exists and the fundamental responsibility of those who work within it” (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, as cited in Weber, 2011). Both whether and how that is achieved hinges upon the district’s adherence to the three big ideas that Dufour (2004) offers as the best representation of core PLC principles:

1) Ensuring that students learn- a process to be determined by answering three critical questions: What do we want each student to learn? How will we know when each student has learned it? How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning?

2) A culture of collaboration – “They encourage and support members to examine their practice, to try out new ideas, and to reflect together on what works and why; and they provide opportunities for the collective construction and sharing of new knowledge” (Lieberman & miller, 2011, p.16).
3) A focus on results – including, but not limited, to clarifying essential outcomes, developing common assessments, and formulating improvement strategies based on results (DuFour & Dufour, 2003).

It seems reasonable to accept that the first big idea, ensuring that students learn, is not a novel concept—it is the reason that schools exist. Likewise, focusing on results is nothing new—schools have been under performance mandates (whether formalized or not) for decades. The second big idea, a culture of collaboration, however, is somewhat unique. Not only should it be established based on its own merit, but, in order to construct a true PLC, its spirit should also permeate the other two. That is to say collaboration is the kitchen in which the other ingredients come together. Lieberman & Miller (2011) speak to this when recalling the progress made by teachers who recognized this importance and embraced the spirit of collegiality in their particular PLC:

“…members learned how to deal with differences, eventually recognizing that conflict can be dealt with openly and should be expected, and that all could grow from a connection to one another by working at various approaches to student learning” (p. 17).

With such a strong focus on collaboration, the role of administrators takes on a meaning and purpose significantly different from how it has been viewed over the last century. Unlike the “building manager” model of old, the key to successfully guiding PLCs is mastering a balancing act between staying involved and allowing others to lead. Wilhelm (2010), for example, notes that in schools with successful PLCs, leaders “modeled involvement, helped troubleshoot problems, and by their very presence supported each team leader in the sometimes daunting task of fulfilling [an] important new role” (p. 34). This level of involvement helps to support a spirit of collegiality and
the perception that all participants, regardless of title, are on the same team and playing the same game.

These sentiments can be further exemplified in the leader’s willingness to share in specific and meaningful leadership tasks. In fact, Hall (2006) sees this trait as one of the defining characteristics of PLCs. “Powerful professional learning communities are inevitably characterized by widely-dispersed leadership…people who trust each other and work toward a common goal” (p.46). Marzano, Waters, & McNulty (2005) professed the same, going as far to say that the most effective leadership is characterized by a team, not an individual. This shared-leadership can take many forms, but in PLCs, is most often manifest in the formation of teacher-populated leadership teams and steering committees.

Based on the qualities extracted from pertinent literature, Lieberman & Miller’s definition of “ongoing groups who meet regularly for the purposes of increasing their own learning and that of their students,” can be validated.

The practice, however, can differ from the founding theories. DuFour, himself, articulated this when revisiting the topic some ten years after his seminal piece. Having established and disseminated the guiding principles, DuFour and partners Robert Eaker and Rebecca DuFour realized there is much more to PLCs than theory and checklists. In Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work (2008), they offer new insights into the inner workings of PLCs, having seen them in practice over the previous decade. Most notably, they indicate the importance of shaping the culture overall, recognition of the micro-political framework through which unwritten rules are established, and providing relevant resources (professional development, time, data, etc.),
These same sentiments are often discussed by other scholars, but usually as potential pitfalls rather than “further insights.” In fact, there is a bounty of literature to be read on what can go wrong with PLCs almost as rich as the literature on the PLC construct itself.

**Potential PLC Pitfalls**

Foremost among potential pitfalls is a school’s failure to recognize the importance of shaping the culture to promote true collaboration. As revealed in the literature, schools too often place bureaucracy over culture. In doing so, they create (even if unintended) a “checklist culture” in which things are done simply because they are expected, leaving participants going through the motions rather than investing time and effort in meaningful collaboration. DuFour (1998) puts it plainly: “A school does not become a professional learning community simply by advancing through the steps on a checklist, but rather by touching the wellspring of emotions that lie within the people of that school. A professional learning community makes a conscious effort to bring those emotions to the surface and to express explicitly what often is left unsaid” (p. 57).

Talbert (2010) explores this idea further and, in fact, attributes the failure of most PLCs to this unfortunate phenomenon. He expresses that many teachers asked to ramp up their PLCs comply with the mandates as a matter of course rather than investing themselves as mentioned above. The weakness, according to Talbert, is not entirely within the teachers, however, noting, “…school administrators and leaders of change either fail to understand the deep principles that anchor PLC work or try to create them in ways that alienate teachers” (p. 555). The alienation manifests itself in one of three
different forms: compliance, resistance, and anxiety—not only negative responses, but responses counterproductive to the spirit of PLCs.

Lieberman & Miller (2011) discuss similar findings in regards to bureaucratic mandates, going so far as to purport that schools employ models that favor compliance rather than reflection and collaboration. Allen (2013) discusses a similar, yet more specific stance, asking “Do teachers determine the focus for their collective work or is their collaboration ‘contrived’ to advance administrative or system-imposed goals” (p. 192)? The notion of contrived collaboration seems especially damning: It allows both administrators and teachers to engage in what they call collaboration, when, in reality, they may have only completed tasks at a nominal level. Having earned the right to truthfully say, “Yes, we’ve collaborated,” another checkbox has been completed, but to what benefit?

DuFour & DuFour (2003) recognize this pitfall, and offer that administrators who focus on results rather than activities are more likely to find success than those that adhere to a traditional bureaucratic approach and who create checklist cultures in their schools. This is achieved, according the DuFours, by administrators who present fewer competing demands. “They limit district initiatives and demand the coordination of all central-office services to support those limited initiatives” (p. 19). This seems a reasonable treatment for macropolitical management: top-down support rather than top-down bureaucracy. There exists, however, a plethora of finer entanglements that can sink PLCs as well. These micropolitical considerations must also be examined; for while they exist on a lower layer of the organizational strata, they are nonetheless tangible and can hinder the PLC process just as effectively as the macropolitics.
Barth (2006) sets the tone for this examination boldly. He purports that the nature of relationships among the adults in a school plays the biggest role in the quality of the school and, in turn, student achievement. He further finds that, too often, educators consider these issues incurable because they are often left undiscovered. “Thus paralyzed, we can be certain that next September, adult relationships in the school will remain unchanged. School improvement is impossible when we give nondiscussables such extraordinary power over us” (p. 8). If these conversations are so important to the process, why are they so often neglected?

Servage (2008) offers insight, pointing out how highly personal these conversations can be—even among colleagues. Human nature serves as a great obstacle when discussions of individual weaknesses and insecurities, professional choices, fear of change, and quests for power become personal, even threatening. Participants, then, undermine consensus and collective action to protect themselves. The personal threat can also cause individuals, according to Servage, to withdraw true investment from the process, leaving the business of PLCs a dispassionate, checklist-type undertaking. As noted above, “When attention is focused on technical work alone, we fail to address the underlying social and emotional dimensions of learning and working in groups” (p. 72).

“Asking human beings to alter their theory-in-use is asking them to question the foundation of their sense of competence and self-confidence” (Argyris, as cited in Servage, 2008). It is no wonder, then, that the discussions mentioned above can feel threatening. For many, there is no sense of safety when they expose their true thoughts/feelings about best practices and those practices in current use. In response, a growing number of schools are using discussion protocols which specify steps for the
discussion as well as norms for teacher participation. Allen (2013) notes that these protocols “seek to create a climate of trust and safety within which participants expose their instructional practices to analysis and feedback” (p. 194). While this may be a noble gesture, he adds that the contrived safety just leads to shallow or unfocused conversations.

True safety, it would seem, takes the reader back to the key principle in implementing PLCs: understanding the culture. Lieberman & Miller (2011) note that there is no magic wand for instantly developing an authentic PLC. “It takes time and effort to unpack conversations and to get at real problems of practice. The capacity to engage in honest talk is of critical importance and develops gradually as trust and colleagueship take root” (p. 20). They further argue that these qualities transcend from instructor to instruction, creating new ways of thinking about teaching and learning, improving practice, and, ultimately, increasing student achievement.

Cultural and political concerns aside, whether and how schools provide resources are also significant considerations and can lead to PLC pitfalls. Physical and financial resources are certainly necessary in any educational setting. However, intangible resources are just as vital, yet are often overlooked. Arguably, the most precious of these is the most simple, and ironically, the most elusive: time. When attention is demanded from students, parents, fellow teachers, administrators, and local/state/national mandates, it is not hard for one to imagine that there simply isn’t enough time to satisfy everyone’s needs. What happens, according to Talbert (2010), is that teachers invest an unbalanced portion of their time in response to the external pressures. Today, this most frequently manifests itself as improving student performance on standardized tests. Teachers’ before
and after-school time is spent in tutoring and test preparation rather than in collaboration. However, even when time is built into the day, collaboration tends to lean more towards the short term improvement of student test scores rather than examining long-term systemic changes.

Perhaps this shortage of foresight is simply due to changing times. After all, the notion of learning communities is relatively new. Up until the last few decades, teachers functioned as solitary islands rather than teams. Allen (2013) notes that this change should be (yet, too often is not) reflected in the type of professional development offered to teachers. Today’s PLC teachers need enrichment opportunities which indicate a transition from “that individual teacher…often removed from the school itself, such as training workshops, courses, and institutes, to those that emphasize teachers learning with colleagues and within the ongoing work of their school” (p. 193). Administrators who fail to recognize this shift are likely to also fail in the larger goal of establishing the proper culture for collaboration as discussed above.

Another great resource often overlooked is student information. A misnomer perhaps, student information refers, according to DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker (2008), to the teacher’s knowledge of his/her student’s performance and how the teachers’ strengths and weaknesses play into that. Such awareness requires three essential components: student performance data, honest and specific teacher evaluations, and recognition of current best practices. Traditional evaluations generally examine the teacher as a solitary entity, failing to recognize the student performance and best practices pieces of the puzzle. “Improving teacher practice requires informed and precise conversation about effective techniques, and the best way to provide teachers with the tools for that
conversation is to ensure each receives frequent and timely information” (p. 27). More specifically, the authors suggest that a close examination of today’s in-house reality be compared against known best practices. Only when the starting and endpoints have been defined can improvement begin.

**Change Theory**

One final pitfall mentioned by DuFour (2004) himself is one inextricably embedded in the nature of education: change. So inevitable is change that many in education accept it as a given headache rather than a mark of progress. The PLC construct has fallen victim to precisely that sort of thinking. Some see it as nothing more than a passing fad and, therefore, choose to reserve their professional investments. “In this all-too-familiar cycle, initial enthusiasm gives way to confusion about the fundamental concepts driving the initiative followed by inevitable implementation problems, the conclusion that the reform has failed…and the launch of a new search for the next promising initiative” (DuFour, 2004, p. 6). Reeves (2009) appropriately names this phenomenon “initiative fatigue,” a familiar and prevalent manifestation of change aversion

Zimmerman (2006) and Tagg (2012) further explore change aversion by identifying multiple mental models which can serve as hurdles to change. Of particular interest here is Tagg’s discussion of a trifurcated phenomenon which seems especially prevalent in schools. The first tine of this devilish fork is known as loss aversion, a simple emotion which is born of people’s fear of losing what is theirs. The second tine is justification for keeping what they have, the endowment effect, in which stakeholders
feel possessive of their thoughts, ideas, procedures, etc. simply because they are theirs. “My things gain value just by virtue of being mine” (p. 10). The two tines meet in the middle and create a bias for the status quo. Disabling this fork, according to Tagg, requires moving the endowment to the future. In other words, stakeholders are asked to consider why a given outcome, one born of change, will be an important possession in the future.

Fullan (2006), however, offers another remedy: exposure. He proposes that change can be more easily accepted when people have multiple and meaningful opportunities to examine, argue, accept, practice, fail and succeed. In other words, he believes people can find importance inherent in an idea once they have a chance to get to know it. In that sense, it seems Fullan’s approach is more personal than Tagg’s. Tagg’s deferred endowment asks, “How does my leader think this will be important someday?” Whereas, Fullan’s exposure theory asks, “Why is this important to me?” Textually, it may come across as a small difference, but it is a difference that speaks to the importance of ownership and culture during a time of change.

The power of cultural considerations such as this should not be underestimated when attempting to overcome change aversion. In fact, culture is one of the key discussion points in the current body of literature discussing change theory. Zimmerman (2006), for example speaks of the importance of trust, collaboration, and shared decision making. The same sentiments are echoed by Fullan, Cuttress, & Kilcher (2005) who add knowledge sharing and collective identity to the key ingredients for positive change. “Developing a climate where people learn from each other within and across units, and
being preoccupied with turning good knowledge into action is essential” (p. 57). Because this process is an inherently social one, developing the proper culture is crucial.

All of these responsibilities fall naturally on the leader…or more importantly, leaders. What, then, in the literature is addressed specifically to them? Aside from generic organizational advice, one mandate emerges: Understand the nature of change. Understand, as Reeves (2009) would suggest, the anxiety associated with change. Understand Tagg (2012) and Zimmerman’s (2006) mental models that convert that anxiety into aversion to change. Understand that the right culture can promote positive change, as suggested by Fullan (2006). “The presence of change knowledge does not guarantee success, but its absence ensures failure” (Fullan, M., Cuttress, C., & Kilcher, A., p. 54).
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Adopting a PLC construct requires a great deal of change. Today’s public school system is one born from generations of change. However, the failure of administrators, and indeed, all stakeholders, to consider the cultural impact of changes to the system is a problem of practice. School leaders often fail to look at the past when attempting to understand the present and plan for the future. Why do school leaders too often miss the mark in this practice? Much of the failure can be attributed to a simple lack of access to first-hand accounts of how and why changes have occurred and what cultural effects they have had on learning institutions.

The research study proposed here has attempted to address this issue with a focus on the changes surrounding a particular district’s decision to become a PLC. While many of the findings are sure to be relevant in only a local context, it seems reasonable that others may also have some universal application.

This overview of the design and methods chosen for this research will discuss the aforementioned issues further and will also address how the study has attempted to satisfy other conventional expectations of sound research. Specifically, I will begin with a discussion of the research design and methodology, outlining specific choices that were made and why. Secondly, a discussion of the data collection and analysis will follow. Here, I will address such issues as sampling, collection tools, analysis techniques, and the like. Finally, this overview will explore quality issues such as how I have chosen to define my role in the research in an effort to minimize bias, how I found trustworthiness in the qualitative data collection, and other significant considerations.
Before presenting the detailed commentary of these components, I offer the following summary of the structure of the study:

Using a funneled approach, I have presented an introductory and somewhat generalized perspective of PLCs as they were intended: their goals, organization, potential benefits, and the like. This general discussion has served as a base from which a more focused exploration of their impacts was launched. To that end, I have also examined such things as potential dysfunctions, systemic limitations, and other pitfalls as identified in pertinent literature.

Narrowing even further, I have examined a particular school district (referred to as Riverside County School District) for a more in-depth and personalized account from those who have undergone the transition. I began with data reviews used to present cursory information about general demographics and also examined student performance data from both before and after the transition. The most important piece, however, turned out to be the qualitative data collected from those employees, past and present, who served in the district at the time of the transition into PLC. These interviews have been synthesized into an oral history of that time in order to tell the story in a single narrative that focuses on how the transition—and the years that followed—impacted their school culture and their human experiences.

In the end, I hope to add to the current body of literature by adding a more localized and recent examination of the transition process. Further, I will attempt to educate school leaders on the power of PLC-related decisions, and in particular, their effect on culture. Finally, I will also seek to preserve the oral history of the district being studied. The multi-faceted approach to conducting the study will, hopefully, allow for a
broad utilitarianism in that, because it came from a multitude of sources and methods, it may also be applied to a multitude of situations for multiple purposes.

An ulterior purpose, but one that serves the study, the community, and the district simultaneously, is to preserve the oral history of the individuals involved in the study. Mertens (2005) relies on the work of Yow (as cited in Mertens, 2005) when characterizing this type of work as one that “inspires narrators to begin the act of remembering, jogs their memories, and records and presents the narrators’ words through recorded in-depth interviews” (p. 268). Such is the case here. It has been my intent to collect and synthesize the participants’ subjective recollection of the events of the past in an order to not only answer the research questions, but to preserve the history of the district and paint a cultural portrait of the interviewees and the school district itself.

The following overview of my design and methods will not only illustrate what choices were made, but will also justify those choices with pragmatic explanations and the support of relevant literature on acceptable research strategies.

**Research Questions**

In an effort to guide the study, I have attempted to answer the following fundamental questions:

- What factors initially led to the district’s decision to adopt and implement the PLC model?
- What impact did the transition have, specifically on the culture of the environments in which the participants worked?
As either regrets of the past or advice for the future, what do participants now recognize as key components of PLC implementation essential for success?

Research Design and Methods

Design and Methods

The overall design of the research could best be described as a qualitative narrative study or collective oral history. I have attempted to use qualitative study methods to contextualize the quantitative data collected through historical artifacts including performance and growth data, district profiles, and the like. A thorough review of the aforementioned information, as well as an extensive literature review on related areas, have complemented the interviews with Riverside County School District leaders. The intent is to lend context to the findings from the literature review and review of artifacts.

The heartiest portion of the research has proven to be the interviews. In terms of sampling, I have conducted interviews based on availability of those who can best serve the study as determined by their level of involvement in the transition process: teachers, administrators, trainers, etc. Interview questions have included standardized questions that relate directly to the themes identified by the literature and artifact reviews. However, I found that new themes emerged throughout the interview process. I found these emergent themes useful in further guiding the research and the related interviews.

I have conducted the interviews individually (with one exception) and in accordance with practices set forth by the research institution’s accepted standards. Once
completed, I transcribed the interviews and coded the transcripts for emergent themes which made for meaningful discussion when juxtaposed against the overall themes exposed through the literature and artifact reviews. For all participants, confidentiality has been maintained (as established by their participation consent forms) and measures to insure accuracy (audio recordings, transcript approvals, etc.) have been in place.

It became quickly obvious that a sort of “reflexive literature review” was necessary. That is to say, because of the highly qualitative nature of the study, it has been impossible to predict what emergent themes would arise from the interviews. Therefore, as these themes emerged and were threaded together, I chose to do a second review of literature to contextualize the interviewees’ comments, experiences, and opinions.

The process has proven to be rather cyclical, and even symbiotic. Therefore, the design is one born of pragmatism. This has been a necessary paradigm because I have relied on both quantitative and qualitative methods to collect and interpret information. Likewise, multiple methods and sources were used in an effort to adequately address the issue at hand. In short, and as Creswell (2007) says, I focused on the practical implications of the research and will “emphasize the importance of conducting research that best addresses the research problem” (p. 23).

Stripped of theory, paradigms, and scientific research labels, and further reduced to its most basic components, the process was simply this:

1. Conduct a literature review in search of emergent themes.
2. Take those themes to the participants for discussion/reflection.
3. Further explore emergent themes that are born from the interviews.
4. Synthesize the interviews and literature in a way that complements and
contextualizes both, creating a historical narrative (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).

Participants

The individuals chosen to participate in the study fit several basic criteria deemed important when considering the overall purpose of the study. Specifically, they were individuals who were directly involved in the transition process. These individuals were administrators, teachers, department chairs, or others who have held varying leadership positions. These participants have certainly been able to “purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell, 2007, p. 125).

In addition to these basic criteria, I attempted to seek out those individuals for whom recollection and storytelling is second nature. While it wasn’t always possible to determine the presence of this quality beforehand, the participants, themselves, proved helpful in making recommendations for additional participants who did possess the above desired traits. This chain sampling, a phrase coined by Creswell (2009), has proven to be an integral part in selecting the candidates who could best provide the thick, rich descriptions desirable in a qualitative study such as this.

Several individuals proved to be especially informative in this study. I discussed the broad idea of my study with them in an effort to determine their potential in contributing to the overall purpose and nature of the study. Specifically, I extensively considered their ability to answer the research questions in a way that will lend to synthesis of a qualitative narrative history.
Other candidates with similar qualities were readily available and willing to participate. I have chosen to include their voices as well. Because of the human factor involved in this highly qualitative study, though, I must concede that the course of the study changed in direction on more than one occasion. Emergent themes arose that warranted discussion, and additional participants not initially considered were included in the study. In both cases, I had to consider directions outside the initial mapping of the research and chose to explore new areas as they presented themselves.

Data Collection

Data Collection Procedures & Interview Protocol

In an effort to bolster my knowledge of sound interviewing practices, I reviewed the works of several noted qualitative research experts, paying particular attention to interviewing protocols appropriate for this sort of study.

Of particular interest was the work of Kvale (as cited in Roulston, 2010), who offers six criteria by which quality can be determined in qualitative interviews:

• The extent of spontaneous, rich, specific, and relevant answers from the interviewee.

• The shorter the interviewer’s questions and the longer the subjects’ answers, the better.

• The degree to which the interviewer follows up and clarifies the meanings of the relevant aspects of the answers.

• The ideal interview is to a large extent interpreted throughout the interview.
• The interviewer attempts to verify his or her interpretations of the subjects’ answers in the course of the interview.

• The interview is ‘self-communicating’ – it is a story contained in itself that hardly requires much extra descriptions and explanations.

In addition to reminding me of Kvale’s analysis of quality in interviews, Roulston’s work also served as a series of lenses through which I could consider the importance of interviewing. In particular, I found great use in her constructivist approach to interviewing. In that discussion, Roulston reminded me that interviewing, and the analysis that followed, should be handled as “sensemaking work through which participants engage in explaining, attributing, justifying, describing, and otherwise finding possible sense or orderliness in the various events, people, places, and courses of action they talk about” (Baker, as cited in Roulston, 2010).

To that end, I established the following guidelines which were implemented in the interviewing process in an effort to normalize my efforts across interviews:

1. Develop interview questions that seek to answer the overall research questions.
2. Pilot the questions to hone their clarity and effectiveness in eliciting stories.
3. Select participants whose voices can add to the overall story.
4. Discuss consent as a set of rules, not just a form.
5. Ask all questions of all interviewees.
6. Explore unforeseen emergent themes which arise during interviews.
7. Allow participants to refer me to others not initially identified.
8. Cease adding interviewees once the story base has been saturated.
9. Transcribe and code all interviews.

While I chose to conduct an initial review of literature to highlight major themes prevalent in PLC-related literature, I also reviewed district-related artifacts to offer cursory data of the school district as well. However, the data collection required to ruly answer the research questions proved to be the qualitative interviews with selected participants. The interview questions asked individuals to recollect their experiences during the transition process. To that end, I developed a set of questions (see Appendix B) that seek to elicit this information while remaining true to the purpose of the study and the research questions. This set of questions was first piloted in an effort to refine their focus, clarity, and direction before implementation in the actual data collection process.

I conducted interviews individually (with one exception) and in locations mutually convenient for the participant and me, free from distractions and allowing for freedom in the conversation. Interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed for coding purposes. Most of the interviews lasted 30-40 minutes, but the human factor involved made predicting a more specific window of time difficult. Regardless, the interview was considered complete when the scripted questions were exhausted and any emergent themes had been extemporaneously explored as well.

With both the participants I chose and those who were chain-sampled, I attempted to illustrate particular information related to the targeted and emergent threads rather than simply pooling thoughts and opinions in order to illustrate generalities. That is to say, I have attempted to make in-depth inquiries about the discussion topics in an effort to elicit comprehensive recollective responses which I then used to fashion the research further. This philosophy is born from the work of Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw (1995) who note that
“thematic narratives use field-notes not as illustrations and examples of points that have already been made, but as building blocks for constructing and telling the story…” (p. 171). To this end, I have attempted to fashion the best “building blocks” possible by asking detailed questions, coaxing detailed answers, and pursuing new themes that emerged from the discussions.

*Human Subjects Protection and Other Ethical Considerations*

I have attempted to follow accepted protocols for human subjects’ protection in accordance with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the Office of Human Subject Research Protection (OHSRP). Specifically, I have informed the interviewees of the nature of the study, the research questions, and their rights as participants. Such disclosure and the individuals’ acceptance of the related terms and conditions have been documented by means of a university-approved informed consent form (see Appendix A). The form addressed the issues discussed above as well as means for withdrawing from the study, my contact information, and an offer of disclosure of the final research project in its entirety.

Secondary measures to protect the rights of the participants have included providing access to their individual recorded interviews and the transcripts derived from those conversations. Individuals have also been granted follow-up interviews when requested which allowed them to clarify or qualify any of their previous comments. Additionally, I have honored requests to redact statements as requested by the participants as well as requests to remain anonymous.
Ultimately, the measures taken to protect the rights of the interviewees have been intended to satisfy the standard expectations for sound and responsible research. More importantly, though, I looked to these tools as means by which the participants could be made more comfortable, and, in turn, more freely giving of genuine responses. That is to say, because the interviewees knew that their rights, thoughts, identities would be safeguarded in reasonable ways that they can understand and appreciate, they were more willing to participate without applying filters to their comments and memories.

Literature Related to Framework and Design

For guidance in framework and design, I have relied primarily on Mertens (2005), particularly on the use of mixed methods. This seemed especially relevant to my intended path in terms of informing and guiding in the use of pragmatic sequential mixed-methods and general data collection. Further guidance was sought from Creswell’s (2007) work in establishing a sound qualitative research design with a special focus on the role of the researcher and writing the narrative.

To further bolster my understanding and execution of sound narrative inquiry, I have consulted the works of Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw (1995) and Clandinin & Connelly (2000), particularly as they apply to converting interviews into accurate yet interesting scenes on the page. The former offered sound suggestions on collecting field notes—guidance which will be of particular use in this study, while the latter discussed more about composing with the correct blend of accurate context and literary flavor.
Data Analysis

Analysis of the data relied primarily on a hybrid coding process. Initially, I relied on the open coding strategies offered by Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw (1995). Specifically, I conducted a line-by-line analysis of the transcript, categorizing statements into major themes or issues. This open coding proved to generate a sizable list of topics, some of which will not be found in common among different individuals’ interviews. Therefore, the process was followed by a focused coding in which I focused efforts on a list of topics or categories pre-determined by the earlier open coding. This second funneling of coding efforts yielded the major themes and topics which became the guiding framework for the narrative.

Additionally, I borrowed from Creswell’s (2007) model for coding a narrative study. Elements such as chronology, plot, setting, and situation were coded for later threading in the narrative. This process, while logical for this kind of study, also presented challenges. Specifically, as Creswell notes, “The researcher will not know what approach to use until he or she actually starts the data analysis process” (p. 171). This reality, while ambiguous and unstructured on the surface, allowed me great flexibility in mapping the course of the narrative as the themes were weaved together.

In practical terms, both coding techniques were completed manually rather than with the aid of a computer program designed for such tasks. The decision to avoid such technological tools was based on my belief that working with the data personally and extensively would be the best way to understand it as it exists and to determine the ways in which it would be most logically and effectively threaded together into a meaningful narrative.
Addressing the Issue of Quality

*Role of the Researcher*

In this particular case, I have diligently strived to function as a data collector only. That is to say, every effort was made to collect the participants’ thoughts and feelings without either influencing or validating them. While this may sound like a difficult task for a researcher who has a work history as well as personal and professional relationships with those at the organization studied, positionality and bias were only marginal issues in this case because I lacked the historical perspective to offer any opinions or commentary on the topics discussed. Additionally, I do not serve as the administrator in charge of any of the interviewed individuals.

Still, I chose to heed the advice of Kvale (2006), who touts the recognition of power dynamics by the social construction of knowledge in interviews is necessary to ascertain objectivity and ethicality of interview research (p. 480). In other words, I tried to remember that the exchange of information could influence the dynamics of our professional relationship/communication and made diligent efforts to mitigate those by reminding participants that I was only a recorder at the time of the interview.

In a further effort to protect against influencing the participants, I deliberately refrained from offering commentary that lay outside of their given statements. In other words, I would recall or repeat statements, rephrase questions or statements for clarity, and asked qualifying questions to add further understanding. I did not, however, venture beyond operating outside of these commonly accepted interview techniques.
Once data collection was complete, however, my role changed to that of storyteller. I considered it to be my responsibility to use the emergent threads identified from the coding to weave together a thick, rich, and descriptive narrative that served the purpose of the study overall, and more specifically, the research questions. In that role, I have strived to maintain the individual flavor of the participants’ responses while blending them into narrative threads that worked together to provide perspective on the topics that emerge.

_Trustworthiness_

Issues of trustworthiness (specifically confirmability), though seldom problematic, were largely addressed by triangulation, a process by which the strength of data is determined by multiple methods and data sources (Mertens, 2005, and Creswell, 2007). This method fit well with the paradigm of pragmatism in that it allowed me to use a variety of methods in order to achieve the task. Specifically, I made an effort to compare participants’ statements against each other and against the historical data that exists on the given topics in order to determine their strength and validity.

On a more fundamental level, I deliberately chose to primarily work with participants with whom I was familiar enough to make a reasonable judgment about their personal trustworthiness. While certainly not an absolute remedy against spoiled credibility and dependability, it seemed to serve as a reasonable starting point. Using individuals whose trustworthiness is reasonably established may not always be an option, particularly with the chain-sampling process, but in this case, it did prove to lighten the burden of the triangulation process. Regardless of these judgment calls, the highly
The qualitative nature of the study opens the door for human nature. Bearing that in mind, I chose to triangulate data from all participants before choosing whether or not to include their statements in the final narrative.

Transferability, though largely left up to the reader, has been addressed by providing detailed descriptions of the interviewees as well as the specific events discussed in the interviews. Not only has this helped to provide an engaging narrative, it should also enable readers, as Creswell (2007) contends, “to transfer information to other settings and to determine whether the findings can be transferred because of shared characteristics” (p. 209). That is, if readers can fully understand the circumstances and individuals involved in particular events, they can more accurately determine if similar situations could arise in other settings; hence the term “transferability.”

Anticipated Study Limitations

The greatest limitations of the study lay in the specific choice of using only a single location with limited individuals. The study is not likely to be wholly transferable as it deals with a specific group of individuals in a certain setting over a certain period of time. It does seem reasonable, however, to expect that some of the lessons learned will be universal, but contextually speaking, the overall focus is rather specific. It is my intent, then, that the study will serve the chosen community primarily, but will also include “take-aways” applicable to other educational settings.

Another limitation that cannot be avoided is that the pool of participants available to provide the qualitative data needed for the final narrative is somewhat limited. Natural attrition of the potential pool has occurred through career changes, retirements,
geographical relocations, death, and other extenuating circumstances. Those that remain and were asked to participate are suitable candidates, but a more comprehensive narrative could be constructed if I had access to more individuals who could offer their perspectives on the transition process. Because of these facts, I have made an effort to include as many contributing participants as possible, but a comprehensive historical narrative is something of an impossibility.

Summary

The research study proposed here has used primarily qualitative methods to describe how the decision to become a PLC district and the transition that followed affected the district, particularly in terms of culture. While much of the information collected has come from the illustrative qualitative data collected from interviews with current and past school leaders, quantitative data has also been interlaced in the study to add context to the commentary. This blended approach was employed in the spirit of pragmatism while focusing more naturally on the social constructivist nature of the narratives provided.

In the end, I hope to add to the current body of literature by adding a more localized and recent examination of the transition process. Further, I hope attempt to educate school leaders on the power of PLC-related decisions, and in particular, their effect on culture. Finally, I hope to preserve the oral history of the district being studied. The multi-faceted approach to conducting the study will, hopefully, allow for a broad utilitarianism in that, because it came from a multitude of sources and methods, it may also be applied to a multitude of situations for multiple purposes.
CHAPTER FOUR: PARTICIPANTS’ NARRATIVE

Inception

When Mrs. Burnett arrived at RCSD over a decade ago, she found herself initially impressed with the goings-on of its four schools: Riverside County Elementary (RCEL), High Grove Elementary (HGEL), Riverside County Middle School (RCMS), and Riverside County High School (RCHS). RCSD, at that time, was a primarily rural county district with over 1,500 students. An abundance of natural resources in the area allowed the district to benefit from incoming tax dollars, which in turn, afforded the district the financial advantage of offering quality teachers at highly competitive pay despite its rural setting.

On the job as a district-level administrator, she immediately busied herself with a thorough examination of student performance, focusing specifically on standardized test scores. It was then that she stopped to say, “Wait a second. What’s going on?”

*When I got to [RCSD], in my review of test scores, what I could see very clearly was that our math scores were phenomenal and our English scores were in the toilet all across the board. I mean, that’s from bottom to top. Strangely enough, in the elementary, we did better in math than we did in reading. I mean, nobody did that… I’d come from another district where our scores were great. Reading, at the elementary level, was through the roof...always. Language arts at the middle school and high school were always top-notch, and I was devastated that this was the situation I found myself in. I had a lot of fire to make it better.*
That first summer, her role in the district, but more importantly, her inherent curiosity led her to examine the academic procedures/practices in place. Although RCSD seemed to have sound practices in place in terms of writing and revising curriculum, some key component was missing and elusive…Until, that is, school started in August. Once the classrooms were full and operating, the problem became immediately apparent.

...Essentially, the curriculum was written and it was free-for-all as to what, basically, you might use...It went all the way down to kindergarten. It was pervasive throughout. Every classroom was an entity unto itself with that teacher selecting the materials they wanted.

Mrs. Ellis, a building-level administrator found the same to be true. In her daily visits with students, most of which were disciplinary, she found that students who had different subject-area teachers were being exposed to different content despite being in the same grade/course. She recalled, They were teaching completely different things. It was all over the place...The building was truly about, “I go to my classroom, I shut my door, and I teach.”

This sentiment, in surprisingly similar words, was expressed by Ted, Allen, and Cindy, all core-subject (English, math, science, social studies) teachers and all future players in PLC implementation at RCSD. Cindy, however, was the only one who expressed recognition of the isolating practices prior to her direct involvement in PLC. In quiet, humble tones, she expressed, For the most part, we were on our own. So, we were doing everything we could inside our rooms. I felt like I was. I was doing everything inside my room to increase student achievement because I have one of those areas that is
tested by the State. I was hitting a roadblock because I had done everything I could on my own. I was looking outside for extra help...

Thus began Mrs. Burnett’s quest for something more…some way to organize the district’s efforts and get the teachers working together toward instructional goals. She began examining programs the district could implement and would qualify for professional development or school reform funds from the State. Having heard of several prospects, she invited Mrs. Ellis, who had expressed her own recognition of the problem, and Mrs. Poole, an administrator from another building, to join her on a visit to a school which had already implemented PLC. What they found intrigued them. Mrs. Ellis recalled the visit with a smile that seemed to indicate her enthusiasm of the visit’s initial promise. ...What I saw at that district was truly amazing: a group of professionals—and I call them professionals because they were sitting in the same room talking about data, talking about kids, talking about what was working and wasn’t working, and nobody was getting upset or throwing a fit, if you will, that they were being questioned why their kids weren’t performing when another teacher’s were. It was all very open, honest, sharing relationship, and they all seemed to have a very tight connection to each other.

Perhaps by coincidence, perhaps not, the school the trio visited was Mrs. Burnett’s alma mater. As she recalled the visit, a noticeable pride colored her words: What impressed them is what you know about [those] schools: Those people do whatever it takes. They raised those kids, and that’s their family. That’s what impressed Mrs. Ellis and Mrs. Poole about going there: The mindset of those teachers who said, “This is our home. This is our school. We are going to make sure that it is outstanding because that’s the kind of place we want it to be. That’s the kind of schools we want our students to go
to. ” There was that huge amount of pride about having that school system despite the obstacles and money or whatever. They were being successful just through sheer determination. That speaks to the fact the there is a certain amount of mindset of “This is important. This is for our kids. And we love these kids and this school. We want the best things for it.”

Shortly after their return, the three, Mrs. Burnett, Mrs. Ellis, and Mrs. Poole, all of whom were second-in-command at their respective levels and would later be collectively referred to as “The Axis of Evil,” agreed to adopt PLC in grades 6-12. One would presume that such an endeavor would require leadership from the top administrator, Mr. Taft. By all accounts, however, he was simply uninvolved.

On one hand, Mr. Taft existed as a throwback to the managerial style of administrators of generations-past. He insisted on having his hands in every piece of business throughout the district. Mrs. Burnett recalled, He controlled the middle school and high school as if he were the principal and those guys down there were the assistants. It was like that. Every decision that was made was his decision. Even the most small things that should have been a principal’s decision, they got on the phone and they asked him.

Mr. Spooner, an especially vocal administrator who worked with Mr. Taft and was head of one of the buildings at the time of PLC implementation, further characterized this side of Mr. Taft: Mr. Terry (a former building administrator) used to have to call Mr. Taft to let him know that he was going to the bathroom and that he wouldn’t be available. Mr. Williams (another former administrator) called him every day at 3:15 to let him know how the day went. When I took over, the thing that frustrated me was the attitude of,
“You’ve hired me to run this high school, I will run it. I will run it my way, and I will call you when I need something or when there is some sort of issue going on when there is something the upper-level administrators here need to be aware of.” So, when people ask me how it was working for him, I say, “Well, envision having a colonoscopy at least twice a week…maybe more.” That’s a grotesque assessment, but that’s how I felt.

On the other hand, however, Mr. Taft made deliberate choices not to get involved when Mrs. Burnett proposed adopting PLC. He did not participate in the preparatory book studies undertaken by the building administrators. He chose not to lead the professional development that was PLC’s initial rollout at RCSD. He did not attend the PLC or Leadership meetings after implementation. Why would a man with an established stranglehold on his building principals suddenly decide to let go? With a moment’s careful speculation, Mrs. Burnett proposed, *He’d had kind of a fundamental shift. He and Mr. Terry had been really close, and Mr. Terry dropped dead of a heart attack.* Something changed and partly—I think—because of that… He knew he couldn’t run the entire district—every building in the district—in the minutia way he had been. He was a smart man and had seen that our test scores were not good and not improving… And he’s like, “Okay. It’s yours. If you think we need to do it, do it.” It was about that short of a conversation, but I think there had been some sort of fundamental change in him.

With Mr. Taft allowing someone else to hold the reins, the work of steering the district through PLC implementation was taken on—and taken on with great enthusiasm—by the trio of Mrs. Burnett, Mrs. Ellis, and Mrs. Poole. Their first task: Select the core-subject teachers who would be trained to serve as the PLC leaders, or lead teachers, of their departments and eventually form the Leadership Team.
Teacher Selection and Training

Mrs. Burnett and Mrs. Ellis, two of the three PLC architects at RCSD had different recollections of the teacher selection process. While Mrs. Burnett recalled an initial request for volunteers, Mrs. Ellis remembered hand-picking the teachers in her building with Mrs. Poole, the third architect, choosing the teachers in her building. This difference in recollections could be explained by Mrs. Burnett’s delegating the task to each building’s administrators rather than assuming the task herself as Mr. Taft perhaps would have if he had chosen to be involved.

The teachers who were chosen, however, leave little to speculation. Their recollections are far more vivid. Each of the participants who filled those roles specifically remembers being hand-picked by either Mrs. Ellis or Mrs. Poole. With surprisingly similar language, each expressed an inability to say exactly why they were chosen, but offered their own suppositions.

Cindy, for example, a veteran teacher in her department who earlier expressed a desire to reach beyond her own classroom to improve her skills, supposed, I don’t know why they approached me. I think they knew I was always looking for ways to improve, and I was going to be one of the long-lasting teachers who were going to be around. And...I would think they chose me because I was proactive in trying to raise my own individual scores in individual scores in student achievement. Maybe that was it. Spoken by anyone else, Cindy’s thoughts would sound braggadocious. Her soft tones and unassuming demeanor, however, allow her to deliver such a supposition as one who is modestly proud of a career well-spent.
Ted, who was not a senior member of his department, nor department head, expressed that his selection created some issues with his department. He recalled thinking, “Why are you asking me? I’m surrounded by teachers who have been doing this a lot longer than I have.” But, of course, I didn’t ask those questions; I just agreed to it… I think one of the reasons they asked me to do it is because I was young and hadn’t taught for so long in that traditional way. That and I had a pretty good rapport with teachers throughout the building through coaching and just being that kind of person.

Ted’s selection was referred to by several participants as being the source of one of the great conflicts of RCSD’s PLC implementation. On multiple occasions, those involved referred to Ronnie, one of Ted’s neighboring teachers, as feeling slighted by not being chosen as a PLC lead teacher. They further speculated that his jilting led to his resistance and rogue behavior once the initiative was launched. Mrs. Burnett, district administrator and one of the district architects of PLC, recalled of Ronnie, Really, what he wanted was to be courted and begged, and, “We can’t do this without you and we kneel at your altar. Please come and save us.” We never did do that. I personally had many conversations with him about being a team player and being more supportive. Got comments all the time about getting in trouble if you didn’t get in line. Conversations that were never, ever documented. There were never any negative repercussions from him. But there were those comments, and I knew where they came from.

Mrs. Ellis, building level administrator and RCSD PLC architect, expressed the same sentiment regarding Ronnie. There was one department, we didn’t pick the most experienced teacher because we didn’t think he could lead that process because he was
very much an island and didn’t want anybody on his island. I think even to this day he makes it a little difficult.

Mr. Spooner, building administrator at the time of PLC implementation, in his own colorful language, cast a different light on Ronnie’s situation. The shame is...The HS lead teachers were/are phenomenal teachers. Even back then, they were top-notch, but I think Ronnie felt he was crapped on by going to Ted because Ronnie was the chairperson. But they knew he’d ask questions and that he’d be a fly in the ointment. I do not recall him being asked. I know that Ted was. My recollection is that Ronnie was a rogue, a wild child, a wild card. Damn good teacher. The kids just loved him. I’m sure that he’s still teaching at that caliber today. I believe they bypassed him...

Ronnie, however, remembers it differently. He recalled being personally asked to serve as the lead teacher for his department by Mrs. Poole, one of the building-level administrators and RCSD PLC architects. In a passing time, she came to me with an article about PLC and asked me to be on the leadership team. This fact was confirmed by Mrs. Poole, despite the decade of perception that he was not asked. The thing was, at that time, I had young kids, and most of the teachers with experience had young kids. The expectation was to go to the lake for a week that summer, and for babysitting purposes, I couldn’t do it. Most of the teachers with experience couldn’t do it. So it fell on the young teachers to go to the lake and be a part of the decision-making process. Afterwards, a lot of people felt those teachers were put in a situation they couldn’t say no to, and they were almost bullied and intimidated into PLC.

Ronnie’s sentiments on the teacher selection process were echoed by another significant player, Carl. He was the senior member and chair of his department at the
time of implementation and recalled, *There was a bit of surprise to me that it wasn’t communicated prior to that... for someone with more experience or who was the department chair. It makes it sound like I’m saying they were really bad apples, but I found that interesting, I guess, in the whole PLC process. Across the board, not just in my department, was an interesting thing. Typically, when I think of who was placed in that...more of the younger teachers, less experienced. And this may shade it, too, and make it sound worse: more that I think would drink the Kool-Aid and try to come back and promote this. Not necessarily a negative... just that they would buy in, too. If I were looking to do this, I would do the same thing probably. If I were looking to get people to buy into this. Quality folks, but ones that I would need to come back and drive it.*

Like Ronnie, Carl was referred to by several as the source of major conflict throughout the PLC implementation process. Unlike Ronnie, however, Carl was never asked to be the PLC lead teacher for his department. Instead, Mrs. Poole selected Steph, a teacher slightly younger and less experienced than Carl. According to Steph, her selection had nothing to do with neither brainwashing nor Kool-Aid. She speculated that the teachers chosen were the real go-getters who were willing to try new things, and *I was one of those. I was naïve, so I was really excited about that. So, I said, “Sure, I’ll do it! I would love to do it!” I had no qualms about it all because I was all about trying new things. If it was going to make me a better teacher, I was willing to try it.* As for Carl and the other members of her department, Steph supposed, *They were grateful I was doing it; they didn’t want do it. Nobody else wanted to do it. They were fine with me doing it.*
Allen, a representative member of his department and not one for drama, recalled a much more placid experience involving his selection as PLC lead teacher: *I was just happy to be part of a process that was hopefully going to transform the school...*

Cindy, Ted, Steph, Allen, and their respective counterparts from the reciprocal building attended intensive PLC training at a lakeside resort across the state accompanied by administrators Mrs. Ellis and the colorful Mr. Spooner. Ted recalled their time there: *They took a group of us, and it was basically one from each department from the middle school and one from each department from the high school, and the building administrators went with us. We went to the lake and spent the whole weekend learning about the PLC process and what it was, and then brainstorming together ideas about stuff we could do at school, restructuring the schedule, introducing advisory... Collaboration, basically, because “collaboration” wasn’t even a word we even used before we went to PLC. Nobody used the word “collaboration,” because there was very little going on. We got together and talked about that at the lake.*

Allen, delivered a slightly more comical, albeit important, memory of that trip. Again, not one for drama, his deadpan delivery heightened the humor: *I can remember on the fourth day in, Ted and I were waiting to enter the room, and he looked at me and said, “Do you have any fucking idea what we’re doing?” And I said, “No, I still don’t know what we’re doing.” So, we spent three days training and we were ready to go into the fourth day, and they’d talked about what PLC was and how you do it, and on the fourth day, we’re walking in going... We didn’t even know what to take back at that point and what we were going to do. And they started getting more concrete. I remember*
thinking after the fourth day, “Now we have stuff.” It’s not just the concept of PLC and all the fluffy stuff.

Mrs. Ellis found something more transformative. Well, when we first got there, we were just a group of people who had to go through a conference together, and so everyone was very guarded. We went through the first day and you could still see that everyone was kind of like, “I’m not sure how this is going to work. I’m not sure how this is going to be.” But we started talking through after the second day, “How are we going to bring this back and present this at the inservice in August?” That’s when our big push was to start it. And so we started talking through that process. “This is what we need to tell them...”

Of particular fondness was Mrs. Ellis’s memory of a bonding experience the group shared at one of the restaurants in that area after a long day of training. So since we were such a big group, we basically got a private room because they put a bunch of tables together and put us in the back. I don’t know how long we sat there, but that was the connection. That was the moment that we all became a team, got on the same page, and knew what we wanted to do. That was the moment everybody put down their guard and we really got to know each other, and it was a lot of fun. We had a good time.

Both Cindy and Steph recalled the excitement of being there and that the trip itself was pleasant. Both alluded to the energy and drive derived from that training. They did not know at the time that their enthusiasm would be short-lived, but both commented on the trip as if it were a positive memory. Steph described what that training meant to her, specifically: I was pumped. I was ready to come back and implement this stuff. I believed
in it. I understood the point behind it, and I was ready to share it with my colleagues. I was really excited. And then, we came back for the inservice and that all changed...

Implementation Obstacles and Conflicts

When the newly formed Leadership Team returned, it was upon them to train the faculty on the basic tenets and design of PLC. Together, they worked with regional trainer Shirley Goodfellow to present at the back-to-school inservice that August. The inservice, among other things included a skit designed to convey the message that together, they should all row in the same direction, a common message in organizational professional development. However, what was intended one way was received in an entirely different way. “Let’s all row in the same direction,” became, “Get on the boat or get the hell out.”

The supposedly jilted Ronnie remembered being on the receiving end of the ill-fated message: That was the first we’d heard of PLC or Advisory...a couple of days before school started. It was just...shock. Shock and ignorance. I had no idea what this was. As it progressed, what got me literally in trouble was that I asked questions: “What is PLC? I don’t...Can you explain this to me?”

Specific memory: they brought in Shirley Goodfellow who was part of the RPDC (Regional Professional Development Center). She was supposedly the guru of PLC, and she was here to make it all better. I asked her multiple times and the people involved, “I don’t understand even what this is. Can you explain it to me?” And the answer I consistently got was, “Aww...bless your heart, honey. Change is hard.” Nobody would
even explain what PLC was that first day. It's a lot to explain, but we were pretty much
told to get on the boat and not understand what it was.

Ted and Cindy, though both members of the Leadership Team validated Ronnie’s
response to the inservice. They both agreed that while an ultimatum was not the intended
message, it proved to be the perceived mentality of the Leadership Team. Colorful Mr.
Spooner related to Ronnie’s sense that the inservice lacked substance: Shirley Goodfellow
was the person who trained us. It was like a…shall we say…dog and pony show. A rah-
rah show. A candy on the table show. There wasn’t anything hardcore. Much to the
chagrin of Mr. Spooner, Shirley Goodfellow would continue serving as the regional
trainer for the Leadership Team’s ongoing training once PLC was implemented.

A lack of substance, Carl recalled, was a real sticking point for him, as well. A lot
of those people who went to those meetings and came back and thought they were experts
didn’t really know much. They, like I said earlier, drank the Kool-Aid and thought,
“Well, this is great! We’ll work together!” They didn’t really have the general idea or
the concept of how this would work. I was frustrated fairly often with some of them and
what they thought. ...There was always the fallback of, “Well, there isn’t any rules! We
can do whatever we want!” That’s a copout. It’s a brilliant plan because you could do
that forever, and you can always roll with it. It changes...It’s so manipulative and
manipulated that you can mold it into what you want it to be inside of that generalized,
basic plan...”

Carl and Ronnie both contended in their narratives that they simply needed more
information as to the particulars of PLC implementation at RCSD and that some saw their
questions as resistance to the process.
In addition to the “Get on the boat” debacle, some teachers took exception to the plan itself. Two particular areas were referenced in the participants’ recollections: the introduction of Advisory, a fifteen-minute period to be used as a homeroom with academic coaching, and the formation of departmental PLC meetings. To many, the former lacked value while the latter lacked logic. Both of these components were introduced for the first time during the same back-to-school inservice as the boat skit. Ronnie recalled, *Advisory was bombed on us that first inservice day. There’s a whole new... I just remember being so shocked. It was a whole new thing to prepare for. I couldn’t believe they were just dropping it on us a couple of days before school starts with no specific plan of what we were supposed to do with it.*

Steph, on the other hand, shared a specific memory that seemed to point to the contrary. *We were really excited about it, and we were trying to teach them an activity they could do in Advisory... We were trying to have them do it just for practice, and the reactions that we received from some teachers was like we were scolded puppies. Like, I would walk up to... Specifically, I went up to Ronnie to see if he would do the activity with us, because at the time, he and I were very, very close friends. He was like, “This is the stupidest thing ever, and I can’t believe you guys were doing this to us.” There were others, but he’s the one that I remember because I really, really, respected him. It seems like that was the beginning of difficulty just from the start that day.*

Ronnie and Carl, though perhaps more vocal than others, were not the only faculty members taking exception to the components rolled out that day. Nearly all of the participants, including Mrs. Burnett and Mrs. Ellis, two of the three architects, mentioned negative responses regarding what would prove to be the second major obstacle, the
formation of departmental PLC groups. Specifically, implementers faced a considerable amount of negative concern coming from non-core teachers who were asked to meet with core departments. By all accounts, the logic behind this decision boiled down to two simple notions: 1) The non-core teachers had to do something so the core teachers wouldn’t complain about having to lose a preparatory period for meetings. 2) The non-core teachers had to meet with whatever group happened to be off at the hour during which their preparatory period was scheduled. This configuration was consistently noted as a problem in nearly every participant’s narrative.

Mr. Spooner, in his usual colorful way, recalled the frustration: When you put these non-core people and the core people are, “Focus, focus, focus. Math, math, math. Increase test scores. Data, data, data,” these people are just standing there going, “You gotta be kidding me.” It’s wasteful. It was very obvious to anybody in non-core that this was all about the cores…most importantly, language arts and mathematics. Later, science became part of the EOC (end-of-course) testing, and we’d take the voluntary test to beef up the APR (Annual Progress Report). If you didn’t teach something that benefited the school through data, you were crapped on.

To remedy the situation, Mrs. Ellis and Mrs. Poole worked together to create more logical meeting times by scheduling teachers in like core subjects with common preparatory hours. A difficult task, to be sure, but one that was generally accepted and allowed for PLC groupings considered far more logical than the first iteration. The original intent was not for teachers to meet for PLCs during that time. The new design also introduced Power Hour, a mandatory tutoring time for students in academic distress.
in core subjects. Power Hour was also intended to be a time during which the
departmental PLC teams could meet without sacrificing a preparatory period.

Ronnie recalled the difficulty of trying to accomplish both tasks in the same time
period. *So, this plan developed of the late start Wednesday for PLC meeting time. At the
same time, and we tend to do this consistently at this school, it also had to be tutoring
time. So we had to meet and tutor at the same time every Wednesday. We tried to leave
one teacher behind on rotation while the rest of us met. One teacher tutored all of our
students while the other teachers met with middle school and had PLC time.*

Cindy recalled the same configuration: *So, they came up with Power Hour
tutoring. So Power Hour tutoring was really set up where teachers could meet, and that
cauased a problem. We were told we could meet during that time, but you still had
someone missing your process to go tutor. So then, we all decided as a group, that we
needed to all be...If our PLC process was to work, we had to all be together. We couldn’t
have someone miss for Power Hour tutoring. We decided to all do tutoring and continue
our meetings during a [prep] time. I do remember that it was frustrating to me as a
teacher—and I don’t mean to talk bad about other teachers—that they fought to get this
time. You can hear through the grapevine that it wasn’t productive.*

Said Ronnie, *I remember [Cindy’s department] taking a real strong lead on
meeting during their prep times. Once [that department] does things, everybody’s
expected to follow along. So, after a few years, we’re meeting on prep time.*

While the issue of departmental groupings and meeting times was improved, at
least by most accounts, another area continued to suffer and, according to some, get
worse: micropolitics. Consistently across the participants’ narratives, the cultural climate
at RCSD declined in the first few years of implementation. Riding on the coattails of a plethora of generic negative comments regarding jumping on the PLC bandwagon, the debacles of Advisory and departmental PLC meetings continued to cast a shadow for years to come. These black marks left the Leadership Team with a group hesitant to follow their leads. Foremost among those names, and consistently mentioned by the participants: Carl and Ronnie.

Regardless of their reasons, Carl and Ronnie were consistently referred to as the two who created the greatest obstacles not only to the process, but to the lead teachers as well. Multiple participants’ narratives reference the two as especially challenging. Mrs. Burnett, Mrs. Ellis, and Mr. Spooner all recalled the behavior, calling it miserable, juvenile, and disengaging. Particularly noteworthy is Steph’s recollection: *He [Carl] would make really inappropriate jokes. He would attack me. In fact, many times after the PLC meetings, I would be bawling. Because he would...it wasn’t just a questioning type of thing where he was trying to make sure he understood things. He was intentionally questioning me in ways that were insulting and derogatory and really, really hurt me...big time. To the point that I wasn’t ever sure I’d like that man again. And they would talk. I would try to get them to talk to me about things that needed to be discussed, and they’d just talk. To this day, Carl does not do anything for PLC. We do it all for him...We enable him. We just do it. We don’t want to deal with the consequences if we don’t.*

For Ronnie’s part, his lingering distaste for PLC, at least in its RCSD incarnation, was both professional and personal. It should be noted that none of the participants had anything negative to say in regards to Ronnie’s teaching. In fact, several specifically
mentioned he was a capable, if not exemplary teacher as his multiple awards would suggest. Ronnie, however, expressed having a tough time swallowing the PLC pill as it was administered for two significant reasons: 1) As previously mentioned, he felt he needed more solid information from the initiative leaders so that he could contextualize the plan based on his own knowledge of PLC. 2) He felt that the design of the program allowed others to take freely from the career he had built without giving back.

To elaborate on the former, Ronnie offered, *Asking those questions got me called into the office by Mrs. Poole and chewed out pretty hard and my job threatened. I just wanted to know what it was. It was her and Mr. Spooner. It was a real good cop/bad cop type of play. She told me that...This is pretty bad: I don’t actually believe everything she told me that day. She said Ted and Steph had reported me as being against PLC, which threw me off. She played the bad cop side, and Mr. Spooner played the good cop side. She pushed hard about how I needed to get on board and wouldn’t accept that I wasn’t against it, I just didn’t understand it at all. It ended with me saying I wasn’t comfortable with this meeting and wanted representation. Mr. Spooner came back later and apologized and said that was poorly researched before it happened. That was the end of it.*

Mr. Spooner gave insight into Ronnie’s supposition that there was a “good-cop, bad-cop type of play.” *...When I spoke to Ronnie, Mrs. Poole was present. He didn’t appreciate the conversation, and I would not have either. But, because they were the orchestrators—the three—they knew that I had my hands tied because I was answering to those three on that specific issue. Mr. Spooner went on to say that it was not a simple matter of overruling Mrs. Poole, which—organizationally speaking—he could have.* He
was in charge at his level, while Mrs. Poole was second in command. The problem, according to him, was that defying one of the three, Mrs. Poole, Mrs. Ellis, or Mrs. Burnett, meant facing all three. ...I was told. Not told what to do, but told, “Here’s our next step,” which meant it was orchestrated and developed, and I needed to know about it because I was going to be a part of it. It was the Axis of Evil who ran that thing.

Although Steph was not part of that meeting, she had her own recollection of the outcome. Ronnie is probably the one who made it hardest for me and Ted. I know that people told the administrators about the negative people and I still don’t know who told on Ronnie. I don’t know if Ted did or if it was me. There was a time I was talking about that Advisory activity, and I said, “Man, Ronnie did not like that” That’s all I said. I don’t know if that was enough or whatever, but then they got pulled into the office and scolded about their behavior and they were warned and things. After that happened, the PLC teacher leaders were referred to as the Gestapo. We were ostracized because nobody wanted to talk to us because they were afraid we were going to go tell on them. We had to deal with just being completely alienated for a while because people just didn’t want anything to do with us because we were the little tattletales and Gestapo...that’s what they called us.

In addition to Ronnie’s feeling that no solid plan actually existed—at least not one that matched his understanding of the basic underpinnings of PLC—he also felt that what the building was calling “collaboration” consisted primarily of him giving away his best strategies/tools/resources, but not receiving adequate return on his investment. What I discovered early on is that it was less collaborating as Ted cycled out and I was left the old guy in the department. [Another teacher] left soon after PLC. It broke his teaching
soul. I was left leader by default, and it was never collaboration. It was all these guys just took my stuff. I had to provide everything for everybody. I think collaborating would be great.

I gravitated toward what I considered people better than me… I gravitated more toward [teachers in other departments] to try to get better teaching ideas for me because I was getting nothing from here. I think that led to some impressions that I was non-collaborative and don’t want to work with these guys. They were taking, just never ever giving back.

Carl explained his dissatisfaction in a strikingly similar fashion. Not that people wouldn’t want to help each other… they felt like a part of themselves was being pulled out and given to other people. For a lot of teachers, that struck them as sort of a deconstruct of what they do as professionals. They were losing part of themselves as teachers. If what they’re doing is now given up to everyone else, they kind of felt a loss of identity. Again, I love sharing and talking to people, and trying to…I’m sure that’s part of ego, but I want everyone to do what I do when it works and share that out to other people. It is a bit of a shock and somewhat offensive when you’re creating these things and you’re just giving it out to other people to use that aren’t…It boils down to them not working as hard as you to create the things that you are. I even had…This is a teacher who had more experience than I had, where I was brought in to assist that teacher in how to create [required documentation] and how to do things that were appropriate within the classroom and sharing out. Even though we taught different levels, it was the same subject. Someone who was a mentor, that now, I’m mentoring and trying to show how I do the things that I do because the principal asked me to do that and share.
Again, it wouldn’t be a matter of my not wanting to do it or to help, but it was another case where—you look at it from my standpoint or a teacher’s standpoint—and you see if this hasn’t changed for years…I mean, there has to come a time where you cut the rope. Add to that, my giving all my work to this person just made it last longer until that person eventually went away on her own.

Underlying all of the issues with implementation hid a somewhat perplexing — albeit in bits and pieces—perception by many that the chain of command was not intact throughout PLC implementation. As previously stated, the three architects of PLC at RCSD, or the “Axis of Evil” to Mr. Spooner, were each second-in-command at their respective levels. Mr. Taft, Mrs. Burnett’s supervisor, chose not to take an active role for his own reasons. Mr. Hale, Mrs. Ellis’s supervisor, did the same. Mr. Spooner, Mrs. Poole’s supervisor, admittedly just jumped in and played along although he did not always agree with the way things were being handled.

Further complicating the dynamics, most of the narratives—at least, those from the teachers—fail to mention Mrs. Burnett as a key player in the process. This was first noted in drama-free Allen’s interview but arose consistently in discussions with other participants. When I attempted to clarify her involvement with Mr. Spooner, he offered speculation as to why most would say the initiative was spurred on by Mrs. Ellis and Mrs. Poole. *That is false. She [Mrs. Burnett] started the ball rolling. She was an integral part of that. Her disciples were Mrs. Ellis and Mrs. Poole. They were more than that; they were basically puppets. You answered to all three women. If you gave crap to Mrs. Poole, she’d go straight to Burnett. That’s the way it was.*
Mr. Spooner went on to say that it was reasonable for the teachers to make such an assumption, because they were not in the same meetings behind closed doors. He had opportunity to see the process from an administrator’s perspective: the planning, the organization, the impetus. *Mrs. Poole didn’t come up with that on her own, and she sure as hell didn’t check any of that by herself. It was all being orchestrated from up there* (district office).

Still, to some, the initiative that led half of the district into what some have referred to as a significant drop in school culture, appeared to be helmed by two figures, Mrs. Poole and Mrs. Ellis, who were not by organizational title in charge of their district or the buildings in which they served. Mr. Spooner, in plain language, called it much more than a drop in culture. *I will then look you in the eye and tell you that the year of PLC implementation was the second worst thing of my life; the first being divorce, the second being the implementation of PLC. Even the death of my father was not as bad as PLCs. Nowhere near close. It was hell.*

While nearly every participant recalled improvement in dynamics, procedures, and eventually, student achievement after the first few years, they all consistently found significant issues with the implementation: communication, collaboration, purpose, leadership. While Mr. Spooner admitted that eventually there were some returns on the painful investment, he recalled the early days using the most direct language he could muster. *If you didn’t catch it the first time, let me say it again: The implementation was fucked up. It was FUBAR. Seriously.*
Gains after Implementation

With references to communist ideals, Gestapo, the Axis of Evil, drinking the Kool-Aid, broken relationships, distrust, frequent crying, and even four-letter words peppering the narratives, it is hard to imagine the participants would be willing to go through it again. Reflecting on their experiences, however, nearly every participant was able to see gains made after implementation of PLC at RCSD, even if it did take a few years to get there.

Mrs. Burnett, for example, answered the question leaving little doubt. *Unequivocally. It was the right thing to do. I think our scores since have borne that out. Putting that structure in place of common plan times gave us a structure to do a lot of other things to happen as well: other decision making things that needed to happen. That was one of the things that I feel has been most useful, aside from the instruction side of things. It’s been a vehicle for us to talk about a lot of other things in the building and get feedback from teams and have that interaction.*

Speaking specifically of high school language arts, she noted, *When they finally got their heads all wrapped around it and got their arms around what they needed to do...Man...It happened. They were so much better than where they started and were making Adequate Yearly Progress. The things that were not clicking were not their performance, but just their working together as a department. The way they gelled and dealt with one another.*

Steph, despite her history with Ronnie and Carl, also noted the improved camaraderie among the teachers, but also in the students. *I feel that it has helped with the overall morale of the school because, at the same time PLC was being implemented, and*
as much as an issue as Advisory is, I do see the benefit in it. I can see the camaraderie among the kids. Not 100%. There are still kids that want nothing to do with anybody else, but I do notice that...That’s when we started to get the pep club going, and school spirit was getting bigger and better, and so...I feel like...the benefits definitely outweigh the issues that we had. ...Obviously, we are doing better academically across the board. I still feel like we still could benefit if teachers were willing to talk about their weaknesses a little more. But, for the most part, I feel like everyone who is doing what we have been asked to do has improved in their teaching.

Drama-free Allen summed up the experience with an axiom too simple to be invalid. The more smart people you have working on something—I feel like—the better the outcome is going to be. So, me working alone in my room as a young teacher is not going to be as productive as me working with a veteran teacher who’s been working here fifteen years and a veteran teacher who’s been here ten years and has seen things I haven’t seen. There’s no way I can be as smart as those people by myself.

Soft-spoken Cindy continued the thought. There was something that made us want to do better. We worked well together. That’s what the other schools liked; we came together 6-12. We worked consistent through...It’s pretty cool we came together. We were all about student achievement. We were all about making sure grades reflected their knowledge and not just...We wanted to know if someone was really a B student, they were a B student; not just because they were completing assignments. We always agreed on so many different things.

As standardized test scores rose to among the top in the region, nearby schools weren’t the only people paying attention. In the district’s seventh year of implementation,
the statewide PLC organization recognized the district and each of its buildings with exemplary PLC awards. At that time, RCSD was the only district in the state to have received the distinction with all of its buildings qualifying as well. Mrs. Burnett elaborated. …*We were selected as a state-recognized school with excellence in PLC in our fourth year, fifth year, something like that, after we’d had steadily increasing scores.* That’s what qualifies you to even apply for that. Some of our administrators were awarded as outstanding leaders in that. I felt like there was validation that what we were doing was good. A lot of folks saw that and said, “OK, you know…” I was selected as an exemplary district administrator, and Mrs. Ellis and Mrs. Poole received awards at that same time. The state recognized that our implementation was good…

Although Mr. Spooner agreed that they had made significant gains in multiple areas, he questioned the validity of the award. *You go into the [meeting] room and you see the photos of past board members and the awards for previous teachers of the year and the banner that says, “Exemplary PLC School.”* That award was given after I was gone. When people get up and pound their chest about that, I feel like getting up and saying, “Okay, motherfucker. Why don’t you tell them about the implementation process?” ‘Cause that was a cluster fuck.

Cindy expressed her concerns in a significantly tamer version of Mr. Spooner’s same sentiment. *Our school was actually put on a pedestal for doing this and doing this, and I just sat back going, “There’s a lot of things wrong.”* All those awards we have for being PLC? We’re not a true PLC…*For PLC, we look good on paper, but something is missing. We get good scores, but something is missing.*
Mr. Green, Mr. Spooner’s successor, who has now been involved longer than Mr. Spooner, offered a different perspective on receiving the PLC award. *Are we as exemplary as you can get? Are we exceptional at it? I don’t know in that context. Did we deserve to win the award? I kind of feel like we did, and here’s why: That award wasn’t about that year; it was about an accomplishment over time. To me, when English started communicating, looking at data, and being productive, we got out of “Needs Improvement.” We not only got out of “Needs Improvement,” we started turning in the best scores in the area. I don’t think you arrive at that point having done nothing. Biology was the same way. Mathematics. We were competing on those top ends. Were we doing it exactly the way maybe PLC should have been done: textbook? No, but I also don’t believe that any one school can because it has to fit who you are. I look at all those accomplishments and all that took place there, and I say that’s probably worthy of that, because we don’t ultimately get there if they don’t go through that growing process and have that purpose and have that gain. That would be my opinion.*

Mr. Green’s supposition is more correct than perhaps he realized. In order to qualify for the award, a district or individual building must complete a staff survey and self-assessment. The qualifying district must also submit evidence of increased scores, with a particular focus on mathematics and language arts. Finally, the building or district must also subject itself to an onsite review during which a rubric is used to determine fidelity to the program. In other words, the award is not given based on an implementation rollout. Rather, it is based on a process…a journey. It is also not given without exclusivity. On average, only about a dozen schools receive the award each year.
When the buildings of RCSD district won their awards, they occupied four of the ten award-winning slots that year.

The participants all agreed with Mr. Green that, despite that rocky rollout Mr. Spooner so quickly brought up, the overall journey took them to a better place. One of the best summations came from an unlikely source: Carl. Without hesitation, he offered, *I can say that—and it’s not true data or something that I can call a true cause and effect—lots of things have developed and become much better in that 10-11 year span within our department. The fact that we’re now driven by—not our curriculum, per se—but by skills, has moved us so much above where we were before. We don’t have a reliance on teachers that just do what’s right because it’s right. We have a reliance on, “This common assessment is approaching. You have to cover these skills. If you do not cover these skills, these students will not perform well on our common assessment which then leads us to the EOC and, eventually, educating the kids.”*

While Ronnie struggled to come up with any noteworthy gain, Ted, who initially represented Ronnie’s department as a lead teacher had no trouble whatsoever. *I do want to say that I think becoming a PLC school was a tremendous step in the right direction for us, because since we have done that, we have become one of the school districts in the area everyone wants to be like. Is it completely because of PLC? Probably not, but I think it’s partially because of PLC. Our test scores have gone up; it’s there. I really feel like the reason test scores have gone up is because of PLC. ...It was just how we introduced it that I would have changed. I’m glad we went through the PLC process. I don’t think we’d be where we are as a school district if it weren’t for that.*
Regrets and Advice

Despite what they were able to accomplish, all of the participants noted troublesome areas which could have gone more smoothly. From the top down, there was a pervasive sense that more time should have been taken to prepare the faculty for implementation. Whether the participants felt that the extra time should have been spent in book studies, increasing the effectiveness of communication, or engaging in more careful planning overall, there was clear recognition of missed steps.

Mrs. Burnett noted, *I don’t think, I know in retrospect—there hadn’t been enough done to prepare people. There just wasn’t. We probably should have taken another year of preparation. I didn’t know that then. I just figured that people saw the problem. This was a very-well researched, highly-successful program that yielded successful achievement results. I just assumed that they had been given the information… “Let’s go!”* Very naïve. So, *I think part of what happened and the resistance early-on was the lack of preparation and trying to go at it too fast. In my defense, there had to be change, though.*

Mrs. Ellis agreed when asked if she could go back in time and serve as her own advisor. *I would say, “You have to get this implemented, but you need to do a book study first. You have got to get these people trained so that they understand what it is before you jump with both feet into it.” I don’t feel… We did not train them. We jumped with both feet and ran and said, “This is it. Let’s go!” Most of our staff jumped with us and said, “Here we go! I would like more information; I’ll get it as we go.”* I would tell myself to *do the book study the first year and kind of put some of it in place with the structure, and begin the process the second year.*
Ted also referred to jumping in with both feet: *And, I will say as a team, and as an administrative group, we made some mistakes. They told us at the lake that the PLC process was something that you took baby steps and just slowly got into the PLC process. We jumped in with two feet as far as we could possibly jump in right from the start, and that was a mistake. Now, the bright side of that is, we got a lot further a lot quicker, but the culture suffered bad for a year to a year-and-a-half.*  Ted, among others, also went on to comment on missed opportunities that could have been used to involve more people, remarking, *My advice would be for administration to take baby steps to get into it. Those teachers who are skeptical—try to get them involved by giving them leadership roles, making them feel like they are part of the process: stakeholders. True stakeholders, and not just cramming it down and telling them what they are going to do. ...Just really do a lot of research together as a school district before you take the plunge into PLC. When we jumped right—before we even educated anybody—we told [our] people, “We’re doing this full throttle,” and that was a bad situation.*

Another comment shared by several of the lead teachers hearkens back to Carl’s comment about choosing teachers who were young and would easily buy-in. To the credit of Mrs. Poole and Mrs. Ellis, it should be noted that half of the lead teachers would be considered veterans by most standards. The other half were still in the beginning years of their careers. Ted, Steph, and Allen, in one way or another mentioned that they were young and/or naïve when chosen to serve. Allen, in particular, found his inexperience and inflexibility (which he blamed on his youth) as being a hindrance. *Frustration. Thinking a lot, “Why can’t you just see this is good for our kids? I get that change is hard, but this change is for the benefit of our kids.”* We were poor at communicating that. *I think we
were big on “This is what we need to do,” instead of explaining, “Look at where we could be if we chose to do it a different way.” So, I think that part of it created that frustration. And, like I said, I was very young, and I don’t know if I was capable of communicating that appropriately.

The woven narrative in this chapter calls upon the voices of those who lived the experience. While constructing the composite, I attempted to stay true to the research questions, but above all else, true to the participants’ narratives as they were originally offered. The following chapter seeks to create purpose for the construction of this woven narrative by lending research-based perspectives on the aforementioned conflicts and obstacles.

Additionally, the discussion of the findings, implications, and recommendations is intended to serve as a conclusion to this study, but is also offered as a potential starting point for further discussion and research.
CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

Summary of the Study and Methodology

This study was undertaken in an effort to answer what were initially simple questions regarding RCSD’s implementation of PLCs over a decade ago. Because the impact on culture was of particular interest, I made a conscious effort to capture the experience from those who experienced the transition first-hand. I interviewed the participants, most of whom were present at implementation and remained with the district at the time of composition, regarding their experiences and their perceived experiences of those around them. Finding that their first-hand knowledge often overlapped with others’ perceptions, I chose to weave their multiple experiences into the single narrative presented in Chapter 4.

Before collecting the participants’ narratives, however, I undertook an extensive review of research methods to bolster my understanding the basic tenets of collecting research of synthesizing it into some thing of meaning. Of particular use was Kvale (2006), Clandinin and Connelly (2000), Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw (1995) and Creswell (2003) and their discussions of using interviews and field notes to construct a narrative inquiry within the realm of qualitative research. Armed with strategy, I then looked to the academic literature, particularly the works of DuFour, in order to familiarize both myself and the reader with the subject-at-hand, as well as broader thinking on educational leadership and change theory. The works of multiple related authors were also reviewed.
to construct a more comprehensive base understanding, but DuFour’s work was clearly the most pertinent.

Participants were then solicited for their individual recollections and provided with consent forms which outlined their rights and the institution’s safeguards for research regarding human subjects. Interviews were conducted individually (with one exception which occurred by happenstance) and audio recorded to facilitate transcription. Once the transcripts were reviewed by the interviewees, I coded the text for relevant themes and timelines in preparation for composing the woven narrative.

The result is a single story as told by multiple individuals based on their own experiences, memories, and emotions. Construction of the narrative was completed with two main goals: Answer the initial research questions, and allow the interviewees to speak for themselves. While some interpretation, as suggested by Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw (1995), was unavoidable, a conscious effort was made to allow the text itself to carry the participants’ meanings rather than assigning meaning to them by means of unnecessary speculation or overreaching connective conclusions.

Findings & Implications

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest that any narrative inquiry should be examined in retrospect with a simple question: “What is your narrative inquiry about?” Simply put, this narrative inquiry is about a school district which faced difficulties due to missed steps in the implementation of PLCs yet persevered in its efforts to change. To further answer the above question, and in an effort to adhere to the purpose of the research, the following responses to the initial research questions are offered:
Question 1: What factors initially led to the district’s decision to adopt and implement the PLC model?

As indicated by both Mrs. Burnett and Mrs. Ellis, as well as other participants, RCSD was a district in need of improvement, particularly in the area of standardized test scores. The data presented in Table 1 indicate this was especially true in mathematics at the middle school and communication arts at the high school.

Table 1

RCSD Student Performance on State Testing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mathematics Percentage of Students Scoring Proficient or Higher on State Test</th>
<th>Communication Arts Percentage of Students Scoring Proficient or Higher on State Test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year</strong></td>
<td><strong>I -4</strong></td>
<td><strong>I -3</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Target</strong></td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RC High School</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RC Middle School</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>18.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RC Elementary</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>36.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HG Elementary</td>
<td>43.8</td>
<td>37.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In an effort to explain the school’s lackluster performance, Mrs. Burnett began to look for an explanation. What became quickly evident to her was a lack of collaboration which would also be noted by Mrs. Ellis. In an effort to reform the school, and believing that collaboration was an important component missing from that reform, the two, along with Mrs. Poole found the PLC model to be a potential solution.

Mrs. Ellis and Mrs. Poole, however, may have had additional motivation. In Mrs. Burnett’s narrative, she asked if I was familiar with the story of the monkeys which hung on each of their doors. She went on to explain that the two had found a certain mundane quality to certain components of their daily tasks. She continued, *They began to feel like, after the first year on the job as assistant principal, that a monkey could do the job. You get the kid in, they’ve got this infraction, and check the book, “Here’s the punishment.” So they felt like a monkey could do that job. Mrs. Poole still has her monkey. I don’t know if Mrs. Ellis does or not. They hung on the back of the door and made a monkey noise when you squeeze them. Those two were going to die on the vine if they stayed in that job long term. That was another reason why I wanted to work with them. They needed something more. Something to tie them back to instruction and to be a little more challenging. …And, they both saw the need. They both had that vision for “It can be something more. We can do better.”*

Why, though, would three administrators, none of which were at the top of their organizational levels take the leads on such a potentially transformative endeavor? It can
be argued that they simply had to. Mrs. Poole’s supervisor, colorful Mr. Spooner was, by his own admission, a managerial school administrator, not a 21st Century leader. Mrs. Ellis’s supervisor, Mr. Hale, simply chose not to be involved. And over it all, was Mrs. Burnett’s supervisor, Mr. Taft, whose managerial style harkened back to the archaic “building manager” construct of yesteryear, despite the fact that he wasn’t even that anymore. Together, the three heads busied themselves with the minutia of maintaining the status quo, through Mr. Taft’s overbearing direction, rather than recognizing the rising temperature attributed to poor performance data. Their assistants, however, were feeling that very heat.

About that same time, though, Mr. Taft underwent what Mrs. Burnett referred to as a “fundamental shift” when one of his assistant administrators died. She refers to this event as the turning point which caused him to loosen his “stranglehold” on the administrators under him. One might argue that when he loosened his grip, and the trio of PLC architects took a gasp of fresh air, their excitement drove them to push forward at a pace the district was not used to. Steph commented that some faculty members looked at the trio and attributed their push as efforts to earn feathers in their caps. Steph, however, had a different take, simply noting, *It was because they were excited. They were excited. They wanted to get change rolling and all of that. I recognized that. There are some people that would say they were doing it so that they would have another notch in their belt. I don’t say that. I think they were excited about it and wanted to get it rolling.*

The short answer to the first research question is simply that the school was in need of improvement caused largely by a lack of collaboration and cohesion. Mrs. Poole and Mrs. Ellis, under the direction of Mrs. Burnett, were willing to explore new programs and were excited about potentially enacting change. Thus, PLC was introduced to RCSD.
Question 2: What impact did the transition have, specifically on the culture of the environments in which the participants worked?

The most frequently discussed impact of the PLC implementation was clearly a decline in the culture of the affected buildings. Morale, relationships among teachers, and trust of the leadership all suffered as teachers (both those who were PLC leaders and those who were not) found themselves frustrated with the rollout. For most, these feelings subsided as student success improved and served as the payoff for the difficult times; for others, the feelings lingered for years.

Ironically, the arguments on both sides of the equation could be boiled down to very similar statements. Those who were responsible for bringing the program into the school might spout, “Why can’t you stop being stubborn and listen to what we’re saying? There’s a bigger picture here!” Imagine now, the voices of those whose clamoring for guidance, purpose, and a definitive plan was interpreted as change resistance extolling, “Why can’t you stop being stubborn and listen to what we’re saying? There’s a bigger picture here!” One might argue that somewhere between the two exists what should have been.

Their inability to find that middle ground led to an environment where, at least for some time and for some of the participants, the agenda became more important than the purpose. In other words, merely completing the checklist of what it is to be a PLC became more important than understanding the purpose or the practicality of the tasks. For Ronnie and Carl, especially, stopping to question the motives and even the steps themselves was read as resistance. For others, the details were less important; they were willing, some even excited about the prospect of changing their schools for the better.
Still others were on board because, in their own words, they had no choice. “Get on the boat or get out!”

Regardless of which group in which the participants found themselves, there existed with that group its own set of unique challenges. For those who didn’t understand, there was a sense of rush, moving without purpose, and an invasion of professional pride. For those who enthusiastically chose to get on board, there was opposition, impeded momentum, and demeaning labels such as “Gestapo” or “The Golden Children.” The third group, those who expressed they had no choice, also expressed feeling, at least at the time, powerless, voiceless, and in some cases, even threatened. With these three groups all vying for the high ground, the micropolitical fallout was palpable. Ronnie referred to an environment of bitterness and competition that not only followed the implementation, but lasted, at least in his perspective, for years to come.

Despite the negative impact it had on some aspects of the buildings’ cultures, there are significant positive findings, as well. Most notable is an increased sense of collaboration among the buildings’ teachers. Ted mentioned that collaboration was a word never used before PLC because it never existed before PLC. With nearly identical phrasing, multiple participants summarized the pre-PLC teaching model as, “You go into your room, shut the door, and teach what you interpret to be the curriculum.” Those days, it would seem, have been relegated to storage with the Risograph, opaque projector, and other antiquated school icons.

Although it took some time, through direct, focused collaboration, departmental teams of teachers eventually created pacing guides and common assessments for teachers who teach the same course. These collaborative tools allow those teachers to not only
cover the same material, but to do so with fidelity to the established curriculum and with an ability to more accurately gauge student progress through data. Collaboration of a larger scale has also led to fruitful discussion of meeting the needs of diverse learners through improved instructional practices. All of these gains are reflective of the basic goals of PLCs and indicate a reasonable measure of success in adopting and implementing the construct. In fact, nearly every individual interviewed indicated without hesitation that they would do it all again if necessary.

Many of the participants further explained that the rewards from the program can be seen clearly in the district’s annual performance on state testing. Table 1, referred to earlier as an illustration of the state the district was in prior to PLC implementation, also reveals what happened afterwards. Within a span of only a few years, the district improved student achievement scores in both mathematics and communication arts at all grade levels. Not only was there marked improvement, but the district became a regional leader in student achievement and a model after which other districts hoped to fashion themselves.

While the negative impact the PLC implementation had on the districts’ culture may be the more entertaining part of the participants’ stories to digest, one would be remiss not to acknowledge the gains as well. It is important to note once again that each of the interviewees asked said they’d go through the experience again. If given the opportunity, however, they’d take the lessons they learned over the last decade with them. Their comments speak to the third research question directly.

*Question 3: As either regrets of the past or advice for the future, what do participants now recognize as key components of PLC implementation essential for success?*
Three common areas exist as regrets from the past or advice for the future among the participants: communication, preparation, and fidelity to the program. Taken individually, shortcomings in any one of the areas would have been detrimental, but with all three pointed out as areas of concern, implementation almost certainly would have failed if not for the undeniable gains made at RCSD in student achievement. Regardless of their role or personal experiences regarding the implementation process, nearly every participant found hardship when the above were missing, but were also able to note gains if/when the shortcomings were eventually corrected. Unfortunately, only one of the areas saw improvement: communication.

From Mrs. Burnett at the top down to skeptical Carl, the participants expressed that communication was of vital importance and that the rollout suffered when it was missing or fell short. Several surmised the inadequacies started well before implementation and can be traced back to the selection of the lead teachers and even further back to the adoption of the PLC construct from the very start. Regardless of when it started, both administrators and teachers expressed that not enough had been done to communicate how dire their student achievement situation was, the reasoning behind choosing PLC as a potential reform model, or even the basics and expectations of the model itself.

Once implementation began, there was little improvement…at first. Some shared feeling the steps, tools, and resources were handled as edicts rather than parts of a collaborative process. Multiple participants referred to the skit at the first inservice as the “Get on the boat or get out” moment which manifest itself into an unofficial and unfortunate mantra for years to come. Further aggravating the already strained lines of
communication were the questions asked by those teachers who expressed a lack of direction, purpose, or ignorance as to what they were doing. Those individuals indicated their questions were met with administrative gag orders designed to quash their supposed rebellion. On the other side of the equation, those responsible for implementation claimed the questions were designed to needle them and question their knowledge and, in some cases, their very professionalism.

Another manifestation of the damaged communication existed under the surface in the negative language either chosen or quoted by the participants. In addition to multiple intense and unexpected profanities used to express frustration, they used some rather derogatory words to describe one another: socialist, wild card, Gestapo, juvenile, rogue, lone wolf, Axis of Evil. Additionally, negative terms were used to describe the decisions/actions of those who experienced the implementation: drinking the Kool-Aid, ramrodded, crammed down throats, FUBAR, naïve, crapped on. Interestingly, these were not just words used in reflection, they were, according to the participants, the same names, adjectives, and verbs used at the time of the initial conflict. What power must these negative words have possessed in order to remain in the conscious of the interviewees ten years later!

Amazingly, communication is the only area of concern the participants recognized as improving over time. Specifically, they spoke in varying degrees to the increase in collaboration once the PLC construct began to take root. Teachers, in particular, were finding that communicating about their instructional strategies and discussing data—even on a small scale—were both highly valuable when it came time to prepare pacing guides and common assessments for those teachers who worked in
different classrooms but taught the same courses. Once those gains were made, they
translated the same tactics into concerted efforts to more closely align curriculum and
assessments to match the state standards and tests. As evidenced in the student
achievement data presented earlier, their investment paid significant returns. Certain
communication issues of generic varieties continued at RCSD and were not unlike those
any organization might experience. Still, the participants felt the district had made
significant gains in collaboration which led them out of “the dark days.”

A second major area of concern and one closely related to the discussion of
communication is that of preparation. Again, from their own unique perspectives, nearly
every participant expressed that not enough was done to properly prepare the teachers—
particularly those who were not trained to be PLC teacher leaders—for what was being
asked of them. In fact, Mrs. Burnett and Mrs. Ellis, two of the three ultimately
responsible for the implementation, noted shortcomings in this area before that portion of
interview questions was even presented to them. For them, they were counted as missed
steps; one might even call them regrets.

For others, however, they were factors that compounded the frustration of an already
difficult situation. Multiple remedies were offered by those participants in retrospect: book
studies, more substantial inservice, and more meaningful visits with/to other schools, to name a
few. Mr. Spooner, in particular, expressed recognition of missed opportunities: Why did we not
take a year longer? They were in a hurry. This was ram-rodded in a big hurry. Some
teachers in our town who worked in another district said they sent all, or at least a great
number of their teachers, to Rick DuFour’s school. Why didn’t we do that? Or why
wasn’t there a book study that was done for a full year with us being sent to...For
example, a group of us were sent up to visit a nearby district. There needed to be more
money and more time spent on subs to send our people to see how it works. If you’re
going to do it right, as this place thinks everything they do is the right way, why not send
18? Or, if you’re going to pick eight members in a team, all core subjects, why not pick
eight other people? Send them to Chicago and let them come back and mesh with the
other eight and see how it goes. Do that over a year’s time. It was rushed. It was
crammed...It was literally crammed down our throats. I’m asking you the same question: Why?
Why did it have to be done right then when it didn’t need to be done that way? That’s part of the
screw-up, in my opinion.

While Mr. Spooner’s choice of words was—as always—significantly more colorful than
the other interviewees’, the sentiment is essentially the same: more should have been done to
prepare for the implementation. Repeatedly, the interviewees mentioned such things as taking an
extra year, engaging in a book study, developing a more focused plan for the non-core teachers,
and adding components in staggered doses—all of which equate to taking extra time to prepare.
The specific term “baby steps” peppers the narratives.

For others, however, such things may not have mattered. Ronnie and Carl, for example,
both expressed a concern with what emerged as the third major area of concern: fidelity to the
program. Both teachers, as revealed in their narratives, had a basic understanding of the PLC
construct. While some might say this should have given them an advantage over others, it may
have done just the opposite. According to both, their recognition of the disparity between what it
should be and what it was is part of what caused them to question the steps being laid out before
them. Carl reflected, The most irritating thing to me is that—and not that I’m an expert—I knew
too much. I knew when I was being given these little kernels of things to follow... I knew what
was going to come next.

In the same vein, Ronnie offered, I’m not against change, and it seems like at this
school, in particular, anybody who asks questions or says no, the automatic reaction is,
“You’re against change! You’re old and crabby.” Where I’m really going is, “No, I’m not against change. If we’re going to do this, let’s do it right and make sure we really understand what is going on.” That’s what I would tell them.

The concerns about “doing it right” were not limited to Ronnie and Carl, the oft-labeled naysayers of RCSD’s PLC implementation. Cindy and Mr. Spooner also expressed concern that the district might not have even been a true PLC. In fact, both questioned whether the district deserved the statewide PLC award because it had strayed so far from the basic principles of the construct. Those four, Ronnie, Carl, Cindy, and Mr. Spooner, collectively mentioned significant underpinnings either lacking or completely missing at RCSD. Among them, inherent, meaningful collaboration, focus on instructional practices, data-driven decision-making, and shared leadership emerged as the most buzzworthy and in the literature presented earlier, among the most essential components of PLC.

These findings are presented as they were revealed in the narratives: personal, emotional, guttural. For a balanced look at those same problems, a second examination of the related literature is offered in an effort to identify the implications of the findings and to offer recommendations to the leaders of the district studied as well as those of other districts examining or considering their own implementation.

Implications and Recommendations

 Recommendation 1: Plan carefully for both organizational and cultural change.

Planning for PLC requires at least a simple recognition, if not a specific expectation, that change must occur on multiple levels. It is inevitable. While broad
strokes may be applied to revise the systemic organizational systems, more finesse is required to coax the professional and personal changes necessary to germinate culture. Granted, overhauling the organizational apple cart without bruising the apples is sure to prove troublesome, as it did for RCSD; however, examining the tasks in ever-decreasing concentric circles, finally focusing on the individual, can help the school leaders find focus and an order of operations.

In the outermost ring lie the organizational changes necessary in any transition into PLC. Restructuring the day-to-day practices and procedures is essential in cultivating an environment in which the blossoms of collaboration are allowed to grow. Considerations abound: the format and purpose of group meetings, the manner in which feedback is sought and offered, how expectations are communicated, to name a few. On the surface, such considerations may appear mundane and their significance negligible. On the contrary, establishing norms and expectations that speak clearly to the basic tenets of PLCs in these organizational areas plants a root system which can feed educational decisions later.

Laying directly in the path for such a systemic revision is one of the most perpetual and chronically insurmountable educational leadership goals ever considered: the provision of resources, the most elusive of which is time. Consider for a moment the provisions that must be made in order to create time for collaborative meetings, common preparatory times, creation of common instructional materials, analysis of data, and teaming both across and between grades/schools. Many (2009), commenting on the challenge offers, “There is no closet in which schools store extra time or secret desk drawer holding a stash of reflective moments. Simply put, because we are never going to
find more time, if we want to ensure that teachers work in teams we have to make time for collaboration.” Eaker, DuFour, and DuFour (2002) offer much the same advice, but offer that the issue of time is actually one of perspective and priorities. In other words, if an effort is important enough to set as a priority, creating the time for it should be as well. As the axiom goes, there is always time for what you make time for.

Narrowing in on those concentric circles, but just as important as the systemic changes, however, draws focus on the professional and personal changes required to foster the proper culture of PLCs. For many teachers, whose very livelihood exists both in their content knowledge and personality, personal and professional considerations are so inextricably intertwined, they bear discussion as if they were one and the same. Foremost among these is increased collaboration, including a willingness to share the good, the bad, and the ugly. “Isolation,” as noted by DuFour, DuFour & Eaker (2008), “is the enemy of school improvement. In fact, it is difficult to find either supporting research or advocates for the position that educators best serve their children, themselves, or the profession by working in isolation” (p. 177).

Fortunately, much of the same restructuring used to change the system, including and especially the perspective shift mentioned above, can also be fashioned to facilitate an emphasis on the professional change as well. When the organizational structure places emphasis on collaboration, but more importantly, provides the leadership and resources necessary to support those efforts, teachers see them as institutional values for which their district is willing to make investments. Reeves (2009) proposes the very recognition of “the way we do things around here,” is, quite simply put, culture. It stands to reason,
then, changing “the way we do things” also changes the culture. Increased collaboration must be a part of that change.

One broad stroke often referred to in the literature, particularly among DuFour and Eaker’s multiple works, is collaborating and unifying under a common mission and vision. Of these efforts, Rozycki (2004), offers, “Our educational institutions, responding to public pressure for the upbeat and the heart-warming, have become intellectually obese with happy talk: sweet slogans that enervate clear definition of goals, that obscure inquiry into their achievability, and that have provoked the ‘fad diets’ of standardized testing, teacher accountability, and lockstep curriculum” (p. 94). Sugary-sweet is not the prescription here. The mission needs to be a clear, decisive statement that simply answers, “Why are we here?” while the vision statement responds to, “What do we hope to become?” The ability to look to these two statements as guiding philosophies, as well as the deliberate act of coming together to develop them, can be great fuel for advancing a collaborative culture.

Existing in the innermost concentric circle, indeed the very bullseye, are the personal changes teachers must make in the midst of the professional and organizational changes taking place around them. In order for that to happen, teachers must come to the proverbial poker table prepared to place their most valuable chips in the ante: trust and knowledge. Administrators can help them hedge their bets by following Barth’s (2006) advice and rewarding those who behave as colleagues and protecting them and their assets from the deconstructive scrutiny of those unwilling to go all-in or even sit at the table. Thus, their investments are safe, but on the table and in the pot as a wager towards collective success. When this becomes a recognizable and dependable practice, “the way
we do things around here” changes again and can have the power to build confidence among those who may have been initially hesitant to lay those all-important chips down. When the setting is changed from an illustrative poker table to an actual planning table, teachers’ comfort in bringing their trust and knowledge with them becomes exponentially more valuable.

For administrators, the narrowing focus on the aforementioned concentric circles can be an effective means of leading a school or district through comprehensive change. First, the administrator must examine how the organizational structure works, then how the professionals within it work, followed finally by how the individuals work. Recognizing and planning for changes in these areas are necessary…even if it means the leaders must examine and eventually change themselves in the same ways as noted in the second recommendation.

*Recommendation 2: Demonstrate involvement by modeling behavior.*

Administrators must do more than lead a PLC implementation. Making an announcement, it is often said, is not making a change. “Principals must recognize that this task demands less command and control and more learning and leading; less dictating and more orchestrating” (DuFour and Eaker, 1998, p.184). They must experience it, live it, entrench themselves in it just as they would expect from their teachers. This is likely to require the same perspective shift mentioned in the organizational and professional changes designed to foster change in the teachers. Such a shift towards a few collective priorities can be difficult when faced with so many conflicting demands, influences, and variables.
“Educational leaders confront a bewildering array of recommendations, programs, and alternatives. We know that the least effective response is the simultaneous implementation of many different initiatives. But as bad as ‘initiative fatigue’ may be at one extreme, the other extreme—analysis paralysis—is no better” (Reeves, 2009, p. 107). On this latter end of the spectrum lay three administrators who should have taken the lead on the PLC initiative at RCSD: Mr. Taft in the district office, Mr. Hale at the middle school, and Mr. Spooner at the high school. Their unwillingness to act, however, left their respective assistants, Mrs. Burnett, Mrs. Ellis, and Mrs. Poole, to take up the initiative in an effort to improve student achievement.

Despite multiple obstacles, these ladies proved that they had the skills to complete the task they started. Consider, though, how many fewer obstacles might they have faced if the heads of their organizational levels had taken the same advice multiple teachers across the district thought they had heard at the first inservice: “Get on the boat, or get out!” Whether one chooses to label these laissez-faire administrators as lame ducks or remnants of a managerial style considered no longer effective, or chooses to believe they were caught in a maelstrom of excitement surrounding the potential for reform, the significance of their involvement in the process—or lack thereof—cannot be overstated.

Commenting on the power of true involvement from district leaders, DuFour and DuFour (2003), offer, “When the central-office team models the clear purpose, collaborative effort and focus on results that characterize a professional learning community, it increases the likelihood that those conditions will flourish in the schools it serves” (p. 13). As for principals, Wilhelm (2010) notes, “Principals who send their teachers off for staff development while they remain behind (or in their office, when it is
held onsite)—notably those where planning will occur for implementation of new classroom strategies, or changed school-wide practices—are broadcasting its relative unimportance” (p.23).

For both central office and building administrators, the first steps to getting involved and modeling behavior are found in the basic pillars of PLC. They are no different from those implemented by the teachers in any PLC and were identified as essential components as far back as the seminal works of the DuFours (2002, p.3):

1. Focus on learning.
2. Focus on collaborative culture.
3. Focus on results.
4. Provide timely, relevant information.

Administrators who take these basic tenets to heart and model their instructional practices after them will not only engender more learning-centered initiatives, but will also set the tone for those educators who work with them to do the same. After all, as Barth (2006) so eloquently quoted a bumper sticker, “You can’t lead where you won’t go.”

Recommendation 3: Practice and foster effective and productive communication.

Administrators, not just those—but especially those—facing an institutional change as comprehensive as PLCs, need to carefully consider their communication strategies as well as those afforded to the teachers whom they intend to lead. Foremost among these considerations are those components most clearly aligned with communication as it pertains to traditional leadership. Specifically, the administrator
needs to communicate clearly (Barth, 2006) and often with a focus on expectations. This should begin with the aforementioned consensus of mission, and perhaps more importantly, vision. Communicating with the teachers and in fact, all stakeholders, regarding what the district stands for and where it should be going is a positive initial step towards speaking the same language as those who might bring that vision to fruition. The same could be said, in smaller measures, regarding the adoption and implementation of new initiatives. Deliberate, focused communication that answers “Why are we doing this?” and “Where are we going?” has great potential to clarify motives and direction and reduce often negative and detrimental speculation.

While administrators must be careful to purposefully craft and practice their own communication, they must also consider the communication channels by which their teachers may communicate with them and with each other, as well. Servage (2008) notes, “Administrators, teacher leaders, and professional development specialists can, I believe, enhance the sustainability and long term effectiveness of a professional learning community by providing opportunities within its structure for teachers to hold open-ended conversations oriented to communicative learning…Teachers need to use their collaborative time to engage one another in hopeful, critical, and creative dialogue” (pp.74-75).

Such opportunities are born of the ultimate combination of the previously mentioned considerations: organizational and professional/personal change, provision of resources (specifically time), administrative involvement including modeled behavior, and purposeful communication. Laying these foundational components early and often in
the process not only provides a base on which construction can efficiently take place, the mere act of putting them into play communicates their importance.

Both in their own communication and in fostering communication among their teachers, administrators must engage in the previously mentioned perspective shift and prioritize. Making communication a priority will only prove to be effective if the communication is validated by also soliciting feedback and if the communication works to support the previously identified goals and values. “Principals of PLCs provide clarity and coherence when they remain focused on the purpose of their schools and their responsibilities as principals” (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008) p. 318.

Recommendation 4: Protect the integrity of the construct through deep understanding of the core principles and sustained fidelity.

One of the most important prerequisites for successful program implementation is also the most obvious: know the construct. While it may seem easy to tout the basic principles, guiding questions, and everything that a PLC should be, it is something else to understand what those things represent. For clarity, it behooves administrators to review the advice and navigation offered by those scholars who have peeled back the surface to determine what lay underneath. Special attention should be paid to the multiple works of the DuFours and Eaker which chronicle PLCs as organizational constructs as well as vehicles for cultural change designed to refocus schools on student learning, thereby increasing achievement. Talbert (2010) offers “…Deep understanding of the core principles of PLCs grounds effective change strategies. System approaches to
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engendering PLCs must develop through leaders’ understanding of both the what and why of changing professional culture” (p. 568).

Understanding the basics is only the first step. Administrators must continually replenish and refresh their knowledge base after implementation in order to sustain the PLC over time. This may include continued reading designed to stay abreast of current topics and trends, or inservice and meaningful networking designed to help one stay plugged into a professional community of practicing administrators. It may also include, from a different perspective, refreshing the portion of the knowledge base that contains what they know of their own school. This can be accomplished through clear communication which encourages feedback, staying current on data and trends on campus, and comparative analyses of both where they have been and where they stand in relation to state standards as well as in relation to other districts who share similar demographics. In short, they must not only stay current on what is going on the world of academia, but must also engage in ongoing, meaningful evaluation of their own school in order to fully recognize what is taking place right in their own front yards.

Another important way to sustain fidelity to the program is advised by Fullan (as cited by Zimmerman, 2004) who offers, “All successful schools experience ‘implementation dips’ as they move forward. The implementation dip is literally a dip in performance and confidence as one encounters and innovation that requires new skills and new understandings…Leaders who understand the implementation dip know that people are experiencing two kinds of problems when they are in the dip—the social-psychological fear of change, and the lack of technical know-how or skills to make the change work” (p241). With that in mind, administrators must not only expect these dips but also develop the tools required to navigate past them: careful planning, modeling behavior, communicating effectively, and persevering.
“The rise or fall of the professional learning community concept depends not on the merits of the concept itself, but on the most important element in the improvement of any school—the commitment and persistence of the educators within it” (Dufour, 2004, p.11).

Limitations and Recommendations for Further Study

Limitations

The greatest limitation of the study lay in the specific choice of examining a single location with limited individuals. The study is not likely to be wholly transferable as it deals with a specific group of individuals in a certain setting over a certain period of time. It does seem reasonable, however, to expect that some of the lessons learned will be universal, but contextually speaking, the overall focus is rather specific. It is my intent, then, that the study will serve the chosen community primarily, but will also include “take-aways” applicable to other educational settings.

Another limitation that could not be avoided is that the pool of participants available to provide the qualitative data needed for the final narrative was somewhat limited. Natural attrition of the potential pool has occurred through career changes, retirements, geographical relocations, death, and other extenuating circumstances. Those that remain and were asked to participate are suitable candidates, but a more comprehensive narrative could be constructed if I had access to more individuals who could share their perspectives on the transition process. Because of these facts, I have made an effort to include as many contributing participants as possible, but a comprehensive historical narrative is something of an impossibility.

Recommendations for Further Study
Future study might include a hybrid qualitative/action research study focusing on the ongoing implementation of PLC in the institution studied here. As disclosed above, several of the central figures involved in the initial implementation are no longer with the district, but most are still employed and engaged in the PLC process to one extent or another. It might interest a researcher, and certain readers in academia, to further chronicle their journeys amongst ever-changing trends in curriculum and assessment, competing demands for attention/resources, and evolving professional responsibilities.

A variation on the approach might include launching a PLC revival at the institution studied here. The recommendations offered above, or those found in the pertinent academic literature, particularly the seminal works of Eaker and the DuFours, could be used to revisit and refresh the best practices and founding principles of PLC touted in its initial implementation over a decade ago.

Another possible avenue for further study is the qualitative exploration of additional sites. A comparative analysis of the experiential commonalities and disparities of those working in different host locations may help to validate the findings presented here and in the pertinent academic literature. Stronger validation may add to the universally transferrable “take-aways,” and may also help identify PLC-related phenomena worthy of further research themselves.

Conclusion

This study was undertaken in an effort to understand more about the promise and perils of PLC implementation and, in particular, how they affect school culture. Because I accept the definition of culture as simply being “the way we do things around here,” I
must also accept that an immeasurable number of variables influence culture—tradition, personalities, successes and failure: variables that speak to “why we do things the way we do things around here.” Therefore, framing the cultural impact of PLCs as a simple cause-and-effect relationship would be cheating the PLC construct of its merit and the school’s culture of its weight and history.

PLCs, though they are undoubtedly a process, begin as an application lain across a surface that already exists at the time of implementation. If the culture has been properly prepared to accept the application, success is likely. If it has not, the fusion between the culture and the construct, and more importantly, how they might evolve together, are jeopardized before they even have a chance to flourish.
APPENDICES

Appendix A:
How Professional Learning Communities Affect School Culture
Informed Consent for Interview Participants

This form requests your consent to participate in a research study that explores the cultural impact of Professional Learning Communities. The project is assigned by the Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis program at the University of Missouri-Columbia. Data collection and analyses will be completed under the direction of Dr. Paul Watkins, Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis. The interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes.

Project description: This research project involves interviews with public school personnel who experienced the adoption of the PLC construct in their institution. The focus of this project is to examine the cultural impacts of that transition.

Potential Benefits and Concerns: Findings of this project will be integrated into reports, presentations, and/or publications that can advance scholarship around PLCs and the broader field of school culture.

Confidentiality: All information associated with project participants will be kept confidential and accessible only to the researcher. The final report will be submitted electronically to the university toward the researcher’s attainment of an advanced academic degree. It is possible that this research could yield further reports, presentations, and/or publications for use beyond academic studies at the university. In all cases, no comments will be attributed to you by name in any reports or publications related to this study. You may be identified by abroad professional title or category (e.g. “teacher,” “administrator,” etc.), but a pseudonym will be used in place of your name in all reports.

Audio recording: All interviews will be audio recorded and then transcribed. If you agree to have the interview recorded, you have the right to request the recorder be stopped at any time—either to stop the interview completely or to continue the interview unrecorded. You also have the right to review transcripts of your interview and the finished research project in its entirety.

Participation is Voluntary: Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you can decline to answer any questions or withdraw your participation in this study at any time without penalty. You can freely withdraw from the project at any time without negative consequences, and all data pertaining to you will be destroyed.

Questions: For general questions/concerns regarding the study, please contact the researcher using the contact information below or Dr. Paul Watkins at (573) 651-2136 or pwatkins@semo.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research project participant, you may contact the MU Institutional Review Board at 573-882-9585.

Please check the appropriate line to indicate that you have read and understand this letter:

_______ I agree to participate, and I give consent that the interview can be audio recorded.

_______ I agree to participate, but do not give consent to audio record the interview.
I choose not to participate.

Signed: _____________________________________ Date: _________________

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Appendix B:

How Professional Learning Communities Affect School Culture

Interview Questions

1. What was the school environment/culture before the adoption the time of the decision?
2. What factors led to the decision to adopt the PLC model?
3. How was the decision communicated to the staff? The community?
4. What was your reaction to the announcement? Others’ reactions?
5. How were the PLC lead teachers chosen? How were those choices received by the chosen teachers and by the remaining personnel?
6. How was the training structured?
7. What was the school environment/culture during the initial training/implementation?
8. What experiences/emotions are the strongest in your recollection of those days?
9. What changes in dynamics (procedural, interpersonal, cultural) do you recall?
10. Discuss the successes/failures of implementation.
11. Knowing what you know now, would you go advise this district ten years ago to go through with it?
12. What advice would you offer to a school considering a transition to the PLC model?
13. Who else should I speak to get a fuller understanding?
REFERENCES


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VITA

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