

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF ELEMENTARY TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES OF  
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

By

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this case study was to understand elementary teachers' perspectives of professional learning communities (PLCs) in a Southeastern United States elementary school. The theories guiding this study were Bandura's social theory and Herzberg, Mausner, and Synderman's two-factor theory of motivation. The research questions included: (a) How do elementary teachers describe the purpose of a PLC? (b) How do elementary teachers describe the experiences in PLCs? and (c) What are elementary teachers' perceptions of benefits and barriers of PLCs? This study aimed to explore the perspectives of elementary teachers in PLCs and the attitudes of these teachers who collaborate in PLCs. The setting was in the Southeastern United States school that has participated in PLCs for many years. A purposeful sample obtained allowed participants to have certain conditions to participate in the study. The sample size utilized 13 teachers. Data collected was through observations, surveys, questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups. Data was categorized, coded, and analyzed to determine themes and patterns. The results revealed elementary teachers' perceptions of PLCs as the following themes: benefits included (a) collaboration, (b) shared vision, (c) collective learning, (d) shared practice, and (e) supportive conditions, and barriers included (a) data, (b) pointless, (c) openminded, (d) coaches need more training, (e) norms, (f) roles, (g) agenda, (h) time and (i) trust. The elementary teachers indicated that PLCs are beneficial; however, overcoming some barriers must be part of the process. Recommendations for further study include elementary male teachers' perspectives of PLCs, other geographical locations, teachers' perspectives in secondary schools, and elementary teachers' perspectives on time allotted for PLCs.

***Keywords:* collaboration, Professional Learning Community, perspectives, elementary teachers**

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to my family. I thank each of you for the bottom of my heart. To my grandam, Betty Lipscomb, for always believing in me. Your words of wisdom shine the light on my path. To my parents, Darryl and Jacqueline Lyle, for your loving and God-fearing hearts. To my brother, Adairius Gardner, and my sister, Shannon Wise, for your encouraging words and unconditional love. To my church family, Hickory Grove Christian Methodist Episcopal Church for your prayers. To my son, Christian Bess, who means the world to me. Thank you for inspiring me to be a better version of myself each day. All things are possible with God!

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“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” Philippians 4:13. KJV

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### **List of Abbreviations**

College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI)

Early Intervention Program (EIP)

English as a Second Language (ESOL)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

Professional Learning Communities (PLC)

Professional Learning Community Assessment (PLCAR)

Response to Intervention (RTI)

Special Education (SPED)

Specialized Reading Instruction (SRI)

Strategies for Increasing School Success (SISS)

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Overview

School teachers are becoming discouraged by (a) the increasing number of students in their classrooms, (b) the focus of standardized test scores, (c) the incorporation of different teaching-learning strategies in classrooms containing students with highly diverse needs, (d) lack of a collaborative environment, and (e) lack of supportive leadership (Buttram & Farley-Ripple, 2016). Teachers who must deal with these issues all at once may experience job dissatisfaction (Vanblaere & Devos, 2018; Young, Cavanagh, & Moloney, 2018). As a result, professional growth may stifle because of the isolation found in the teaching profession. The isolation found in teaching may also lead to an early exit from the field of education, as evidenced by the percentage of teachers who leave the profession from job dissatisfaction. Teachers need to have time to collaborate with their colleagues to share ideas. The American Education Research Association (2014) found that every year, 500,000 teachers exit the classroom by moving to a different school setting or leaving the profession. The National Council on Measurement in Education (2014) reported that 40% to 50% of new teachers quit within the first five years of employment. A review of the literature uncovered an unbalanced and incomplete body of empirical knowledge about the status of job satisfaction related to professional learning communities (Locke, 1976). In Chapter 1, I gave a history of professional learning communities (PLCs) and discussed how PLCs have evolved. Second, I discussed the theoretical influences and descriptions of Herzberg, Mausner, and Synderman (1959) and Herzberg's two-way theory of motivation (1964), and Bandura's (1965) social theory. Third, I explained my motivation for conducting this study. Few studies provided an in-depth understanding of elementary teachers' perspectives of PLCs. The purpose of the case study was to understand elementary teachers'

perspectives of PLCs in a Southeastern United States elementary school. The research questions answered: (a) What are elementary teachers' perspectives of PLCs? (b) What are elementary teachers' insights on collaboration in PLCs? The objective of the study was to explore the perceptions and insights of K-5 elementary teachers regarding PLCs.

## **Background**

When individuals worked with a partner or with a group, most of them will opt to be a part of a group (Prest & Burns, 2018). There was a sense of community and feeling of relief that you do not have to complete an assignment or do a project alone. Having the opportunity to share ideas with others builds confidence in people. PLCs offered the same opportunity for teachers to feel a part of a group (Mintzes, Marcum, Messerschmidt-Yates, & Mark, 2013).

## **Historical**

PLCs appeared among researchers around the 1960s (DuFour, 2004). PLCs began to provide an alternative to the isolation of the teaching profession (Bayar, 2014). Rosenholtz's (1989) study of 78 schools found "learning-enriched schools" were characterized by "collective commitments to student learning in collaborative settings, where it is assumed improvement of teaching is a collective rather than individual enterprise, and that analysis, evaluation, and experimentation in concert with colleagues are conditions under which teachers improve" (p. 18). Teacher collaboration linked to shared goals focused on student achievement led to improved teacher learning. Teacher collaboration also led to higher levels of teacher satisfaction.

The relevant question in a professional learning community is not "was it taught?" but rather, "was it learned?" The shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning defines the work of a professional learning community (Bush, 2016). Educators cannot fulfill the fundamental purpose of learning for all if they work in isolation (Ning, Lee, & Lee, 2015).



Therefore, teachers must work collaboratively to address those issues that have the most significant impact on student learning and must take collective responsibility to ensure the learning takes place (Tony, 2018; Wang, 2015). Educators will not know the extent to which students are learning unless they have a results orientation, constantly seeking evidence, and indicators of student learning (Bush, 2018). Teachers will use that evidence to identify students who need additional time and support for education and to inform and improve their practice in the classroom (Kruse & Johnson, 2017).

The concept of collaborative problem solving among professionals in education is not a new idea; instead, it reflects an evolution of the American education system that began in the early 1900s (Owens, 2010). Teachers worked independently, and students had little interaction with their teachers before the collaborative model (Hargreaves, 2003; Ning et al., 2015). The isolated teaching environment, known as the pre-professional age, was based on the factory system, where all teachers instructed students using similar methods, and inexperienced teachers had little assistance (Owens, 2010).

During the pre-professional age, the instruction delivered was commonly delivered through teacher-centered lectures with no collaboration among colleagues or teachers; this referred to “silo teaching” (p. 127). (Hargreaves, 2003). Throughout the pre-professional education era (1900-1950), researchers discussed collaborative learning groups which evolved into learning communities (Lunenburg, 2010; Phillips, 2003)). Meiklejohn (1932) documented his experiences with the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin during the 1920s. Throughout the process, instructors worked with students to design a meaningful curriculum to teach the students to become responsible members of society while receiving a general education. The concept of learning communities continued to evolve from the pre-professional

age into the professional era (1950-1960) (Phillips, 2003). Discussions between students and instructors viewed as chaotic, but the intent to walk collaboratively through the education process felt among all. Although the Experimental College lasted only five years, the impact was immeasurable as the terminology of the learning community was born. Meiklejohn suggested that collaboration among teachers would prove beneficial through meaningful curriculum design for students.

During the postmodern era (2000-present), principals and teachers transformed schools into collaborative environments focused on student improvement and professional growth in efforts to break down the “silo effect” (p. 127). (Eaker & Keating, 2008; Hargreaves, 2003; Hord, 2004). During postmodern era, the term professional learning community (PLC) became prevalent through the significant work of DuFour at Adlai Stevenson High School in Illinois. Through his efforts, the school was heralded by the United States Department of Education as one of “the most recognized and celebrated schools in America” (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006, p. xix). Throughout the following years (2000-2014), the pressure to improve learning for all children altered the landscape of education and stimulated interest in PLCs (Supovitz, 2002; Thornburg & Mungai, 2011; & Wenger, 2000). Consequently, professional development intended to enhance teaching practices through teacher collaboration (Joyce, 2004). Teachers became more comfortable in collaborative environments, their confidence rose, and teachers began tackling student-achievement problems through problem-solving and inquiry. Successful teacher collaboration influenced student achievement, increased teacher empowerment through building leadership capacity, and provided continuous support of teacher professional growth (Hord, 2004). Subsequently, the potential for improvement that lies within the school exists in the capacity of the teachers (Hargreaves, 2003; Hord, 2004; Joyce, 2004).

## **Social**

Throughout the Bible, some scriptures encourage collaboration. In Romans 12: 4-6, “For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. Having then gifted differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith” (King James Version). These verses are encouraging individuals to share ideas. The collaboration found in Ecclesiastes 4:9-12, “Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up. Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone? And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken” (King James Version). These verses focus on having two people together will all one to encourage the other. Lastly, Proverbs 27:17 states, “Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend” (King James Version). Collaboration helps people to learn from one another.

Collaboration is an essential skill that is in different facets of life. Collaboration allowed people to connect (Prest & Burns, 2018). For example, in the business world, it is easy to read an article or magazine, but being able to share and discuss the information with others has its benefits (Rees, Breen, Cusack, & Hegney, 2015). Collaborating with colleagues can inspire an individual to try things in a different way (Schaap & de Bruijn, 2018). Networking is a great way to utilize collaboration. Being successful in business requires alliances to be formed. A company would be in trouble if it only sold to the same customers. The company must network with others to make the business grow (Pontefract, 2014). Businesses can also save money by collaborating with other companies. If a company works with another company, part of the terms

may be to share marketing and development expenses (Carpenter, 2017). Another advantage of collaboration is being able to problem-solve. There is an undeniable power in numbers. If one person cannot accomplish something on his or her own, two or more people may be able to get it done (Eriksson, Bihari-Axelsson, & Axelsson, 2012). Reflect on the last difficult problem that a business has faced. Whenever a question arises, many people will immediately turn to a partner or trusted resource to help work through the issue (Rees et al., 2015).

Collaboration is on television. Scooby-Doo displayed collaboration when the meddling kids—Velma, Daphne, Fred, Shaggy, and Scooby-Doo. Each one would bring their talents to the team (Baek & Kim, 2015). The crew would band together and put the pieces together to solve a mystery. In addition, “America Says” is a game show that has a team that works together to answer the most popular responses by Americans (Soane & Foster, 2017). “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire” also presented contestants with the opportunity to phone a friend and ask the audience.

Collaboration develops at an early age. Students bring their talents while working towards a common goal (Heggen, Raaen, & Thorsen, 2018). Students are accountable to each other within a reasonable limitation (Menconi, & Grohmann, 2018). Students better understand and anticipate differences. Collaboration embedded knowledge through listening and sharing. A student was more likely to remember something he or she learned from a peer than from a broadcast in front of the classroom (Christ, Arya, & Chiu, 2017). Collaboration provided productive discussions over new ideas for solving tasks that make it more memorable (Kohfeldt & Langhout, 2012).

### **Theoretical Background**

Dewey (1933), a contemporary of Meiklejohn (1932), wrote that learning processes are

experiences that should be shared among teachers and students collaboratively. In Dewey's research, individual students and teachers shared responsibility in what students learned while actively working in groups to solve problems. Dewey's (1933) analysis denoted the impact of students' curiosities and desires to be intellectually challenged. Thus, the teachers' responsibility in the classroom was to propel students and stimulate their minds, leading to collaboration among students and teachers within the learning process. Dewey perceived education to be a process of building on prior knowledge and skills while providing students with ample opportunities to acquire necessary experiences to achieve such endeavors. Dewey believed that by including students in the journey of learning, the chance for success was much more significant. The concept of collaboration leads to Dewey's fundamental educational philosophy of "an active education promotes lifelong learning" (p. 36). Although Dewey never actually used the term learning communities, his efforts exemplified collaborative learning and provide the foundation for thriving learning communities in present times.

During the 1950s, the space race increased the need for students skilled in higher levels of mathematics and science to compete with Russian scientists for the domination of space exploration (Olivier & Huffman, 2016). The focus on advanced learning contributed to more teacher autonomous individualization than ever before (Hargreaves, 2003). As a result, teachers instructed students within the confines of their classrooms, thus creating professional isolation referred to as the "silo effect" (p. 127). The silo effect occurred when teachers worked independently without sharing or collaborating with colleagues (Fisher & Frey, 2012). Consequently, the independence and autonomy of teachers eventually hurt accomplishing the general improvement of learning (Joyce, 2004).

The persistence of teacher autonomy and isolation lasted well into the 1970s and 1980s;

however, the emergence of a global economy heightened concern for improving student learning (Olivier & Huffman, 2016). Reformers criticized the inability of autonomous teachers to effectively educate students to meet the demands of a shifting social, economic, and political landscape (Northouse, 2010). Globalization and a need to improve the overall education of students gave way to the professional age (1980s-1990s), which underscored the importance of teacher collaboration to improve instruction. The shift in philosophy was supported by federal- and state-mandated standardized testing and grants to support the development of teacher quality and collaboration (Hargreaves, 2003). High-stakes standardized testing and accountability forced schools to focus on improving student academic performance (i.e., test scores) through collaborative practices. Although educators were aware of the need for change, many teachers appreciated former times when they did not have to meet with peers and could deliver their instruction without outside influences (Hargreaves, 2003; Hord, 2004; Joyce, 2004).

### **Situation to Self**

During my first year of teaching, I felt very overwhelmed with all the demands. I had to manage a classroom of 25 students, differentiate instruction for each student, create lesson plans, and other teaching responsibilities. Each year, I began to seek out assistance from other teachers. Working in PLCs helped me to see that I was not the only person who was experiencing stress. I have been teaching for close to 10 years, and I have seen many teachers leave the teaching field. I cannot help but think that many of them left the teaching because of the isolation found in the profession. PLCs could be a source of support for teachers who are feeling overwhelmed.

Social constructivism is a worldview in which individuals seek to understand the world where they live and work (Creswell, 2012). Subjective meanings developed through experiences. The researcher looks for the complexity of views instead of putting the purposes into categories.

The intended outcome is for the researcher to rely on the participants' views on the situation (Adams, 2014; Woodland, 2016). The subjective meanings form through interactions with others. Open-ended questions are better for discussions. The researcher listens to what the participants say and do — social constructivist addresses the process of communication, among others. Researchers are aware of how their backgrounds shape their interpretations. Rather than starting with a theory, researchers develop an approach or a pattern of meaning. The constructivist worldview is seen more in phenomenological studies (Adams, 2014).

As I researcher, I agreed with the underlying philosophical assumptions. I brought my worldview; it shaped the direction of my research. Creswell (2012) described three philosophical assumptions: Ontological, Epistemological, and Axiological. As a researcher, I brought beliefs and philosophical assumptions to my research. Ontology is the study of being or reality. Does it seek to answer, what is fact? In qualitative studies, I worked with multiple occurrences. I embraced different realities. The evidence of various realities included the use of many forms of evidence in themes. I used the actual words of different individuals and presented different perspectives (Devers, 2000). Epistemology questions how you know something. Epistemology focused on knowledge. I tried to study as close as possible to the participants. Subjective evidence was collected based on personal views. Knowledge gained was through their own experiences. As I completed this research study, I was aware that what I experienced in PLCs was not what others might experience (Adams, 2014). Axiological examined the role of values. Researchers share their benefits as well as the value-laden nature of information gathered from the field (Devers, 2000). The costs that I had may not be the same values others share.

All three assumptions guided my study as related to the nature of reality, and the value of its distinct characteristics. I was concerned with what is the form and nature of existence.

Notably, the perceived truth discovered was from the study participants who have experienced PLCs (Devers, 2000).

### **Problem Statement**

Teachers spend approximately 95% of their school day without any interaction with an adult, which results in teachers feeling isolated from their colleagues and no possibilities of collaborations amongst them (Song & Choi, 2017). Collaboration, as defined by Chrislip and Larson (1994), is “a mutually beneficial relationship between two or more parties who work toward common goals by sharing responsibility, authority, and accountability for achieving results” (p.18). Regardless of the many efforts of administrators to create time for collaboration, teachers often use this time to grade papers and to complete paperwork. Collaborative planning is the key to effective teaching (Song & Choi, 2017). Without collaboration, teachers may not gain the tools and strategies for teaching the standards. A lack of collaboration may lead to teachers lacking classroom management, unprepared and disengaging lessons, all of which will negatively impact students as well as teachers (Buttram & Farley-Ripple, 2016). Little (2003) described teacher collaboration as the missing link in school reform. In the study of over 1,000 elementary teachers in New York City, Little found students showed higher gains in math achievement when their teachers reported frequent conversations with their colleagues that focused on math. A case study that investigates elementary teachers’ perspectives of PLCs may provide a solution to the problem of a lack of collaboration amongst elementary teachers in PLCs (Prenger, Poortman, & Handelzalts, 2018).

The knowledge gained from this research may help to inform educators as to the challenges and benefits of grade-level interdisciplinary collaboration in elementary schools (Williams, 2018). A substantial body of research was found on the implementation and benefits



of PLCs, yet there was minimal research giving voice to elementary teachers' perspectives of PLCs (Qiao, Yu, & Zhang, 2018; & Schneider & Kipp, 2015). This study may add to the body of research that exists, providing further depth and breadth of knowledge regarding fostering collaborative learning through PLCs in elementary schools (Gray, Kruse, & Tarter, 2016). School administrators and teachers may gain insight into factors affecting collaboration through the PLC model in elementary schools, which could lead to the increased success of PLCs in their schools. Researchers and educators engaged in PLCs may also benefit from this study. By understanding Southeastern U. S. elementary school teachers' experiences in PLCs, researchers and educators may have a better understanding of the factors and conditions that influence successful implementation, and as a result, may offer specific steps to increase the effectiveness of collaboration among teachers (Schneider & Kipp, 2015).

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this case study was to understand elementary teachers' perspectives of their experiences in PLCs in Southeastern United States elementary schools. At this stage in the research, PLCs definition is organized groups providing the social interaction that often deepens learning and the interpersonal support and synergy necessary for creatively solving the complex problems of teaching and learning (Battersby & Verdi, 2015; Williams, 2018). Elementary teachers are teachers who teach grades K-5. Teachers must have at least two years of experience in PLCs. Two theories are guiding this study. One theory is Herzberg, Mausner, and Synderman (1959) and Herzberg's (1964) two-way theory of motivation. Herzberg, Mausner, and Synderman (1959) determined that an employee's work environment could cause satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The second theory guiding this study is Bandura's social theory (1965). Lack of

collaborative interactions by teachers limits their ability to access new ideas and solutions that could lead to dissatisfaction with their profession (Schneider & Kipp, 2015).

### **Significance of the Study**

Though there have been many studies conducted on the topic of PLCs and indicate that there is a significant gap in the research between the theoretical benefits of PLCs and the actual benefits of this collaborative work, there is a need to seek elementary teachers perspectives of PLCs (Raharinaivo-Falimanana, 2017; Shabeeb, & Akkary, 2014; Slegers, Brok, Verbiest, Moolenaar, & Daly, 2013). Furthermore, there has been a limited number of qualitative studies conducted among elementary school teachers to understand how they experience this collaboration. Of these studies, few studies focused on the experiences of elementary school teachers on interdisciplinary PLCs (Gilbert, Voelkel, & Johnson, 2018). Until researchers and educators fully understand how elementary school teachers experience the cultural change that collaboration represents, the benefits of PLCs will not be fully understood (Budgen, 2017; & Sperandio & Kong, 2018).

The knowledge gained from this research may help to inform educators as to the challenges and benefits of grade-level interdisciplinary collaboration in elementary schools. This study may add to the body of research that exists, providing further depth and breadth of knowledge regarding fostering collaborative learning through PLCs in elementary schools. Researchers and educators engaged in PLCs may also benefit from this study. By understanding how elementary school teachers experience collaboration in PLCs, researchers and educators could understand the factors and conditions that influence successful implementation, and as a result, offer specific steps to increase the effectiveness of collaboration among teachers. School administrators and teachers may gain further insight into factors hindering and facilitating

effective collaboration through the PLC model in high schools, which could lead to the increased success of PLCs in their schools. Not only may this study benefit educators, but it may also be beneficial to those in the private sector. Non-educators may use the findings about PLCs with their colleagues.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this case study was to understand elementary teachers' perspectives of PLCs in a Southeastern United States elementary school. The following questions guided this study:

RQ1. How do elementary teachers describe the purpose of a PLC? Teachers must know the reason why they are participating in a PLC. Educators need a way to meet regularly to share expertise. Educators also need ways to improve their teaching skills (Chen, Lee, Lin, & Zhang, 2016; & Song & Choi, 2017). PLCs tend to serve two purposes. First, PLCs seek to improve the skills and knowledge of educators through collaborative study, exchange expertise, and professional dialogue. Second, PLCs promote the educational achievement of students through stronger leadership and teaching. PLCs provide a way to have continuously question, reevaluate, reflect, and develop teaching strategies. Goals are the driving force of PLCs (Ning et al., 2015).

RQ2. How do elementary teachers describe their experiences in PLCs? Elementary teachers will describe what they have experienced when they are in PLCs. Elementary teachers bring different perspectives to PLCs, and relationships can become stronger when people can communicate in PLCs. PLCs offer teachers an environment that will allow them to respond to what they learn in PLCs (Bates, Huber, & McClure, 2016; & Koellner & Jacobs, 2015). In PLCs, teams build thoughts around shared roles and responsibilities. Participants review lesson plans

and give recommendations for improvement. Student work examples viewed and discussed can provide growth to the students' work (Schaap & de Bruijn, 2018).

RQ3. What are elementary teachers' perceptions of benefits and barriers of PLCs? PLCs have benefits and drawbacks. There can be struggles during the initial phase of implementation of PLCs (Bush, 2018). Some people question if PLCs can have a positive impact on student learning. Having staff that is willing to buy into PLCs is important (Bush, 2018). The progress of PLCs needs monitoring to see what is working. Schools need to learn from others who have experienced or experiencing PLCs (Kruse & Johnson, 2017).

### **Definitions**

1. *Collaboration*- Collaboration, as defined by Chrislip and Larson (1994), is “a mutually beneficial relationship between two or more parties who work toward common goals by sharing responsibility, authority, and accountability for achieving results” (p. 18).
2. *Employee satisfaction*- Job satisfaction is an individual's attitude toward the job he or she performs and includes the level of satisfaction an individual experience in a role within an organization. The term "satisfaction" is the degree of pleasure or enjoyment an individual receives from doing his/her job (Hubbert, 2003).
3. *Job satisfaction*- Job satisfaction is the favorable or unfavorable subjective feeling with which employees view their work. Job satisfaction occurs when job requirement demands and employee expectations are congruent. When a harmonious relationship exists among employees and job expectations and rewards (Kreitner & Kinicki, 1998), it results in job satisfaction.

4. *Leadership*- Yukl (2006) defined leadership as “the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives” (p. 8). Northouse (2010) defined leadership as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (p. 3).
5. *Leadership effectiveness*- Williams (2004) suggested this concept refers to the leader’s ability to bring about desired results. It involves meeting the job-related needs of subordinates and contributing to the effectiveness of the organization.
6. *Distributed leadership*- Mobilizing leadership expertise at all levels in the school to generate more opportunities for change and to build the capacity for improvement (Chrislip & Larson, 1994).
7. *Professional Learning Community*- A community of educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students the educators serve. PLCs operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for educators (DuFour et al., 2006).
8. *Time management*- Time management is the ability to organize and execute one’s time based on priorities (Covey, 1989).
9. *Teacher Attitude*- Teacher attitude is to act favorable or unfavorable towards a situation (Richardson, 1996).

### **Summary**

Elementary teachers are feeling isolated. A possible cause of this problem is the lack of collaboration of elementary teachers. When teachers are isolated, teachers lose out on

meaningful conversations with their colleagues. A case study that investigates elementary teachers' perspectives of PLCs may provide a solution to the problem of a lack of collaboration amongst elementary teachers in PLCs (Prenger et al., 2018). The purpose of this case study is to understand elementary teachers' perspectives of their experiences in PLCs in Southeastern United States elementary schools. Two theories are guiding this study. One theory is Herzberg, Maunser, and Synderman (1959), and Herzberg's (1964) two-way theory of motivation. Herzberg, Maunser, and Synderman (1959) determined that an employee's work environment could cause satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The second theory guiding this study is Bandura's social theory (1965). There are three questions this study will seek to answer: (a) How do elementary teachers describe the purpose of a PLC? (b) How do elementary teachers describe their experiences in PLCs? and (c) What are elementary teachers' perceptions of benefits and barriers of PLCs? School administrators and teachers may gain further insight into factors hindering and facilitating effective collaboration through the PLC model.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Overview

The purpose of this case study was to understand elementary teachers' perspectives of PLCs in a Southeastern United States elementary school. The theoretical framework that guided this study was Herzberg, Mausner, and Synderman (1959) and Herzberg's (1964) two-factor theory of motivation, and Bandura's social theory (1965). This study defined a PLC and explained what a PLC is not. It examined the different characteristics of a PLC. PLCs investigated benefits and barriers. This study was used to explain PLCs and describe collaboration. It explored the examination of the benefits and obstacles of collaboration. Finally, the study explored the relationship formed between PLCs and collaboration.

### Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework of this study was from two theories, Herzberg, Mausner, and Synderman (1959) and Herzberg's (1964) two-factor theory of motivation, and Bandura's social theory (1965). Professional collaboration settings allowed teachers to discuss different educational practices that can benefit students (DuFour et al., 2005). Different strategies, classroom management skills, and instructional methods can be reviewed and evaluated. Working alone does not provide teachers with a chance to determine if what teachers are doing is effective (DuFour, 2004). Herzberg's (1964) two-factor theory of motivation suggested that employees motivated by personal achievement, recognition, the work itself, responsibility, advancement, and growth. These motivators revealed themselves when teachers collaborate through the support of a professional learning community environment.

Herzberg, Mausner, and Synderman (1959) constructed a two-dimensional model of factors affecting people's attitudes about their job. Herzberg, Mausner, and Synderman Herzberg,

Mausner, and Synderman discovered elements, such as company policy, supervision, interpersonal relations, working conditions, and salary do not motivate people. According to the theory, when removing these factors, attitudes may create job dissatisfaction. On the other hand, Herzberg, Mausner, and Synderman determined from the data that the motivators were elements that enhanced a person's job. Herzberg, Mausner, and Synderman initiated five factors that were strong indications of job satisfaction: achievement, recognition, the work itself, responsibility, and advancement. These motivators connected to long-term positive effects on job performance, but the dissatisfiers consistently produced short-term changes in job attitudes and performance. The motivators that linked to job satisfaction—achievement, recognition, the work itself, responsibility, and advancement—may be connected to collaboration in PLCs.

Bandura's (1965) social learning theory stated that learning can happen when people observe others. Three critical ingredients needed for social learning are observation, imitation, and modeling. Bandura indicated that people could learn by watching. For example, if a teacher implemented a comprehension strategy, it does not mean the teacher who saw it would use that same strategy. The next stage in social learning is imitation. Imitation occurs when someone is trying to replicate observations. It will happen if a person sees the desired outcome. When an individual receives positive reinforcement from a behavior, he or she will likely repeat that behavior. The last phase of the social learning theory is modeling. It has a process. Bandura's four critical components of modeling include attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation.

In the teaching profession, teacher candidates learn how to follow the social learning theory. In undergraduate school, prospective teachers must observe veteran teachers. Prospective teachers schedule a time to come to the classroom to observe classroom management skills and engaging lessons (Lotter, Thompson, Dickenson, & Rea, 2018). The prospective teachers must



determine which instructional strategies they will be willing to try for their class. In the next phases, novice teachers will experience imitating and modeling. Prospective teachers try to copy the specific instructional strategy they have seen the veteran teacher use in their classroom (Tan & Caleon, 2016). Some prospective teachers find that specific instructional strategies do not work for them as observed. Novice teachers will be more likely to replicate a strategy if they observed that instructional strategy implemented effectively. Having the right tools alone will not make a teacher utilize an approach (Spencer, 2016). The teacher must be motivated to put the instructional strategies into practice.

The exploratory research underscored Bandura's social learning theory on collective agency to investigate co-teaching partners' collaboration regarding reading instruction for students with disabilities (Holmes & Sime, 2014). Students whose individualized education programs (IEP) stipulate reading are dependent on special educators to deliver such instruction (King-Sears, Stefanidis, & Brawand, 2019). In the current research, many barriers to implementation of specialized reading instruction (SRI) in co-taught classes exist. Based on the research results, we concluded that co-planning and perceived benefits of co-teaching influenced the implementation of SRI, with perceived benefits of co-teaching strengthening the relationship between co-planning and barriers to the implementation of SRI (King-Sears, et al., 2019).

Warren and Loes (2019) conducted a study that considered the use of peer observational learning experiences to improve the teaching of negotiation. Warren and Loes examined observational learning in the context of Bandura's social cognitive theory to enhance the efficacy of an observational learning experience. Warren and Loes examined observational learning in the context of Bandura's social cognitive theory and used the four sub-processes identified therein to enhance the efficacy of an observational learning experience. Warren and Loes considered the

learning benefit of observing peers, rather than experts as used in previous studies. Two groups of students were considered: (a) students who participated only in simulation, with no opportunity for peer observations and (b) students who participated in real time, in person observation of their peers engaging in negotiation exercises. The effects were evaluated in three ways: the scorable negotiation results, expert review of the videotaped negotiations and self-reported comments on the observation experience.

### **Related Literature**

The literature review facilitates the creation of new knowledge by providing and integrating accumulated knowledge in an area of study (Creswell, 2012). The analysis of literature led to the identification of themes that are characterized by the organization of the following discussion: (a) characteristics of a professional learning community, (b) the nature of a collaborative culture, (c) improvement of student learning in a collaborative environment, and (d) the benefits and challenges of collaboration.

### **Definition of a Professional Learning Community**

The term PLC described combinations of individuals with interest in education. When professionals are learning together and collaborating consistently, with collective goals, the professionals will eventually develop a community (Dogan, Pringle, & Mesa, 2016). Teachers are at the heart of PLCs. Teachers take an opportunity to contribute their experiences about what they believe will help students (Dehdary, 2017). Rosenholtz (1989) made a connection between teachers who felt supported in their ongoing learning and classroom practices were more effective than those who did not receive the support. Teachers who received support from colleagues indicate an increase in teacher efficacy in meeting the needs of students (Dogan et al., 2016).

No two PLCs will look the same--they can be large or small. PLCs can work within a formal setting or operate more loosely. PLCs can utilize at different levels---school level, district level, etc. (Moore, 2018; Skerrett & Williamson, 2015). In PLCs, stakeholders must have met. Usually, PLCs will meet regularly over a specific period. Participants must share the same beliefs and behavior (Avalos, 2011; Wennergren, 2017).

### **Professional Learning Communities**

The research conducted was about the benefits of PLCs (Bishay, 1996; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006). Hargreaves and Fink (2006) stated that “it is vital that teachers engage in action, inquiry, and problem-solving together in collegial teams or professional learning communities” (p. 25). Wells (2008) found that, within a professional learning community, teachers are actively collaborating, sharing their expertise, honing their skills, and learning from each other. A search of the literature revealed an incomplete and unbalanced body of knowledge about PLCs, which was lacking, commonalities in explanations that include definitions of (a) faculty commitment to student learning, (b) the meaning of working in collaboration, and (c) inconsistent reflection on student data (Wennergren, 2017; Williams, 2012;). PLCs offered a collaborative type of professional development within a job-embedded context. Thriving learning communities evolve by building professional relationships with a focus on doing what is best for students instead of focusing on personal issues. Schools that value and nurture a collaborative type of teacher development are catalysts for significant and long-lasting school reform (Chen et al., 2016; Lieberman & Miller, 2016).

### **What a PLC is not?**

The definition of a PLC determined what a PLC is not. Complaining without solving the problem is not helpful in PLCs. Expressing displeasure should be temporary (Dogan et al., 2016). PLCs are not a place to put down other teachers' ideas. PLCs are used to share each other thoughts about the predetermined educational topic. PLCs are not a place to gossip about other educators or administrators. Gossiping about others is a waste of time (Murphy, 2015). Voicing concern about a subject is different than talking about another teacher. Gossiping does not lend itself to find a solution to a predetermined educational topic (Chue, 2016). Lecturing by one dominant member is not productive in PLCs. People must be able to share their thoughts on different subject matters (Guzman, 2018).

### **DuFour's Three Concepts**

Professional learning community literature delved deep into what DuFour (2004) referred to three of the significant ideas that characterize the primary focus of PLCs: (a) ensuring that students learn, (b) a culture of collaboration, and (c) a focus on results. The first concept is that “the very essence of a learning community is a focus on and a commitment to the learning of each student” (pg.48). (DuFour, et al., 2006). DuFour, et al. posited that when a school functions as a professional learning community, the faculty takes responsibility and expects high levels of learning for all students. This first concept, ensuring that students learn, has gained attention in recent years as educators have shifted from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning. DuFour (2004) claimed that although school mission statements often promise “learning for all”; they are often clichés rather than reflective of existing practice. However, when professional learning community members within a school commit to a common mission, they pledge the success of each student and move forward as a group to answer the following 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 has trouble learning?” (p. 8).

Concerning these questions, DuFour (2004) posited that when a school faculty adequately address these inquiries, it transforms a traditional school into a professional learning community, and students reap the benefits. The third question, which focuses on the struggling student, is most impactful as “teachers become aware of the incongruity between their commitment to ensuring learning for all students and their lack of a coordinated strategy to respond when some students do not learn” (p. 8). Further, professional learning community members’ response to struggling students is timely, based on intervention rather than remediation, and directive.

The second concept DuFour (2004) posited that a professional learning community embraced of collaborative teams within which faculty rely on each other for support and are accountable to each other as they aim to achieve common goals (DuFour et al., 2006). Thus, the second concept concerned a culture of collaboration. Within the professional learning community, structures were put into place for faculty to engage in professional dialogue that extends beyond topics about social climate, operational procedures, and focuses on instruction (Hallinger, Lee, & Ko, 2014). DuFour (2004) stated, “the powerful collaboration that characterizes professional learning communities is a systematic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practice” (p. 9). As team members engage in a continuous cycle of inquiry, profound learning opportunities occurred for them, and this process leads to notable gains in student achievement. Teachers are forthcoming about their goals, teaching practices, materials, pacing, questions, concerns, and results. DuFour indicated that, “these discussions give every teacher someone to turn to and talk to, and they are explicitly

structured to improve the classroom practice of teachers – individually and collectively” (p. 10). DuFour asserted that a devoted group of staff members, when given the proper supports, will stop making common excuses, such as, “we just can’t find the time;” instead, they “will find a way” (p. 52). to collaborate and build the collaborative culture of a professional learning community.

The third concept focused on results. The singular focus occurred when “members of a professional learning community realize that all of their efforts assessed by results rather than intentions” (DuFour et al., 2006, p. 10). Once the baseline student performance emerged, working together on behalf of students becomes routine for the staff. The team created a goal to improve on that current level of performance while providing evidence of the goal’s progress. Researchers such as DuFour et al. and Senge (2006) agreed that data is necessary to measure progress and to provide evidence to the team continually. PLCs must focus on examining results to improve student learning (DuFour, 2004; Feger & Arruda, 2008; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1994; Louis & Kruse, 2004). When teachers collaborate, teachers can better figure out ways to assist their students.

### **Characteristics of a PLC**

A professional learning community can be identified because it manifests specific features. First, it must have shared values and vision (Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, & Wallace, 2005; DuFour, 2004; Feger & Arruda, 2008; Hord, 1997; Kruse et al., 1994). A vision does not just have a good idea. A vision has an image that is important to a group of people. When someone values something, an appreciation develops. Shared values and vision should create norms. Teachers and administrators share a vision focused on student learning and a

commitment to improvement in a professional learning community (Budgen, 2017; Reichstetter, 2006).

Traditional models of professional teacher development typically consist of gathering a group of teachers to listen to an expert disseminate information and strategies that teachers are to take back to their classrooms and use (Lujan & Day, 2010; Kennedy, 2011). Traditional models of professional learning have its place in education, but a more student-focused form of professional development for teachers delivered through the implementation of PLCs is more effective (Qiao et al., 2018; Williams, 2018). This shift in thinking has brought PLCs to the forefront of professional development by promoting high-quality teacher development sessions that allow teachers to transform their teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2008; Leclerc, Moreau, Dumouchel, & Sallafranque-St. Louis, 2012).

Successful implementation and participation in a PLC provide positive outcomes for both teachers and students (Fresko & Nasser-Abu Alhija, 2015). For teachers, participating in PLCs provided them with an outlet to reduce isolation by offering opportunities to work with colleagues and focus on student progress and performance (Lieberman & Miller, 2016; Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Participation in a PLC also allowed teachers to communicate with colleagues and transform their teaching through the reflection of ideas and observations from others (Crowley, 2015). Teachers were thriving in this type of collaborative environment by designing engaging lessons that establish high expectations for students and that provide more student learning, less student absenteeism, and lower achievement gaps in content areas (Carpenter, 2018; Hord, 1997).

It takes time for members to build an active PLC where there is interpersonal trust, where new ideas can develop, and where members feel comfortable raising sensitive issues (Barton &

Stepanek, 2012; Easton, 2016). Over time, many communities that support teacher learning establish their ways of working together. Communities build their ideas of structuring conversations, discussing, debating, and thinking about teaching and learning (Hughes-Hassell, Brasfield, & Dupree, 2012). A collaborative kind of development process must be allowed to emerge. A collaborative process cannot be mandated. As trust and school culture develop, those utilizing PLCs begin to engage in jointly constructing a joint knowledge base (Carpenter, 2018). Teachers start to talk about teaching and learning in a way that makes their tacit knowledge more visible (Thessin & Starr, 2011; Van Driel & Berry, 2012). Teachers question assumptions about teaching practice, and together, teachers examine school and student data, and information to generate new ideas and hypotheses about student learning. These teacher learning teams begin to use a wide range of student work, school artifacts, action research, and professional literature in their work together (Easton, 2012).

A collaborative culture was another feature that all PLCs possess (Bates et al., 2016; Harris & Jones, 2015). The teaching profession can be very isolating. Teachers typically work alone, and the job provides little time to interact with colleagues. However, collaborative cultures share a sense of purpose, and concomitantly decrease the perceived isolation teachers under its umbrella may feel (Easton, 2012; Hairon, Goh, Chua, & Wang, 2017). Trading the isolation model of teaching for a collaborative model established demands for collegiality among faculties and joint efforts among teachers to create a productive working environment for both the teachers and students in a school (Baek & Kim, 2015; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). Creating an atmosphere of collegiality is critical to the success of PLCs. Rosenholtz (1989) ascertained that a collaborative culture contains the following characteristics: (a) regular opportunities for improvement, (b) a reduced sense of uncertainty associated with teaching, (c) more team



teaching and shared decision-making, and (d) an increased sense of power and knowledge of efficacy. PLCs based on the premise that through collaboration, professionals achieve more than they could alone (DuFour et al., 2006; Joa & McDougall, 2016). Finally, PLCs have shared personal practice (Hord, 1997; Kruse et al., 1994; Thompson, Gregg, & Niska, 2004).

Hord's (1997) research at Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) entailed a study of the outcomes of a school that operated as a professional learning community. The results revealed a paradigm shift supporting a collaborative school culture where a school faculty plans, learns, and cooperates. Educators from around the world are familiar with the professional learning community model, and how this concept was promoted as one of the top educational reform efforts to improve student achievement (Hairon et al., 2017). The very essence of a school learning community is the commitment to focus on the learning of each student.

Supportive and shared leadership must be apparent for a professional learning community to succeed (Feger & Arruda, 2008; Hord, 1997; Kruse et al., 1994; Louis & Kruse, 2004). PLCs often are viewed as a foundation for developing teacher leaders (Caine & Caine, 2000). Graham concluded that leaders thrive in environments that allow them to be active instead of just being passive watchers (Crowley, 2015). There are five myths of leadership, noted by Bennis and Nanus (1985), that schools need to overcome in collaborative cultures. The first myth is the belief that direction is a rare skill. In many schools, teachers have leadership skills, but lack the opportunities to use them. In collaborative schools, teachers, parents, and others enact leadership. Leadership qualities learned are invaluable (Vanblaere & Devos, 2018).

The second myth about leadership is that leaders are born and not made. In many schools, teachers, parents, and others have become leaders through support, trust, and specific training

(Wake & Mills, 2014). In collaborative schools, leaders nurture the skills and abilities of others so they can become leaders.

The third myth is that leaders are charismatic. Most collaborative leaders in groups are not charismatic, but are skilled, talented motivators of others (Holmes & Sime, 2014). Leaders need to be able to get people to do what is going to be best for children. In collaborative schools, leadership takes on many forms from many different people.

The fourth myth is that leadership can only exist at the top, which is a misconception. Leaders found in every role and position in the school (Sack-Min, 2017). In collaborative schools, leadership is spread throughout the school, so having one person know everything is impossible. (Evans, 2014). Dividing up the leadership is essential.

The fifth myth is that leaders know how to control and manipulate. Effective leadership is not heavy-handed and pressuring. Trying to force people to do things that they do not want to do is not leading (Forte & Flores, 2014). Having people work together and have input in situations allows them to have collaborative schools and, leaders facilitate, motivate, solve problems, and build a shared sense of purpose (Evans, 2014). In summary, collaboration entails leadership on every level of a professional learning community.

Educational leadership literature acknowledged the role and influence of administrators have within a school (Bush, 2018). Transforming a school's organization into a community of learning can be done when leaders and staff develop it a community (Yin & Zheng, 2018). A robust professional learning community has a leader who facilitates the learning of all staff members (Vanblaere & Devos, 2018). The school leader must also turn into a learner. The leader must attend professional staff development. Leadership must be willing to share authority, and staff should have input in the decision-making process (Chauraya & Brodie, 2017). The

traditional model that teachers teach, students learn, and administrators manage must be changed (Sargent, 2015). A good starting point to figure out how to create a PLC would be to look at how leadership is distributed throughout the school (Bates et al., 2016).

Burnette (2002) contended that expanding leadership among teachers would give them a better chance to voice their opinions. Futernick (2007), after polling 2,000 current and former teachers in California, determined that teachers felt greater personal satisfaction when they believed in their efficacy and were involved in decision making. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) asserted leaders must establish a high-trust environment in which it is safe for both teachers and students to learn and grow. Part of the responsibility of school leaders is to secure fiscal and human resources to support teacher development, which is essential for educators to develop (Bolam et al., 2005; Huffman, Hipp, Pankake, & Moller, 2001). Additionally, modeling a vision and sharing a focus of the professional learning community is essential for leaders to promote (Brown, 2003; Leo & Cowan, 2000). Distributed leadership is an idea that is becoming better known. There is widespread interest in the notion of distributing leadership although it interpreted in a variety of ways (Mu, Liang, Lu, & Huang, 2018). A distributed leadership perspective acknowledges that there are several leaders (Spillane & Camburn, 2006) and that leadership activity shared within and among groups (Harris, 2004). Spillane and Camburn (2006) confirmed that “the days of the principal as the lone instructional leaders are over. We no longer believe that one administrator can serve as the instructional leader for an entire school without the substantial participation of other educators” (p. 11). The one-person leadership model leaves the talents of teachers, mostly untapped.

## **Leadership**

Leadership is a shared responsibility for achieving collective or organizational goals regardless of positional or organizational authority, acknowledging that increasing levels of positional authority yield a more significant impact in an organization. Leadership accomplished in groups in comparison to what individuals cannot accomplish alone (Vanblaere & Devos, 2018; Ronfeldt, Farmer, McQueen, & Grissom, 2015).

### **Distributed leadership model.**

A distributed model of leadership centers upon interactions, instead of actions of those in formal and informal leadership roles. It is primarily concerned with leadership practice and how leadership influences organizational and instructional improvement (Spillane & Camburn, 2006).

Spillane and Diamond (2007) argued that leadership happened in a variety of ways throughout the school and center in the interactions between people. Spillane and Diamond indicated that “depending on the particular leadership task, school leader's knowledge and expertise may be best explored at the group or collective level rather than at the individual leaders’ level” (p. 25). In what Spillane and Diamond term the “leader plus” (p. 73) aspect, they recognize those leadership roles are played by many individuals, whether in formal or informal positions. Spillane and Diamond noted that “people informally designated positions and those without any such designations can and do take responsibility for leading and managing in the schoolhouse” (p. 7). Spillane and Diamond observed that the distributed leadership perspective is neither a top-down nor a bottom-up approach but is characterized by leadership roles that are played by different people at different times. Spillane and Diamond's theory of distributed leadership moved beyond individual agency and the study of what leaders know and do and included an exploration of how leaders think and act in situations. In using distributed cognition

and activity theory as the basis for their study of leadership practices, Spillane and Diamond identified the social context as an integral component. Spillane and Diamond identified “the tasks, actors, actions, and interactions of school leadership as they unfold together in the daily life of the school” as contributing factors to distributed leadership in schools (p. 23). A distributed perspective on leadership recognized the work of all individuals who contribute to leadership practice, whether participants are formally designated or defined as leaders (Harris, 2004).

A 2010 research report commissioned by the Wallace Foundation, *Learning from Leadership: Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning*, found that a distributed approach to leadership is often a key to the success of high-performing schools (as cited in Burkman, 2012). The report also highlighted ways that strong principals can promote such a collective approach to leadership, including three things that often lead to better instruction and improved student outcomes (Saldaña, 2012):

- Focusing the school on goals and expectations for student achievement
- Attending to teachers’ professional development needs
- Creating structures and opportunities for teacher collaboration

At Hedges Elementary, Principal Casey Bertram puts these practices into action (Hatchet, 2002). Here, strong principal leadership is not antithetical to an empowered staff. Instead, leadership helped to foster a collaborative, creative, and highly professional environment in which both students and adults can reach their full potential, and everyone feels that his or her voice heard. Focusing on data does not take the human element out of decision making. Even with all the facts in hand, making crucial and sometimes risky decisions can raise intense emotions, which leads to Bertram’s other primary expectation: a culture of respect and open

communication. Bertram indicated that “we treat each other well,” and “we value relationships and communication, and our staff believes in the power of collaboration” (p. 23). Another way Bertram helped to foster a culture of collaboration is by supporting teachers’ professional development and making time for it within the schedule (Hatchet, 2002). That support is part of a district-wide commitment. Bertram meets with the five other elementary school principals in the district monthly; he takes a similar approach at the school level. PLCs are the foundation of the school’s professional development, which means most efforts are ongoing, site-based, job-embedded, aligned with district and school goals, and focused on student achievement — as in all schools, finding time for those professional learning communities and other formal and informal collaborations presents a significant challenge. Alex Schaeffer, one of the school’s four Title I tutors, says Bertram has worked hard to make that happen. “That’s a major change that I’ve seen under his leadership. He devotes instructional time during the day for us to sit down at eye level to talk about what we’re doing and how it’s working and what we need to adjust. There is no substitute for that kind of face-to-face interaction” (p. 33). The structure of the professional learning community follows two concepts: grade-level teams, and a response to intervention (RTI) team. Grade-level teams expected to meet weekly, but the group can choose the time and day. Bertram would like to build in more regular time for the teams to meet, but for now, he has adjusted the schedule so that all teachers in a grade level have the same 40-minute typical planning time at least once during the week. Most teams have found that they need even more time and have arranged to meet once a week, either before school, after school, or occasionally even on the weekend.

Bertram (2009) also provided time for the RTI team to meet with each grade level, which has been even more of a challenge (Hatchet, 2002). To make it work, Bertram, the school

counselor, and the school psychologist combine to cover classes in each grade level for an entire day, freeing up the grade-level teachers as well as the four Title I tutors, special education teacher Jerome Sanders, second-grade teachers Susan Ryan and Sandra Anderson, and Miller, who serve as a teacher leader. “You really can’t get nine people in a room unless you specifically carve out that time during the school day,” said Miller (p. 40). “The fact that [Bertram] will do that is great. It has been very, very effective. It’s the most empowering thing I’ve experienced, regarding professional development” (p. 28).

Distributed leadership allows responsibilities to distribute among many people (Bush, 2016). For example, an upper-level administrator might periodically visit an organization to evaluate and provide feedback to a teacher. However, other administrators in the organization might not view this evaluation period as enough to develop the staff member under review effectively and might arrange for a lower-level administrator also to evaluate the staff member more frequently (Bennett, Wise, Woods, & Harvey, 2003).

Sometimes, leadership is distributed more literally, with leaders spreading tasks among each other (Zonoubi, Eslami Rasekh, & Tavakoli, 2017). For example, a literary coordinator can create student assessment instructional materials, teachers could provide the assessment to the student, and a literary coordinator scores the test. Then, the literary coordinator meets with the principal to discuss the results (Prenger, Poortman, & Handelzalts, 2017).

Distributed leadership has many interpretations. The work of Spillane and Diamond (2007) and Duignan (2007) viewed distributed leadership as being central to the teaching and learning process in the school and concluded that leadership involves all members of the school community, not just the principal and assistant principal (as cited in Harris & Lambert, 2003). Spillane and Diamond (2007) and Duignan (2007) both highlighted not only the interaction

between people, but the interdependence between the people and their context. Spillane and Diamond (2007) claimed that “the interdependence of the individual and the environment shows how human activity as distributed in the interactive web of actors, artifacts and the situation is the appropriate unit of analysis for studying practice” (p. 23). Spillane and Diamond provided the example of a pilot landing a plane using his skills using the instruments and controls of the aircraft and considering the weather conditions and the state of the runway. In the school context, this interdependence exists between the teachers, the students they teach, their subject department, and the overall school culture and background. Spillane and Diamond explained the idea further by detailing three types of co-leadership practice: (a) collaborative, (b) collective, and (c) coordinated.

Another critical feature of Spillane and Diamond’s (2007) work was that leadership embed in the vision of improving teaching and learning. A distributed perspective is not a recipe or a blueprint for practice; it is a framework for focusing diagnostic work and a guide to help teachers design for improving practice. It is about preparation and improvement. Hirsh and Hord (2008) argued teachers must engage with the method of leading, managing teaching, and learning. Improving practice involved the twin processes of diagnosis and design. A distributed perspective provided a framework for diagnosis and design work. School staffs are critical agents in this work (Duignan, 2007; Spillane & Diamond, 2007).

One of the central contributions of Spillane and Diamond’s (2007) work was that they provided a vocabulary and the tools to investigate leadership in schools (Ritchie & Woods, 2007). Spillane and Diamond’s (2007) theory of distributed leadership incorporated many essential features. First, leadership needs to enact by multiple players, not just the principal. As such, the administration does not take a top-down viewpoint; it is a practice that occurs through



people interacting with each other and co-leading in different ways (Ritchie & Woods, 2007). There is interdependence between leaders, followers, and the situation. Leaders influence followers and shape their practice, particularly about the core work of the school, teaching, and learning (Spencer, 2016). Second, the context of the school is essential and will influence and be influenced by the leadership practices that occur. Third, a distributed leadership perspective is a framework used to focus on teaching, learning, and planning for improvement. It is an exploration of leadership as practice and influence, not as power and authority (Cherrington et al., 2017).

Duignan (2007) presented a new critique of distributed leadership, which, he claims, maybe more evident in the rhetoric rather than the reality of many schools. While Duignan acknowledged that “the idea of sharing leadership responsibilities more widely in schools is desirable because the leadership of contemporary schools is too much for anyone person” (p. 3). Duignan questioned what distributed is. Duignan challenged distributed leadership as being ‘the way to do it,’ which seems to be the accepted practice in education today. Duignan indicated that “the language of distributed leadership may provide practitioners with the comfortable and comforting sense that if they distribute duties, tasks, and responsibilities, the leadership density, capacity, and the quality of their organization will be greatly strengthened” (p. 2). Duignan contended that while this may be the case, there is an equally strong chance that it will not. Duignan suggested that distributed leadership cannot practice in schools that operate within a hierarchical paradigm. Duignan placed a strong emphasis on trust and highlighted the need to identify a “moral purpose for sharing leadership practices around maximizing opportunities and outcomes for students” (p. 14). Duignan also asserted that “leadership is an influencing process effected through authentic relationships and,

as such, does not lend itself to distribution, especially if this term interpreted within a hierarchical and control paradigm” (p. 15).

What Duignan (2007) does encourage and promote is the development of leaders within each organization and expansion of an “allowed-to-be-a-leader” (p. 38) culture. The process of developing these leaders, however, while not explicitly stated by Duignan, is suggested by the way the principal carries out his/her leadership role. For example, Duignan suggested that principals should stop behaving as if they are leading followers and start acting as if they are leading leaders. Duignan also noted that principals should actively seek out the talent within the organization and ask the question, “do those who work with me grow as persons?” (p. 40). Finally, Duignan asked if principals are providing user-friendly mediating processes and structures to empower people regarding making decisions that profoundly affect their lives. He sees the value and necessity of sharing leadership, particularly in decision-making, where this affects the lives of those involved. In difficult ethical situations, he considered it particularly important to share leadership.

Duignan's (2007) critique were founded on ethical principles and draw on the concepts of community, the common good, the law of subsidiary, servant leadership, and love-driven leadership. Duignan advocated in shared leadership and defined it as “a product of the on-going processes of interaction and negotiation among all school members as they construct and reconstruct a reality of working productively and compassionately together each day” (p. 107). Leadership is not merely splitting the tasks, but as requiring a mind shift. The principal must ‘let go’ of the idea that leadership is hierarchically distributed (Sack-Min, 2017). Assumptions about leadership, such as those underpinning power, authority, influence, position, status,

responsibility, and accountability, also need to be articulated, critiqued, and adjusted. The quality of relationships influences everything in the organization (Chue, 2016).

Duignan's (2007) concept of distributed leadership contrasts with Spillane and Diamond's (2007) in that Duignan placed a heavy emphasis on community and relationships. Duignan's (2007) theory penetrated the organization and could describe an ethical view of distributed leadership. Duignan's argument rests on the empowerment of individuals through the recognition of their worth as people. The community aspect of it is an attempt to ensure that a sense of unity and shared vision prevails. In contrast, Spillane and Diamond (2007) stated that "leaders don't have to see eye to eye or even get along with one another to co-perform leadership routines and tasks" (p.11).

#### **Characteristics of distributed leadership.**

Teamwork is a crucial element of distributed leadership (Harris, 2004) in that the nature and purpose of distributed leadership is "the ability of those within a school to work together, constructing meaning and knowledge collectively and collaboratively" (p. 5). Another distinctive characteristic of distributed leadership is that the distribution of leadership varies according to expertise (Durksen, Klassen, & Daniels, 2017). There is the recognition that various tasks require different knowledge and that all the skill does not reside in one person at the top. Schools nowadays are complex organizations, and therefore it is too much to expect that they can lead by one person (Copland & Knapp, 2004). Martin (2006) pointed out that "the role of the principal is now so complex and demanding that it is unrealistic to think that any one person can discharge the role without the assistance of a considerable number of colleagues, both from the teaching and the support staff" (p. 47). The principal's role is particularly significant in the context of leadership for improved learning, as recognized in the literature that the most significant

influence on student learning is the direct influence the teacher has in the classroom (Vanblaere & Devos, 2018).

Elmore (2000), Spillane and Diamond (2007), and Duignan (2007) argued that leadership should be concerned with improving instruction and that in this context, the skills and knowledge that matter are those that are connected to, or lead directly to, the improvement of instruction and student performance. Elmore (2000) recognized that any organization of people would represent different skills and competencies that are related to their predispositions, interests, aptitudes, prior knowledge, and specialized roles. Elmore acknowledged that some people would do things better than others, either as a function of their personal preferences, their experience, or their knowledge, and argued that therefore, distributed leadership acknowledges “multiple sources of guidance and direction, following the contours of expertise in an organization, made coherent through a common culture” (p. 15).

The third distinctive characteristic, as identified by Wood (2007), was that distributed leadership suggested openness of boundaries. While distributed leadership explored from the perspective of the principal and teachers, it should also include students, parents, and those involved in governance and management. The situation raises the question of all teachers being leaders or potential leaders. Barth (2006) suggested that all teachers can lead. Harris (2004) agreed that "all teachers harbor leadership capabilities waiting to be unlocked and engaged for the good of the school" (p. 78). Harris pointed out the need for professional development that will create communities of learning and link professional development and leading. “Teachers who are engaged in learning with their peers are most likely to embrace new initiatives and to innovate” (p. 78). Distributed leadership theories offer a different perspective. Spillane and Camburn (2006), for example, does not suggest that all teachers can be leaders. The initiative, as

an aspect of leadership, is another concept familiar throughout the literature on distributed leadership. Spillane and Camburn highlighted the idea of “reciprocal interdependency” (p. 48) and defined it as one leader’s practice becoming the basis for another leader’s training. Wood (2007) agreed that “the initiative referred to as ‘the circulation of the initiative’ in which the individual initiates action and change within the resources and constraints of his/her organizational context, and through this, contributes to the flow of activity and the shaping of that same organizational context” (p. 6).

Teachers must have time with colleagues. Rismark and Solvberg’s (2011) research study of Cottonwood Creek School examined how the professional learning community characteristics expressed in this school and how the school staff evolved into a professional community of learners. The data was collected through personal interviews conducted by strategies for increasing school success (SISS) staff with 30 members of the Cottonwood Creek School staff, the current principal, and the previous principal. Approximately 500 students were enrolled in Cottonwood Creek School, which included pre-kindergarten through grade 5 classes. The teaching faculty comprised of 36 people. The school also had a principal, an assistant principal, an instructional guide, and twelve paraprofessionals.

Rismark and Solvberg’s (2001) study of Cottonwood Creek School indicated a school where the staff operates as a professional learning community. The aspirations of teachers, the needs of the students, and the goals of the school are realized. Rismark and Solvberg’s study indicated that there must be some factor or purpose around which the staff rallies its interest and energy to join in community, and that factor must ultimately benefit students. The factors that make it possible for students to grow and develop (provision of stimulating and relevant material, processing the material in a social context, feedback on performance, support and

encouragement, etc.) are the same that enable professional staff to grow and develop. A climate of democratic participation (in matters of authority and decision making) by all constituents in the school generated energy and enthusiasm to reach goals. A focus on goals and productivity, the community of professionals in the school demonstrates care and concern about the students (Bennett, et al., 2003). Organizational learning, in contrast to specific knowledge, is more productive and provided a focus for the members of the professional learning community (Zhang & Pang, 2016). The school's administration must give the schedules and structures for initiating and maintaining organizational learning and its application by the professionals in the school. Sharing their classroom practice provided the opportunity for members to give and receive feedback, contributing to their education and development. An undeviating focus on students and their needs and care is the compelling motivator of the learning community of professionals (Watson, 2014).

Roseler and Dentzau's (2013) study investigated school executives' understandings of leadership and PLCs and how to use them to advance workplace practices. Roseler and Dentzau's study outlined the nature of PLCs as collaboration within a professional group where participants become co-learners in philosophical deliberation for addressing and promoting workplace practices. Roseler and Dentzau discussed that successful PLCs established with a commitment to contextual needs and circumstances that generally aim to achieve practical applications for the common good. Roseler and Dentzau showed that the continuation of a PLC requires effective leadership and an information-discussion-feedback-trialing cycle that utilizes specific discourses for problem-solving within the workplace. However, more research is necessary to understand the commonalities of effective practice for operating successful PLCs that advance the organization's goals. Fajardo (2014) found that a strong relationship existed

between successful PLCs and leadership. In another study (Fajardo, 2014; Patton & Parker, 2017), the leader's role was considered pivotal within a PLC as both an inspiration and for ensuring like-minded people are co-learners within respectful and equitable arrangements.

Effective leaders within PLCs have enthusiasm with problem-solving abilities:

- PLC members discuss openly to understand the concerns
- PLC members make suggestions for action
- Issues and problems are brought to the PLC, highlighting what is working and what is not working
- Suggestions or recommendations trialed.

Effective leaders provide a forum conducive to open discussion and as a productive pathway for building capacity within the workplace environment (Hairon et al., 2017; Owen, 2015). Effective leaders guide through decision-making processes, particularly at times when hard decisions required for achieving successful outcomes aligned with the core business of the organization. A laissez-faire approach to leadership considered as a barrier and ineffectual for advancing PLCs, which requires proactive and visionary leadership (Chen, Daniels, & Ochanji, 2017; Cherrington & Thornton, 2015). The implications for organizations include the development of programs that develop favorable distributed leadership practices for facilitating a PLC. Leaders want to advance their organizations and focus on the core business, which embedded within the organizational visions and goals (McMorrow, DeCleene Huber & Wiley, 2017). Improving an organization can occur by identifying issues and discussing these within PLCs where possible solutions can present. Importantly, key staff members need to be up-skilled on distributed leadership practices, mainly how methods can facilitate PLCs for successful outcomes (Berry, 2015; Cherrington & Thornton, 2015).

PLCs work is rooted in thoughtful dialogue. Staff conducts conversations about students, teaching, and learning (Darling-Hammond, 2008). Problems identified and solutions created. Participants engage in discussions, so they can learn to apply new ideas and information to problem solve (Watson, 2014; Van Gasse, Vanlommel, Vanhoof, & Van Petegem, 2016). Members of PLCs will challenge and question each other's practice in a spirited way. Current methods are analyzed. Members work together to ask, search, develop, test, and evaluate new skills and strategies (Liu, 2013).

Many factors determine when, where, and how frequently staff will come together. As a group, the staff must evaluate learning, decision making, problem-solving, and creative work that characterize a professional learning community. For learning communities to function appropriately, physical conditions need to be in place (Shabeeb & Akkary, 2014; Toom, Pietarinen, Soini, Pyhäntö, 2017). Giving teachers a guarded time to meet and talk, the staff needs to be able to reach one another easily, and teachers need to feel empowered. It is essential to have well-developed communication measures in place for teachers to be able to express themselves (Hack, 2016; Hanson et al., 2018).

### **Benefits of PLCs**

PLCs can have benefits. A guiding question in all PLC schools is, "Are students learning what they need to learn?" This question is paramount for schools practicing PLCs because their goal is to improve student achievement. Every teacher is on a team that looks a data to inform them of current student achievement (Hirsh, 2016; Vangrieken, Dochy, Raes, & Kyndt, 2015). As a group, teachers create goals to improve that level and decide what evidence would show progress toward those goals. In schools that implement PLCs, the learning community helps each teacher understand the data they are seeing. The data can be compared across grades and grade



levels (Cho, 2016). The comparison helped teachers understand the data that is being examined. Also, when one teacher's class data shows growth, that teacher can share instructional strategies and ideas with the group. Student data in a PLC no longer belongs to just one teacher; instead, every teacher within the grade level or school is responsible for ensuring every student's success (Hirsh, 2016; Marchisio, Barana, Fioravera, Fissore, Brancaccio, Esposito, & Rabellino, 2018).

PLCs empower teachers. Working with colleagues allow teachers to reflect on their processes and develop their skills (Williams, 2018). Teachers can receive insight from other teachers as well as provide insights. PLCs focus on all teachers' strengths and help teachers develop their practices in new areas. When the PLC focuses on supporting student achievement, the PLCs also transforms teaching (Jao & McDougall, 2016; Mihans, 2008).

Teachers have felt isolated in their classrooms for a long time. In a PLC, teachers come together with all their colleagues. The goal of PLCs is to create an environment where inquiry happens collaboratively, decisions made together, and instruction planned across the whole community (Owen, 2015; Petrie & McGee, 2012). In a PLC, colleagues visit each other's classes to observe. Together, the visiting teacher and the classroom teacher discuss the observations. At the heart of this process is the desire for all teachers to improve their teaching practices. These observations and discussions also build respect and trust between staff members—qualities that are important in colleagues because of the shared responsibility for student success (Cherrington & Thornton, 2015; Thornburg & Mungai, 2011). A supportive PLC encouraged teachers to bring challenges and struggles to the group and ask for help. As the problem was discussed, staff members may realize that the problem extends outside of just one classroom and impacts systems used by the whole school. The level of trust that is created allows this problem to be discussed and then addressed as a group (Fajardo, 2014; Sanchez, 2012).

Teachers in the PLC hold a great deal of responsibility, not just for their students, but also for their colleagues. Collaborative teacher groups hold discussions about student achievement and data, model best practices for each other, research and implement new techniques, and accept feedback from peers (Mehli & Bungum, 2013). PLCs allow teachers to be significant decision-makers in the school. Collaboration builds the teacher's commitment to the profession, to their school, and their students. When teachers receive the kind of support associated with PLC, teachers see their practice grow and evolve. When teachers realize that their new-found efficacy makes an impact on student learning, teachers are more likely to stay in the classroom. In addition to seeing their instructional skills grow, teachers in PLCs are more committed to the school itself because of their growing relationships with their colleagues. PLC environments have shown to give teachers satisfaction with their profession (Cho, 2016; Voelkel & Chrispeels, 2017).

### **Challenges to PLCs**

Building an authentic professional learning community in school can face barriers. A problem that can occur is that the norms and rules conflict with the school. Some schools can follow a bureaucratic model that leaves little time for openness to new ideas and practices (Flinders, 2013; Lunenburg, 2010). Time is another challenge PLCs must overcome. It takes time and effort to unpack conversations and to get at real problems of practice. The capacity to engage in the honest talk is of critical importance and develops gradually as trust and collegiality take root (Botha, 2012; Maele & Houtte, 2012; Thornton, 2010).

When a PLC is not working, one common reason is insufficient access to timely data on which to base instructional decisions on. Data is important for educators to use to help one another improve their individual practice (Çolak, 2017). PLCs can also build the team's capacity

to achieve its goals and identify individual students' interventions and enrichment. According to Torrance (2015), based on school-level data use, it was found necessary for school administrators and teaching staff to develop the processes and skills to become more knowledgeable of data. It was discovered that individuals varied in their comfort and understanding when acquiring, analyzing, and using data. Schools found the most success when they encouraged the use of data when problem-solving and problem evaluation (De Neve, & Devos, 2017).

### **Defining Collaboration**

Collaboration based on the idea that sharing knowledge through cooperation helps solve problems more efficiently. Throughout history, collaboration has been a necessary part of life that leads to the realization of the desired outcome (Ellis, Han, & Pardo, 2018). Collaboration is the direct interaction between at least two equal parties who voluntarily engage in shared decision-making as they work toward a common goal (Lujan & Day, 2010). In education, teachers may find collaboration to be a better way to serve a diverse group of students (Burnette, 2002).

Collaboration emphasized team decision-making and requires participants to share in the process of setting goals and implementing plans (Ellis, et. al, 2018; Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Teacher collaboration predicated on voluntary participation, mutual respect, a shared sense of responsibility and accountability, and equitable distribution of available resources (Watson, 2014). Professional collaboration has several distinct advantages over conventional education approaches. Teaching can be a very isolating profession (Talbert & McLaughlin, 2002; Mahler, Gutmann, Karstens, & Joas, 2014); Honingh & Hooge, 2014). It is essential to have support from those who have experience. When teachers can share ideas, it allows teachers time to commit

more to the goals of the school. The shared planning and goal setting process help participants gain ownership of the instructional process and establish mutually satisfactory goals; therefore, each party feels equally responsible for ensuring a positive outcome (Klassen & Anderson, 2009; Talbert & McLaughlin, 2002).

### **Collaboration Benefits**

The first benefit of collaboration is that it encourages individuals to share goals and objectives and to sublimate their interests for the greater good (Williams, 2012). The second benefit of collaboration is that it allows participants to learn from one another and to establish long-lasting and trusting professional relationships (Pellegrino & Weiss, 2017; Seashore, Louis, & Wahlstrom, 2011). The American Federation of Teachers and the American Institutes for Research released a report about what makes teachers happy (Pellegrino & Weiss, 2017; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). The American Federation of Teachers and the American Institutes for Research expressed that having the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues is imperative.

Teachers benefit from exposure to diverse philosophies, training, experience, and the stimulation of new ideas and increased communication among professionals at all levels (Talbert & McLaughlin, 2002). The third benefit of collaboration is exposing the student to a range of caring adults involved in their education, providing the student with a better chance to be successful. By using as many resources as possible, students benefit as more than one teacher can contribute to the process (Sjoerdsma, 2015). The fourth benefit is that teachers are free to teach what they know to other teachers, less stressed by teaching in areas they are less than confident in and less knowledgeable about (Watson, 2014). The fifth benefit is that students have a reduced fear of human differences as teachers observe more than one teacher address problems, which results in their increased comfort and awareness in the school environment (Hughes, 2012;

Wood, 2007). Students become more tolerant of one another. Students experience growth in social cognition. Students perspectives of themselves increase, along with their self-worth, and students develop personal principles and the ability to assume an advocacy role toward their peers and friends (Hunzicker, 2011; Pickard, 2005). A sixth benefit is that teachers feel successful when they can collaborate with their colleagues, according to the *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Collaborating for Student Success* (Perkins-Gough, 2010). The survey, which polled 1,003 K-12 teachers in the fall of 2009, found that increased collaboration among teachers and school leaders would significantly improve student achievement. Most teachers surveyed said they engaged in some collaborative activity with other educators at their school each week. Teachers spent approximately 2.7 hours a week in structured collaboration with other teachers and school leaders. The most frequent types of collaborative activities were teachers meeting in teams to learn what was essential in aiding their students to achieve at higher levels. School leaders also shared responsibility with teachers to achieve school goals, and novice teachers could work with more experienced teachers (Jenkins & Agamba, 2013; Perkins-Gough, 2010; Smith, 2016).

### **Collaboration Challenges**

As amazing as collaboration is, collaboration is not without challenges. Collaboration can result in a lack of the needed time; there may not be enough time in the day for teachers to collaborate with their colleagues. Teachers have meetings and scheduling conflicts that make it challenging to find the time to collaborate and share thoughts (Bullard & Bullock, 2002; Sjoedsma, 2015). Another challenge with collaboration is communication. When working in a collaborative environment, teachers need to be aware of how to talk to one another (Phillips, 2003; Wenger, 2000). Sharing ideas is complicated when two people are not able to express

themselves adequately. Students' best interests should be a priority. Teachers must learn how to communicate effectively for collaboration to work (Bullard & Bullock, 2002; Thornton, 2010).

### **Summary**

Many in the field of education continue to believe that an educator's job is little more than working directly with students. In studies that compare how teachers in other countries allocate their time, teachers use a substantial portion of their time planning instruction (Qiao, Yu, & Zhang, 2018). Working with colleagues, observing teaching in different classrooms, and working with individual students. As shown in the literature review, six in ten teachers complained that time to collaborate with other teachers either decreased or stayed the same in 2012, and as a result, teacher job satisfaction has reached one of the lowest points in the 25 years (Walker & Robertson, 2013). Teacher job satisfaction has plummeted from 62% in 2008 to 39% in 2012. Low levels of job satisfaction reported among schools that had decreasing budgets, limited professional development opportunities, and little time for teacher collaboration. 50% of teachers said feeling under high stress several days a week in a MetLife survey (2013).

When teachers have a sense of personal fulfillment in their jobs, it is a result of (a) the ability to grow within the teaching profession, (b) standard, job-embedded collaborative professional development, and (c) a sense of autonomy and professional responsibility (Crowley, 2015). However, the MetLife survey (2013) revealed that time for collaboration and professional learning was highly limited.

Because of the literature review, it concluded that the benefits of collaboration outweigh the challenges. Researchers who have studied the impacts of PLCs have found that when schools indeed possess the characteristics of a professional learning community, educators report reduced feelings of isolation, an increased commitment to the shared vision and goals of the school, and

higher rates of job satisfaction (Pontefract, 2014; Wood, 2007; & Woodland, 2016). The Infinity School District in the State of Georgia initiated a professional learning community program for the district. Three elementary schools engaged in the process, but to date, no study has assessed the results of the program. The purpose of the proposed research was to determine the perceptions, attitudes, and lived experiences of K-5 elementary teachers in the three Georgia schools about how the (a) professional learning community school environment, (b) leadership, (c) time commitment, and (d) collaborative meetings affect their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the profession. The following chapter is a recitation of the method implemented to assess the perceptions, attitudes, and lived experiences of stakeholders in the three Georgia schools, and the design that was applied to collect and analyze data.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

### Overview

The proposed study implemented a qualitative method. The purpose of this case study was to understand elementary teachers' perspectives of PLCs in a Southeastern United States elementary school. This qualitative study sought to answer the following research questions: (a) How do elementary teachers describe the purpose of a PLC? (b) How do elementary teachers describe their experiences in PLCs? and (c) What are elementary teachers' perceptions of benefits and barriers of PLCs? The setting for this study was in a Southeastern United States elementary school. The sample size was 13 teachers. The first procedure for this study was to obtain IRB (Institutional Review Board) and site approval. The data was collected with questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups. This case study also provided ways for analyzing and interpreting data and information. The data was coded into themes and patterns. In this case, a researcher observed and documented behaviors, opinions, trends, needs, pain points, and other types of information without yet fully understanding what data was meaningful (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Data analysis utilized theme identification coupled with inductive reasoning. Chapter three ends with a discussion of the trustworthiness of the study followed by a discussion of the ethical considerations of the research study.

### Design

This research study utilized a qualitative case study as the research design. Creswell (2012) described case study research as a qualitative approach in which the researcher studies a current, real-life case over an extended period "through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information" (p. 97). A case study is used to present "an in-depth understanding of the case" (p. 98) by understanding participants' perspectives and close



observation. Yin (2009) suggested a case study is the best manner to answer “how” and “why” questions: the research questions sought to understand “how” teachers describe their experiences and how their teaching has been affected through participation in the PLC. The validity of a case study strengthened through the analysis of multiple sources of evidence (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2009). The many forms of data will allow the researcher to present “rich and detailed information” (Prytula & Weiman, 2012, p. 29), essential to understanding the specifics of this case. The purpose of this case study is to understand elementary teachers’ perspectives of PLCs in a Southeastern United States elementary school. The focus on teachers’ internal perceptions and external actions necessitates the collection of multiple forms of data. Creswell (2012) and Prytula and Weiman (2012) emphasized the importance of developing trusting relationships with participants to yield accurate responses in interviews.

There are different types of case studies—instrumental, collective, and intrinsic. For this study, I used an instrumental study. Instrumental case studies provide insight into an issue, redraw generalizations, or build theory (Creswell, 2012). Instrumental case studies seek a larger goal, which is global. Instrumental case studies draw conclusions that apply beyond a case. This study on exploring elementary teachers’ perspectives of PLCs will use an instrumental case study. This case study followed a bounded system. A bounded system is when the researcher makes clear and precise statements. Creswell defined a case study as “an in-depth exploration of a bounded system (e.g., an activity, event, process, or individuals) based on extensive data collection” (p. 485). Bounded means separated for research in terms of time, place, or some physical boundaries. It is possible to create limits around the object to be studied. The limitations of my case studies include the setting, which is limited to the Southeastern United States. A second boundary of my research may consist of the temptation to analyze data that is outside the

scope of the research questions. A third boundary may occur when exploring rival propositions to provide an alternate explanation of a phenomenon. The research objectives will focus on the extent of the research.

### **Research Questions**

**RQ1.** How do elementary teachers describe the purpose of a PLC?

**RQ2.** How do elementary teachers describe their experiences in PLCs?

**RQ3.** What are elementary teachers' perceptions of benefits and barriers of PLCs?

### **Setting**

The setting for this study was in the Southeastern United States. I received site approval from the school district (See Appendix A). The school district is very innovative. The school district uses technology to emphasize students' strengths and interests. The school district offers a school of choice programs that makes a highly personalized education available to all students. The school district has one high school, one middle school, and six elementary schools. The district offers programs of choice. The school district programs include International Baccalaureate, Core Knowledge, and Multiple Intelligences. The data indicated the school district has approximately 10,000 students. The school district has a diversity score of 0.44, which is higher than the average in the state. Diversity is the different races represented within the district—for example, Hispanic, African American, Caucasian, and Asian. Fifty-seven percent of the population is a minority, with Hispanics being the largest group. The student-teacher ratio is 16:1 (Georgia Department of Education, 2020a).

The school has participated in PLCs for ten years. The leadership team consists of a principal, assistant principal, and academic coach, and it is a Title 1 school. The school also has an instructional coach and a reading intervention teacher. There are approximately 400 students

at the school, which serves grades PreK-5. Forty-nine percent of those students are girls, and 51% are boys. At this school, the Hispanic population is 75%, and 20% are African American (Georgia Department of Education, 2020a). All students receive free lunch (Georgia Department of Education, 2020b). The teacher to student ratio is 14:1. The elementary school has an innovative program of choice, appropriate for self-motivated, passionate students who are ready for rigorous, personalized learning experiences. The school provides instruction that challenges advanced students. Character development is practiced daily, and all students take part in community service (Georgia Department of Education, 2020a). Students are selected based on evidence of their achievement, motivation to excel, creativity, curiosity, and maturity to work well independently and in small group settings. Learners will have a schedule to challenge them at their appropriate level and pace. The program offers fluidity within and between grade levels in the school; for example, a first grader may go to a second-grade classroom for reading instruction according to his/her reading level.

### **Participants**

Participants included 13 full-time elementary teachers who currently participate in PLCs. I utilized purposeful sampling because it lends itself to qualitative research designs. Purposeful sampling seeks to select cases that are usually “information-rich” to the study (Gall et al., 2007). Purposeful sampling was useful because all participants have experienced or are currently experiencing the common phenomenon of collaboration in a PLC. The primary goal of purposeful sampling is to achieve a deep understanding of the participants. I sent out a letter to notify the participants of the study. I also sent out a letter to seek permission for their participation. The sampling size was 13 teachers. I used pseudonyms to protect the participant's identity.

## Procedures

A letter of recruitment was sent to the Board Office to conduct the study in the target schools were obtained (See Appendix D). Next, I sought approval of the proposed research from the Liberty University Institutional Review Board. It was according to the U.S. Federal Government Department of Health and Human Services (2009) regulation 45 CFR, “which states the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research should not be greater in and of themselves than any ordinarily encountered in daily life, or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests” (para. 46.10).

The instrumental case study explained how elementary teachers describe the purpose of a PLC, their experiences in a PLC, and perceptions of the benefits and barriers of a PLC. Before interviews began, the participants completed a consent form, demographic information, and a survey. At that time, I described the study and procedures. The case study used interviews, surveys, and observations to collect data and provided an opportunity to address how elementary teachers describe a professional learning community. Participants’ responses toward PLCs were gathered and analyzed through theme identification. Creswell (2012) stated a qualitative researcher must (a) use multiple methods that are interactive and humanistic, (b) conduct research in the natural setting, (c) build rapport and credibility with the individuals in the study, and (d) filter data through a personal lens. Hatch (2002) asserted, “The goal of observation is to understand the culture, setting, or social phenomenon studied from the perspective of the participants” (p.72). The observation tool was not the standard protocol, as described by Creswell (2012), which was a two-column design. One column was titled Descriptive Notes and the other Reflective Notes. An interview protocol coupled with audio recording and transcription was implemented as described in the following section. An inductive model was used to assess

the different themes in participant responses in meaningful relation to constructing explanations that assisted readers in making sense of the resulting data.

### **The Researcher's Role**

I am an elementary teacher in Georgia, and I am entering my 10<sup>th</sup> year in education. I am pursuing a qualitative research study as a human instrument within my study. I want to be able to understand PLCs. Through my experiences as a teacher, I have observed many shifts and changes. As a participant in PLCs, I have developed trusting, respectful relationships with the participants, which increased their willingness to respond to interview questions honestly and openly. I was not able to participate in the study, but I was able to observe the PLCs. I collected and analyzed data.

### **Data Collection**

Before collecting any data, I obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Liberty University (See Appendix B). I received permission from the school district, to have access to facilities, participants, and data. All participants signed a consent agreement. I used several data collection tools to provide a better understanding of the perspectives of elementary teachers in a professional learning community: questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups.

### **Questionnaires**

A questionnaire is a set of questions in paper-and-pencil or computer format. It may measure many variables. In this case study, I used a questionnaire to gather background information about the participants. A demographic survey was given through Survey Monkey to obtain information with which to develop a picture of each participant (See Appendix E). One questionnaire I considered was to assess effectiveness, implementation, and sustainability. To

evaluate the extent to which characteristics are prevalent and adequately implemented, Olivier and Hipp's (2010) Professional Learning Community Assessment Revised was administered to participants (See Appendix F). Professional Learning Community Assessment (PLCAR), served as a useful formal diagnostic tool for identifying school-level practices that enhance intentional professional learning. The PLCA-R provided perceptions of the staff related to specific exercises at the school level regarding shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application shared personal practice, and favorable conditions, including both relationships and structures. This questionnaire acquired data adequately and captured the essence of the participants' perceptions. Educators and researchers most commonly use the PLCA-R. PLCA-R served as a mechanism to stimulate effective face-to-face and electronic discourse and provided a synopsis of the direction and purpose of the study. It contained closed-ended items, so participants choose among the options. PLCA-R provided data to answer the research questions guiding this study and to stimulate dialogue about the current learning environment. I administered the PLCAR questionnaire first since all items were related to PLC core principles and implementation. Each questionnaire was coded and put into categories to assess the strengths and weaknesses of current PLCs, and then counted per each question to gain a breakdown. Some information included in the questionnaire were demographic questions, such as content area, grade taught, years of experience, and years at the research site. I advised participants to return all surveys in their designated envelopes. All documents were organized by ensuring that all data has been carefully reviewed and accounted for. Document accountability occurred by using a checklist to confirm receipt.

## **Interviews**

Interviews began with a review of the content of the consent form (See Appendix C). Then, I discussed a summary of the purpose and direction of the study. Next, interviews were conducted based on an Interview Protocol that contains questions that follow a specific order related to the research questions (See Appendix G). All items were derived from the research questions and were open-ended, clear, and broad enough to solicit in-depth conversations. The interviews followed a semi-structured format (Glesne, 2011; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). One-on-one teleconferences were held, as well as face-to-face follow-up meetings. I conducted interviews after (a) receiving approval from the school district, (b) explaining the purpose of the study to participants and administration and how to use the results, and (c) distributing and receiving signed confidentiality and consent forms from participants. Interviewees were assigned numbers and pseudonym names to protect their identities and informed that participation would be voluntary. To ensure the validity of interview questions as recommended by Merriam (2009), they were created and peer-reviewed before use. Interviews were scheduled, conducted, and transcribed. Creswell (2012) encouraged the use of field notes, and an interview protocol to guide the process. Janesick (2004) described the interview process as “the most rewarding component of qualitative research” (p. 71). Unclear statements were clarified with follow up questions. The interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions designed to illuminate the specific models and systems of collaboration employed and their impact. An inductive model was used to assess the different themes in the resulting dialogues in meaningful relation to construct explanations that make sense of what is being reported (Creswell, 2012). I took audiotapes during the observations. Then, I reviewed them. I crossed checked with the field notes during the observations.

**RQ1. How do elementary teachers describe the purpose of a PLC?**

Interview Question 1: What is the purpose of a PLC?

Interview Question 2: What are some of the things you discuss in a PLC?

Interview Question 3: What characteristics do you feel are necessary to succeed in a professional learning community?

Interview Question 4: What skills do you feel are necessary to succeed in a professional learning community?

**RQ2. How do elementary teachers describe their experiences in PLCs?**

Interview Question 5: Describe your experience in a PLC.

Interview Question 6: What are some norms that should be established in a professional learning community?

Interview Question 7: How is your PLC organized?

Interview Question 8: How are discussions made in a PLC?

Interview Question 9: How does the professional learning community influence collaboration?

**RQ3: What are elementary teachers' perceptions of benefits and barriers of PLCs?**

Interview Question 10: What are the factors that facilitate or hinder communication in PLCs?

Interview Question 11: What are some negative drawbacks if any, would you describe, in regards, to PLCs?

Interview Question 12: Describe the most valuable benefits that you have experienced from PLCs.



Interview questions 1-4 relate to research question 1: “How do elementary teachers describe a PLC?” These questions give more insight into how teachers will describe a PLC. They will look at the purpose of PLCs. Participants can provide background information as it relates to PLCs. In question 2-4, it looks at what the participants can discuss, such as different characteristics. These varied skills and discussion may allow for themes to begin to surface. I coded themes into categories. Interview questions 5-8 refers to the research question: “How do elementary teachers describe their experiences in PLCs?” These questions focus on teachers will describe what they have experienced in a PLC. Questions 5 through 7 invited participants to describe what rules should need to be established so that a PLC can be useful. Collaboration is a crucial ingredient to a PLC. Question 8 examined collaboration. Interview questions 9-11 gives insight into the research question, “What are elementary teachers’ perceptions of benefits and barriers of PLCs?” These questions looked at the pros and cons of PLCs. Participants can reflect on their experiences in PLCs and can explain the pros and cons of PLCs.

### **Focus Groups**

Another data collection method I used was focus groups. Focus groups are a form of a group interview in which several people participate in a discussion. I conducted focus groups at predetermined times and locations. There were approximately three to four participants in each focus group. Before each meeting, I contacted participants to discuss the nature of the interview. Participants signed a form confirming the scheduled date and time. I disclosed the protocol procedures and format prior to any meetings. Interviews lasted no more than 30 minutes and utilized an open-ended question guide. The interviewer guided the discussion. Participants were able to talk to other elementary teachers. Talking to other elementary teachers may allow the

participants to be more likely to express feelings or opinions that might not emerge if they individually interviewed.

### **Data Analysis**

According to Hatch (2002), “data analysis is a systematic search for meaning” (p. 148). To effectively analyze all data and procedures, I need to establish protocols to organize the data once collected. I used coding to organize and analyze data collected throughout the study (Creswell, 2012; Hatch, 2002). I used thematic coding, and themes emerged because of inductively analyzing data. The coding process included a two-step process. First, I created initial codes. The first step began with finding frequently common themes and concepts mentioned during the interview, as described by Rubin and Rubin (2012). During the second step, I used more focused codes to create themes and concepts analyzed during the initial coding phase. Data from interviews and questionnaires were organized, categorized, interpreted, synthesized, and coded for patterns (Bogden & Biklen, 2007). I used a two-column, color-coded technique to code the transcripts. Each interview question was individually color-coded using focused codes and categories, such as perceptions, suggested by participants. Patterns, themes, and concepts were color-coded based on, (a) their occurrences in all sources of data, (b) evidence of their existence in the transcript, and (c) their correlation to the research questions guiding this study. I reviewed and analyzed data many times to identify recurring themes or overlapping concepts, and ensure I addressed each research question. Field notes and journal notes taken during the interviews were also summarized to provide supplemental data, and then I will code by themes during the analysis process. I utilized similar strategies to analyze data from the PLCA-R questionnaire. Since the survey already has categories, I tallied the responses to assess the areas of strength and weaknesses. I compared these findings with the answers from the

interview questions. Then, all data was analyzed to identify recurring themes. Codes will eventually be reduced to themes and represent in the form of narratives and tables. Throughout this study, I assigned the participants numbers. For the interviews, an electronic copy of each participant's transcript was created, followed by a spreadsheet with all interview questions and participants' responses. The spreadsheet was used for analysis to compare answers, and code to identify any emerging themes.

Using the various data-collection tools such as the interviews and observations, an inductive and interpretive method was applied to provide the understanding behind teacher job satisfaction and its relationship to collaboration in the target professional learning community. Theories about teacher satisfaction collaboration and the impact of professional learning teams on teacher job satisfaction were pertinent to the target professional learning community.

### **Trustworthiness**

Triangulation is a method used to increase the credibility and validity of research findings. It allows researchers the opportunity to use a variety of methods to provide evidence. Triangulation involves corroborating evidence from different sources to provide an understanding of the viewpoints. Triangulation can help ensure that biases arising from the use of a single method or a single observer are overcome (Mathison, 1988).

### **Credibility**

Establishing credibility is the first aspect of trustworthiness. Credibility essentially asks the researcher to link the research study's findings with reality to demonstrate the truth of the research study's findings. There are many techniques available to establish credibility (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The credibility is involved in determining if the results of the research are plausible. It is a question of quality versus quantity. Credibility focuses more on the richness of

the information gathered, instead of the amount of data collected (Mathison, 1988). There are many techniques to gauge the accuracy of the findings, such as data triangulation, triangulation through multiple analysts, and member checks. The participants are the only ones who can reasonably judge the credibility of the results (Ali & Yusof, 2012).

### **Dependability and Confirmability**

Being able to repeat the research findings consistently will ensure dependability.

Dependability is measured by the standard from which the research is conducted, analyzed, and presented. Each process in the study should be reported in detail to enable an external researcher to repeat the inquiry and achieve similar results. Repeating the process also allows researchers to understand the methods and their effectiveness (Lincoln & Tierney, 2004).

Confirmability questions on how the research findings support the data collected. It is a process to establish whether the researcher has bias tendencies during the study; this is because of the assumption that qualitative research allows the research to bring a unique perspective to the study (Mathison, 1988). An external researcher can judge whether this is the case by studying the data collected during the original inquiry. To enhance the confirmability of the initial conclusion and an audit trail can be completed throughout the study to demonstrate how I made each decision (Devers, 2000).

### **Transferability**

Transferability refers to the degree to which the results of qualitative research can be generalized or transferred to other contexts or settings. It is primarily the responsibility of the one doing the generalizing (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The qualitative researcher can enhance transferability by doing a thorough job of describing the research context and the assumptions that were central to the research. The person who wishes to "transfer" the results to a different

meaning is then responsible for making the judgment of how sensible the transfer is (Ali & Yusof, 2012).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Cozby (2004) stated, “Ethical concerns are paramount when planning, conducting and evaluating research” (p. 35). I followed procedures for the protection of human participants throughout the study; hence, I assigned participants a pseudonym to protect their identity. All responses to the survey remained anonymous. Only I had access to the data entered by the participants and used for data analysis. Participants’ responses were kept confidential; thus, I did not communicate any information regarding the participation of any individuals to the school district in which they work nor shared information with any teacher or administrator at the school where the participants work or elsewhere. The initial contact email indicated that the researcher would maintain participant anonymity indefinitely. This study was conducted following Liberty University’s ethical guidelines. No sanctions were applied if participants declined or withdrew from the study.

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 was a discussion of the construction of the qualitative study. The purpose of the study is to describe elementary teacher perceptions of a PLC. The case study answered how elementary teachers described the purpose and their experiences in PLCs. It also described teachers’ perceptions of the benefits and barriers of a professional learning community. The setting for this study was in the Southeast United States. I selected participants through purposeful sampling. I discussed the procedure for data collection and analysis of data. I obtained permission to conduct the study; I received IRB approval. I completed interviews, surveys, and observations. Data were analyzed using a triangulation method. Document analysis

occurred, and theme identification assisted with the review. Chapter 4 contained the results of the study divided into three parts according to the instrument used to collect data. Section 5 included the results of the study.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### Overview

The purpose of this case study was to understand elementary teachers' perspectives of their experiences in PLCs in Southeastern United States elementary schools. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a detailed description of the participants of the study and the themes developed from their experiences. The rich description gave a detailed account of the study allowing for an increased understanding of the study's transferability (Creswell, 2012). The chapter included a discussion of the results of the study, including themes developed from questionnaires, individual interviews, and focus groups. I discussed themes followed by a discussion of the research questions addressed in the study.

### Participants

The participants of this case study held employment with the school district for two or more years. Participants were selected based on their experience with PLCs. The participants have participated in PLCs at least two years. I provided a rich description of each participant, utilizing pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

Table 1

#### *Participants Description*

<b>Name</b>	<b>District</b>	<b>Number of Years Participating in PLCs</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Levels of Education</b>	<b>Number of Years Teaching</b>
<b>Betty</b>	Infinity	3 years	3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade	Bachelor	4 years
	County		Teacher		
	School				
	District				

<b>Brenda</b>	Infinity	3 years	Sped	Master	4 years
	County		Teacher		
	School				
	District				
<b>Christian</b>	Infinity	3 years	4 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Bachelor	4 years
	County		Teacher		
	School				
	District				
<b>Erica</b>	Infinity	12 years	EIP Teacher	Master	20 years
	County				
	School				
	District				
<b>Greg</b>	Infinity	5 years	3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade	Specialist	16 years
	County		Teacher		
	School				
	District				
<b>Jackie</b>	Infinity	5 years	P.E. Teacher	Master	18 years
	County				
	School				
	District				
<b>Leigh</b>	Infinity	7 years	ESOL	Specialist	25 years
	County		Teacher		
	School				
	District				
<b>Maria</b>	Infinity	6 years	Academic	Bachelor	18 years
	County		Coach		
	School				
	District				



<b>Melissa</b>	Infinity County School District	4 years	ESOL Teacher	Master	10 years
<b>Renee</b>	Infinity County School District	6 years	5 <sup>th</sup> Grade Teacher	Bachelor	12 years
<b>Samantha</b>	Infinity County School District	3 years	5 <sup>th</sup> Grade Teacher	Bachelor	5 years
<b>Shannon</b>	Infinity County School District	2 years	Kindergarten Teacher	Bachelor	3 years
<b>Tiffany</b>	Infinity County School District	11 years	1 <sup>st</sup> Grade Teacher	Master	19 years

## Betty

During the questionnaire, Betty told me she was a 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade teacher. Betty also said she had a bachelor's degree in Elementary Education, and that she participated in PLCs for three years. Betty has been teaching for four years. Betty was the team leader for her grade level. During the interview, Betty said, "I have some many things I am responsible. I am on the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) committee, and I have to be the team leader for my grade level." Betty was excited to be able to participate in the study. Betty had a big smile on her face when she participated in her interview. Betty was very outspoken about

different educational topics. Betty stated in the focus group, “Sometimes I run my mouth too much. I just need to sit in meetings and just be quiet. I should let others speak.” Betty spends a lot of extra time outside of work, helping students. During the focus group, Betty mentioned how she had to work at Saturday School this weekend. As we were talking during the individual interview, Betty stated she needed to get ready for afterschool tutoring. Betty liked to focus on doing her own thing. Betty does not like being told what to do or wasting her time. While working with Betty, I have noticed that Betty has many family obligations outside of school. As we were talking during the focus group, Betty stated after rolling her eyes, “My experience with PLCs has been very different comparing this year and last year. Sometimes they are pointless. Sometimes they are beneficial. We don’t need to meet just to meet.”

### **Brenda**

During the questionnaire, Brenda stated she was a SPED teacher in the Infinity County School District. Brenda had a master’s degree in elementary education and special education. Brenda had participated in PLCs for three years. During the interview, Brenda told me how she had worked hard at coming up with different strategies to help students. During the individual interview, Brenda stated, “I am constantly looking for different ways to assist my students,” said Brenda with a concerned look on her face. Brenda noted in the focus group, “I want people to be able to get along. So, I try really hard to make sure everyone is happy.” Brenda was a people pleaser. Brenda spent her time trying to make others happy, almost to her detriment. Brenda liked to keep the peace. Brenda was one of the youngest teachers I interviewed. During the individual interview, Brenda spoke about how she has a difficult time telling people “No.” “I have a difficult time telling people ‘No.’ I enjoy helping people. I have always struggled with that.” Brenda’s views on PLCs were extreme in opposing them. Brenda sighed and stated in a

high-pitched annoying voice, “My experience in PLCs is one, or another coach is sharing random information. Sometimes it is beneficial. We are constantly doing the same thing. It is repetitive.” Brenda was adamant about them being a waste of time, but she would not tell others how she feels. I asked Brenda why she does not voice her concern. Brenda crossed her arms and said, “Has anything ever happened when we complain?” Brenda answered her question in a sarcastic voice, “No, so I don’t see the point in telling anyone. Nothing is going to get done.”

### **Christian**

During the questionnaire, Christian shared that she was 32 years old and a fourth-grade teacher. Christian has a bachelor’s degree in elementary education. Christian struggled with finishing high school. Christian stated with a solemn voice when I asked her about the questionnaire, “I had a difficult time finishing school. I am thankful I was able to get finished. Going to college was something I never imagined.” Christian had an enthusiastic personality. One of Christian’s reasons for becoming a teacher was because her mom was an educator. “I grew up watching my mom go to work each day. Christian enjoyed what she was doing. It made me want to instill my love for education on others,” replied Christian with a smile on her face. The more Christian was at school, the more she began to love education. Christian found her love for teaching when she worked in a daycare. Christian has participated in PLCs for three years. Christian can be a little quieter compared to her colleagues. During the focus group, Christian was a little more reserved with her responses. Christian did not elaborate as much with her answers. When asked during the individual interview about the characteristics a person must have for a PLC, Christian stated, “they must be willing to listen and open-minded.” Christian is going to be a team leader for her grade this year. Christian will need to step up and speak more. Christian was more hopeful about PLCs this year. Christian smiled during the individual

interview and stated, "I'm looking forward to this year. This will be my second year at [school], and I will be able to focus more on the teaching than the logistics of learning procedures of what I am supposed to do at school." I asked Christian, "Why weren't you able to focus on teaching this year? That should always be a focus as a teacher." Christian responded in a very timid voice, "Well, my focus is teaching, but you know how all the extra things get put on us." I shook my head in agreement. Christian continued, "We are not just teachers; we are counselors, nurses, and moms. We have all this paperwork too."

### **Erica**

Erica indicated on the questionnaire she was an Early Intervention Program (EIP) teacher. Erica has a master's degree in elementary education. Erica is continuing her education. Erica has participated in PLCs more than any other participant. Erica has been a part of PLCs for 12 years. Erica also was a participant in the focus group. During the individual interview, I could tell Erica did not find much use for PLCs because she is not a homeroom teacher. Erica mentioned that she gets tired of being in PLCs that do not benefit her. At her school, Erica is the only EIP teacher, so that is also a reason why she feels left out of PLCs. Erica felt that most of the PLCs are for homeroom teachers. Erica folded her arms and said, "I sit in PLCs and sometimes, and they do not pertain to me. I feel like they are a waste of time." During the questionnaire, I asked Erica why she does not let the administration know that the PLCs are not focused on what she needs. Erica replied, "You know, I have went to them many times, and um they just tell me to go and sit in on them anyway. I have started building up a hate for PLCs." Erica spent a lot of time working with other teachers. Sometimes Erica can see the whole picture when looking at data or discussing different things in PLCs. Erica brought a different perspective to PLCs since she works with various grade levels. Erica sometimes lacks initiative; Erica wants

someone to tell her what to do constantly. Although Erica has the most experience with PLCs, Erica seems to know the least about them. When asked about PLCs in the individual interview, Erica folded her arms and stated, “Well, um, I think norms and responsibilities are set.” Erica answers lacked confidence.

### **Greg**

During the questionnaire, Greg told me he was a third-grade teacher. Greg had a bachelor’s degree in elementary education. Greg had participated in PLCs for five years. Greg has taught over 15 years. In the individual interview, Greg discussed how his military background had influenced him to become an educator. Greg said he always enjoyed training other soldiers. Greg believed he could take the skills that he had learned from the military and apply them to teaching in elementary schools. During the individual interview, Greg mentioned how he feels a little isolated because he is the only male teacher. Greg said, “Don’t get me wrong, I enjoy working with my colleagues, but I wish there were more men who taught at the elementary level.” People typically think Greg would be more structured, but he struggles with classroom management. During the questionnaire, Greg stated before he became a third-grade teacher, and was a connections teacher. Greg taught STEAM to grades kindergarten through fifth grade. Greg has a very laid-back attitude. Greg is on a downhill slope. Greg seems to be waiting on his time when he can officially retire. In Greg’s mind, he has already retired. Greg allows the other teachers to make decisions. Greg goes with the flow. Next year, Greg will be teaching first grade for the first time. Greg is nervous and not sure what to expect. During the focus group, I saw Greg’s laid-back demeanor. Greg waited on everyone else to speak. Many of Greg’s responses to questions were, “I agree with what was said.”

**Jackie**

During the questionnaire, Jackie stated she was a physical education teacher. Jackie had a master's degree in elementary education. Jackie had participated in PLCs for five years. Jackie has difficulty finding her voice in PLCs because she teaches physical education. Jackie does not focus a lot of time on academics. Jackie stated during the questionnaire, "I am not teaching the same thing as others. The curriculum is different. Sometimes we get to work with a group of students on reading skills." Jackie would like to know more about what is happening in the homeroom class. Jackie sighed during the individual interview and said, "I would love to know more about what the students are learning and how they are doing. I can do what I can to support students in P.E." During the focus group, Jackie discussed the importance of PLCs. Jackie believed that PLCs were beneficial because she believes they give teachers a chance to talk and share ideas. Jackie would like to know how the students are doing. Jackie gives a different viewpoint to PLCs because her husband also coaches some of the students.

**Leigh**

During the questionnaire, Leigh told me she was an ESOL teacher. Leigh had a specialist's degree in elementary education and had participated in PLCs for seven years. Leigh had a math and science endorsement. Leigh only has approximately five more years until she retires. Leigh was thrilled that she does not have a homeroom. Leigh grinned with a huge smile and stated, "Thank God I don't have a homeroom. I am looking forward to the day when I can retire. Teaching is not getting any easier." Leigh enjoyed being able to work with her ESOL students. Last year, Leigh mentioned missing approximately nine weeks to do other things besides working with her students. During the focus group, Leigh revealed her strong feelings about PLCs. Leigh does not believe PLCs are as beneficial and pertain to her as an ESOL

teacher. Sometimes Leigh would sit in meetings that did not help her. Leigh rolled her eyes and stated, “A lot of the meetings were pointless and did not help me. I believe PLCs can be done more effectively. The coaches need more training because sometimes they do not know what they are presenting, and they lack preparation.” Leigh sighed many times before she would answer her questions. During the focus group, Leigh stated, “I would be ‘all in’ with PLCs if they were done correctly. I get tired of sitting in a PLC that doesn’t pertain to me. I wish we could decide what we talk about during PLCs, and then they would be beneficial and helpful.”

### **Maria**

During the questionnaire, Maria said she was an academic coach. Before becoming a coach, Maria was a first-grade teacher. Maria had a bachelor’s degree in elementary education, and she has participated in PLCs for six years. Maria had a quiet demeanor. During the individual interview, Maria would respond to questions very softly. Sometimes I would ask Maria to repeat what she said because I could not hear her responses. During PLCs, Maria showed her quietness; some teachers relate her low voice as not knowing what she is talking about sometimes. Maria stated in her individual, “Sometimes our coaches do not know what they are talking about. They struggle to answer our questions and give us definite answers.” Maria had a quite different approach to PLCs, being that she was an academic coach. Maria felt that PLCs are greatly beneficial and wanted the teachers to take more ownership. Maria’s viewpoint of PLCs was incredibly positive. Maria had a grin on her face when she was discussing PLCs. Maria saw PLCs being beneficial for everyone. Maria knew how to organize PLCs. During the individual interview, Maria stated, “If PLCs are done correctly, then they will be beneficial. Every time someone said that is having a PLC, they are not actually a PLC. Calling something a PLC doesn’t make it one.” Maria mainly focused on reading during PLCs. During the focus

group, Maria stated, “I am trying to get more teachers to take on more responsibility during PLCs; however, some just want to sit back and not take an active role.” Many participants felt that her PLCs were more effective than the math PLCs.

### **Melissa**

Melissa told me she was an ESOL teacher during the questionnaire. Melissa had a master’s degree in elementary education. Melissa had participated in PLCs for four years. During the questionnaire, Melissa discussed her former background in law enforcement. Melissa liked to be in control of situations. Sometimes Melissa would put down the ideas of others. Melissa does not see gray areas; Melissa saw things as black and white. When Melissa and I conversed, I could tell her personality was a dominant one. Melissa liked to oversee the situations that pertain to her. During the individual interview, Melissa stated, “I like to be in charge, who doesn’t? If I can’t be in control of the situation, then I don’t want to do it.” Melissa struggled with PLCs because she was not in charge of them. Before answering questions, Melissa would roll her eyes and sigh. When asked in the individual interview, what characteristics of PLCs were important, Melissa stated, “People need to know there is not always one way to do things.” She wanted her way to be used.

### **Renee**

Renee said she was a fifth-grade teacher when responding to the questionnaire. Renee had a bachelor’s degree in elementary education and special education. Renee had participated in PLCs for six years. During the individual interview, I observed Renee being extremely easy going. Renee also was very talkative, but Renee had been less talkative this past year. Renee had some personal issues going on, so she was not as focused on what was happening at school. In the focus group, Renee mentioned how she had missed more days from work; then, she usually



does each year. Renee's zeal for teaching does not seem to be there any longer. Renee had been the team leader for many years. Renee expressed during the questionnaire that her leadership role will change next year. Renee smiled and seemed to be happy when she talked about relinquishing some of the responsibilities of a team leader. Renee enjoyed giving her opinions on different situations. Renee stated in the focus group, "PLCs should have expectations. We should review what we did the last time. Then, move on to new business, concerns, and last should be the next steps."

### **Samantha**

During the questionnaire, Samantha told me that she was a fifth-grade teacher. Samantha holds a bachelor's degree in elementary education and special education. Samantha had participated in PLCs for four years and was a people pleaser. During the individual interview, Samantha was more concerned about how others feel than how she feels. Samantha had a love-hate relationship with PLCs. Samantha was a newer teacher, so sometimes she felt the PLCs were beneficial. At other times, Samantha thought they were a waste of time. In the individual interview, Samantha stated, "I like PLCs because they help me with instructional practices. I need assistance in finding ways to support my students." Samantha also discussed, "I get irritated when I sit in the PLCs, and they are not focused on what I want to learn." Samantha stated during the focus group, "I wish we had coaches who know what they are doing. They need to model expectations and need to coach. I enjoy it when we are able to collaborate with each other."

### **Shannon**

In the questionnaire, Shannon stated she was a kindergarten teacher at Infinity County School District. Shannon holds a bachelor's degree in elementary education. Shannon

participated in PLCs for four years. During individual interviews, Shannon expressed how extremely thrilled she was to participate in PLCs. “I like going to the PLCs. I actually look forward to going to them.” It was Shannon’s second-year teaching kindergarten, so she was excited to gain more knowledge through PLCs. Shannon was overly optimistic and had a positive outlook on PLCs. Shannon taught EIP her first two years of teaching, so she did not get the full experience of a homeroom teacher. Some of the things Shannon should have found out during her first years of teaching; she did not. Shannon would tap her pen before answering questions about PLCs. During the individual interview, Shannon stated, “Most of the PLCs are informational. I really enjoyed the information on how to complete my job correctly. Overall, they are helpful as a new teacher.”

### **Tiffany**

During the questionnaire, Tiffany stated she was a first-grade teacher. Tiffany holds a master’s degree in elementary education. During the individual interview, Tiffany revealed how she started her teaching career as a paraprofessional. We discussed how Tiffany went back to school a little later in life. I let Tiffany know that was alright and how everyone does not follow an exact step by step plan at the same time. I reassured Tiffany the important thing was that she stepped out on faith and went back to school. Tiffany smiled and hugged me. Tiffany has participated in PLCs for 11 years and had a bubbly personality. Tiffany always had a smile on her face. Tiffany never hesitated to help others. Tiffany would tell me she would help her teammates with their lesson plans and classroom management skills. Tiffany was one of the oldest teachers that had participated in PLCs. Tiffany had a lot of experience in PLCs. Tiffany stated in the focus group, “You can’t take what happens in a PLC personally. It is an opportunity to learn and grow.” Tiffany had also taught different grade levels.

## Results

The purpose of this case study was to understand elementary teachers' perspectives of their experiences in PLCs in Southeastern United States elementary schools. A qualitative case study research design sought to understand the elementary teachers' perspectives of PLCs. Data were gathered and analyzed using case study data analysis procedures. Meaning from statements was coded and established into themes and aligned with the study's research questions. This section presents the findings gathered from the data, including the own words of study participants. The results also describe the essence of the experience studied and to answer the research questions.

Table 2

### *Description of Codes and Frequency*

Code	Description of what the code refers to	Frequency
Data	Assessments (formative, summative)	24
	Tests	8
Pointless	Not beneficial	10
	Annoying	7
Openminded	Willing to try new ideas	9
Coaches need more training	Inexperience	13
	Lacking knowledge	7
Shared value and visions	Mission statement	6
Norms	Rules	9
Roles	Timekeeper	8
	Note-keeper	9
	Facilitator	10
Agenda	Meeting notes	10
Time	Common Planning Time (CPT)	7
	Schedule	13
Trust	Reliable	9
	Honest	12
Supportive conditions-relationships	Principal support	11
Shared supportive leadership	Administration	12
Collaboration	Working together	14

	Sharing resources	8
Collective learning and application	Solving problems together	10
Shared personal practice	Instructional sharing	9
Support conditions-structures	Classroom locations	10

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### Theme Development

I met with each participant individually first in a place where each one felt comfortable and relaxed. I started with small talk. I asked how their day was going or what they were going to do over the weekend. I had a conversation with each participant. During the individual interviews, I asked participants 11 open-ended interview questions, which lead to productive discussions. The participants participated in focus groups. I had four focus groups. Some of the participants had a relief that they would be able to answer questions about PLCs. The participants were excited to have someone listen to their perspectives about PLCs. The participants wanted PLCs to change and be more teacher centered. The participants were aware that PLCs were not going the way they should go. The participants were happy to be able to express this information without the fear of being questioned. PLCs seemed to be a topic that teachers wanted to discuss. This study gave the teachers the platform to discuss their perceptions of PLCs. Samantha had a grin on her face. During the focus group, Samantha said, "I have been eagerly waiting to discuss what is going on in our PLCs." The participants wanted to be able to express themselves about the things that worked, as well as things that did not work as well. During the individual interview, Leigh said, "I'm happy we get a chance to talk about PLCs. There seemed to be the elephant in the room." Some participants did not even care if they had a pseudonym. Jackie stated, "I don't even mind if you use my real name." Some participants would like for the district to know what is going on in their school. The participants wanted to be able to express their thoughts and perceptions about PLCs. All the data inquiry focused on the

research questions. I read the individual transcripts and the focus group transcripts many times to immerse myself in the details, and to get a sense of the whole before breaking in down into smaller units. Yin (2009) suggested writing memos during the field stage and in the analysis stage. The notes that I collected throughout the study contained hints, clues, and suggestions that I used in the preliminary sets of interpretation. I coded and categorized the data collected. During the initial coding phase, I read through my data to get familiar with it. During the process, I had an idea of what the overall data was revealing. The next step involved the interpretation of the data, which included making sense of the data. I put the data into categories based on my research questions. I found broad names of the data, such as collaboration. The final stage of the analysis and interpretation of the data led to emerging themes. The themes that emerged included benefits, such as collaboration; and barriers, such as (a) data, (b) pointless, (c) openminded, (d) coaches need to move training, (e) norms, (f) roles, (g) agenda, time as a barrier, and (h) trust as a barrier. In the end, I described an in-depth picture of the case study and used narrative and tables in response to each research question.

I conducted data analysis for this study after the interview sessions. I recorded each answer and documented appropriately. Bazeley (2013) wrote that coding had become a type of methodology for qualitative research. Saldaña (2012) identified a code as:

“a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence capturing, and evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data. The data can consist of interview transcripts, participant observation field notes, journals, documents, drawings, artifacts, photographs, video, Internet sites, e-mail correspondence, literature, and so on.” (p.3)

Within this study, I collected data using questionnaires, individual interviews, and focus groups. I analyzed the data from these methods and developed themes to describe elementary teachers’

perspectives of PLCs. I used a description of the steps to develop the themes which I provided in the following sections. After I transcribed the data, I asked each participant to review the transcriptions of their statements from the questionnaire, interviews, and focus groups for accuracy. I coded each interview and focus group transcriptions using Microsoft Word Cloud. It allowed me a way to code each statement. Then, I went through the data with a closer eye. I went through and coded everything line by line. My codes became more detailed. Themes emerged when I saw the word clouds. I placed each of the phrases and words used for coding into categories for each of the three research questions. I put similar codes into the same categories. The themes were consistent with the relevant literature regarding elementary teachers' perspectives of PLCs, all of which helped to provide answers to the research questions.

During the process of horizontalization, significant statements were identified, coded, and themes were developed based on those statements. When I completed the search in Microsoft Word Cloud, I found the themes that occurred the most. I organized the themes with supporting statements and provided answers to the study's research questions. Of these codes, the frequency revealed most participants felt that PLCs were beneficial. The participants believed that PLCs could be useful; however, some participants indicated that PLCs were ineffective. The participants felt PLCs were redundant, coaches were ineffective, there was a lack of time, and trust.

### **Research Questions**

Using an analysis of the data from questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups, I answered each of the research questions. To get a rich description of the data and answers to the research questions, I matched the questions to the specific themes that emerged from the data.



Figure 1: Themes for RQ1. How do elementary teachers describe the purpose of a PLC?

**RQ1.** How do elementary teachers describe the purpose of a PLC?

The themes emerged from the data and formed the answer to the first research question: How do elementary teachers describe the purpose of a PLC? The themes represent how participants described the purpose of PLCs. When analyzed, these open codes occurred the most often in the Microsoft Word Cloud. These five codes were the most frequently recurring themes: (a) data, (b) pointless, (c) openminded, (d) coaches need more training, and (e) shared value and visions.

In the individual interview, I asked each teacher to describe his or her experience in a PLC. Teachers described their experiences in the questionnaire and focus groups. During the discussion, teachers revealed the things that they discussed in PLCs. Some characteristics they feel are necessary to succeed in a PLC. The teachers also discussed some of the skills they felt are necessary to succeed in a PLC.

**Data.** Every participant stated that they discussed data at some point during PLCs. This theme emerged as I was analyzing the interviews and questionnaires. Students' learning is

essential. The teachers knew that the data would help in driving instruction. Analyzing data is part of a continuous cycle for learning. Once teachers analyze data, teachers will know what steps to take next. Data is a significant part of the PLC. Teachers look at testing results. Betty stated, “We discuss data, accommodations, and interventions.” Erica said, “We discuss data, progress, implementation of new programs, next steps, and if the programs are effective.” Data may provide concrete evidence and valuable insights into the teaching and learning process. Schools use data as an integral part of professional learning communities. Analyzing the data could have a substantial impact on student achievement and teacher professional growth. When PLCs are data-driven, a teacher is continuously working together to review data and make instructional adjustments. Renee stated in the focus group, “We are encouraged to ask: What is it we expect students to learn? How will we know when they have learned it? How will we respond when they do not learn? How will we respond when they already know it?” Shannon stated, “We are constantly looking at data. We just want to help our students learn.” Samantha answered,

“We have universal screeners which our district has set assessments for reading and math that we use to see kind of beginning, middle, and end growth in our students. Progress monitoring for the RTI process. We’ve got some different programs that we use, like iReady Math, that provides diagnostic assessments at various times throughout the school. That is there to show us how we are supposed to group our kids. It provides differentiated instruction during math. Reading, we group our kids, RI. That data helps us group our kids. The data helps drive our reading groups.”

Renee stated, “Common assessments are what we use as a team. They are based on the level descriptors. We try really hard to level each question, so we can make sure that when students are given a level three question, they are truly a level three.” Samantha replied, “All



assessment data is recorded on an ABC document.” “State testing data is used to drive our SIP goals,” replied Samantha. “We have grade-level data that we use to see if growth is being made.” We use the data to take steps to move forward. College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) is a big data point we use at the end of the year.

Melissa answered,

“Umm, I mean, we look at the data in PLCs, but I don’t know if we actually sit down and discuss the strategies of how to get where we need. Yes, we will go and say that we will pull this person and put them in a DI group. But, that’s different than saying here’s a strategy to try. Maybe this will work. If not, then we will try something else.”

Shannon chimed in, “We kind of did something like that in our math PLCs with [math academic coach]. The groups that were not meeting our expectations gave us some instructional strategies to use during DI groups and extra tutoring.”

**Pointless.** Seven out of 13 of the participants believed the PLCs were pointless. The participants thought PLCs were meaningless because they did not pertain to them. I discovered this theme from recurring statements found when analyzing the transcripts. Betty stated, “Sometimes they are pointless, sometimes they are beneficial. We don’t need to meet just to meet.” Christian replied, “Some have been pointless. Um, I could have spent time meeting with my parents. It’s very annoying to spend time in PLCs, and they are not beneficial.” When PLCs lack organization and preparation, then they are more likely to be pointless. Teachers who are feeling that PLCs are pointless are not consistently experiencing true PLCs. Teachers may be having a staff meeting. PLCs need to be teacher lead. The teachers’ voices should resonant within the community. Betty stated, “I wish we could plan what happens in PLCs. We should be able to decide what we need to learn and focus on.”

**Openminded.** When I asked participants about characteristics, open-mindedness ranked high. Melissa stated, “People need to have some open-mindedness. There is not always one way to do things.” Brenda mentioned in the individual interview, “People should have open minds and not just um listen but participate.” When I interviewed during focus groups, each group stressed the importance of being openminded. Leigh stated, “People need to have an open mind when working in PLCs. Not everyone is going to think and believe what you think, but you must be willing to listen to different ideas and perspectives.” During the focus group, Maria said, “If people are not willing to be openminded and try new ideas, then um, we will not be able to reach our School Improvement Goals. Which is ultimately to help our students.”

**Coaches need more training.** Every participant, except for one, had two coaches at their school. The coaches had been in their role for less than four years. The coaches had only taught lower grades, which includes kindergarten through second grade. Not having the experience of upper grades (third through fifth grades) can be a challenge when assisting teachers in PLCs. The teachers in the upper grades express more discontent than those teaching in the lower grades. For the coaches to receive more training, the administration will need to understand the lack of training and assist them. Samantha discussed during the focus group:

We need coaches who know what they are doing. It is frustrating when they don't know what to do. The coaches need to be able to assist us more. I'm tired of going into PLCs, and the coaches can't answer my questions. They do the same things over and over again. Well, I don't see the point of having two coaches. We should just have one coach. One is definitely enough. I really don't know what they do because they are not coaching. I see teachers walking around here that need help. And umm, the coaches are just sitting in the rooms doing nothing.

Melissa added, “There are coaches, but I don’t know if...[long pause] I just don’t know if they are effective.”

About 20% of participants believed that leadership made decisions ahead of time. During the focus group interview, Samantha stated, “When the principal or leadership asks for our opinions, they are just doing to make it seem as if we have a voice. Decisions are premade.”

**Shared values and visions.** Many of the teachers believed there should be shared values and visions. Melissa stated, “We have our mission statement.” Shannon asked Melissa, “How many people know it?” “Melissa stated, “I would hope this would be something we would like at each time we have Pre-planning, but I can’t say that we will. Well, that will go with our PBIS for student behavior.” Shannon agreed by saying, “Mmmm hmmm.” Melissa responded, “Everyone knows our expectations, and that should guide the teachers.” Shannon stated, “It really does help for everyone to be on the same page.” Shannon continued, “The leadership team meets over the summer, and they focus on what our goals will be.” Melissa asked Shannon, “Do you remember when we were divided into teams? We had to look at our school improvement plan and rate ourselves on where we think we are. I think that helps drive some of our goals.” Shannon constantly agrees with Melissa. Participants believed at the beginning of the year that the vision was shared with teachers. Melissa stated, “Well, at the beginning of the year, must go over goals and focus on. So, everyone will know what direction we need to focus on.” Shannon agreed with Melissa.

Participants described the purpose of PLCs as looking at (a) data, (b) being pointless, (c) coaches need more training, (d) being open-minded, and (e) sharing a vision. Data from multiple sources enrich decisions about professional learning that leads to increased results for every student. Many sources include both quantitative and qualitative data, such as common formative

and summative assessments. PLCs are pointless when they lack a purpose and fail to meet the needs of teachers. Participants felt coaches need extra training because they lacked the knowledge and resources to run PLCs effectively. Participants believed when teachers have ideas, their colleagues should be willing to listen to them. Some participants believed being open-minded is needed for PLCs to be successful. In PLCs, participants need to be on the same page. The participants thought they needed to share a common vision.



Figure 2: Themes for RQ2. How do elementary teachers describe their experiences in PLCs?

**RQ2.** How do elementary teachers describe their experiences in PLCs?

The next themes emerged from the data to form the answer to the second research question: How do elementary teachers describe their experiences in PLCs? These themes explained how participants described their experiences in PLCs. These themes emerged because they occurred the most often in the Microsoft Word Cloud. The three frequently occurring themes included: (a) norms, (b) roles, and (c) agenda.

In the individual interview, I asked each participant what are some norms that should be established in a PLC? How should a PLC be organized? How are discussions made in a PLC? and How does the professional learning community influence collaboration?

**Norms.** Participants believed team norms are the foundation of a PLC. The elementary teachers believed some teams feel like they can operate without them, but the conflict will give even more purpose to the importance of norms. When teams operate with norms, each member of the team understands how to communicate. Norms also let participants know how decisions will occur when to arrive for meetings and how to disagree professionally. During the focus group, Samantha stated, “We should be professional. Our phones should be off. We need to be prepared.” Reassessing norms need to occur too. Teachers move to different positions, and new teachers come into the group. Teachers need to know the norms of the PLCs, and the norms may need to be changed to fit the needs of the new team. PLCs have norms created at the beginning of the year. These norms help the meetings stay focused on what is important. During the individual interview, Tiffany discussed, “Some norms discussed were come prepared, be an active participant, silence cell phones.” Some teams feel like they can operate without norms, but conflict or a dysfunctional team member usually highlight the purpose of norms. When teams operate with norms, each member understands how to communicate, how to handle shared decisions, when to arrive for meetings, and how to disagree professionally. I have observed teams that developed norms five years ago, but they failed to revisit the team norms. When a new teacher moves from a different grade level or another school district, it is difficult for the teacher to participate in the PLC because the team norms are similar to living and working in a different country or culture.

**Roles.** When participating in PLCs, having set roles is important. Participants discussed how each member should have a job to do within the meeting. PLCs should specifically decide on a facilitator and assign any other cooperative roles, such as a recorder. A facilitator should also be used to keep the meeting moving and monitor participation. Christian stated during the focus group, “the roles should be established early. You definitely need a good note-taker.” During the individual interview with Maria, she stated, “PLCs should be organized with a facilitator, timekeeper, note taker. Everyone needs to have a job or role. If the teachers have a job, they will take more ownership.”

**Agenda.** Agendas are critical in the formation of PLCs. Most meetings will have an agenda. Each meeting should end with setting the agenda for the next meeting and a “What did I learn today?” wrap-up. Having an agenda ahead of time would make the PLC more effective. During a focus group, Samantha stated, “Not only having an agenda but following the agenda would be helpful. I hate when we go into a PLC, and we don’t know what we are going to be discussing.” Jackie replied as we were speaking at the interview, “I like it when we have an agenda. It helps us stay on task and focused.”. During an interview, Renee stated, “When we don’t have an agenda, I know we will probably get off task, and we won’t accomplish our goal for the meeting.”

**TIME**  
**TRUST**  
**BARRIERS**

**LACKING  
NEED**

**RELEVANT**

Figure 3: Themes for RQ3. What are elementary teachers' perceptions of benefits and barriers of PLCs?

**RQ3.** What are elementary teachers' perceptions of benefits and barriers of PLCs?

The last set of themes were used to answer the third research question: What are elementary teachers' perceptions of benefits and barriers of PLCs? Time and trust were themes identified as barriers. The themes demonstrating the benefits of PLCs included (a) supportive conditions-relationships, (b) shared supportive leadership, (c) collaboration, (d) collective learning and application, (e) shared personal practice, and (f) support conditions-structures.

In the individual interview, I asked each participant the following questions: (a) What are the factors that facilitate or hinder communication in PLCs? (b) What are some negative drawbacks, if any, would you describe, in regards, to PLCs? and (c) Describe the most valuable benefits that you have experienced from PLCs.

**Time.** The practice of common planning time (CPT) is more than scheduling a common time for a group of teachers to meet. The purpose of CPT needs to be specific, clear, and supported as an autonomous (or at least semi-autonomous) practice where teachers personalize their professional responsibilities and learning. Teachers use common planning time to (a)

strengthen their practice, (b) learn new practices, (c) share what they have learned, and (d) divide or share the day-to-day planning of lessons and activities. Samantha indicated that “We have a planning time of 45 minutes each day unless different events change the schedule.” Participants believe that CPT is vital. It would also be beneficial to have some planning time to complete vertical planning. Even when schedules align and teachers lessen their teaching responsibilities, it can still be challenging to make the transition work in collaborative groups. Some teachers spend their time thinking about all the other things they need to be doing. Betty stated, “Instead of being in some of the PLCs, I would rather be calling parents to set up conferences or grading papers. There just isn’t enough time in the day.”

**Trust.** Several participants expressed views regarding faculty relationships on the development of trust. Teachers can build trust by making commitments to one another about how they are going to work together. Trust develops over time as team members follow through with their commitment. Melissa stated, “It’s hard to trust people when you have new people on your team every year. I want to trust my team, but it takes time.” (Personal Communication, April 14, 2019). Trust can develop by (a) working together, (b) sharing resources, (c) by planning together, (d) creating common assessments, (e) examining the data, and (f) reflecting on how to support students more effectively. Tiffany stated, “Sometimes, people don’t like to share their ideas or resources for fear of not receiving the proper credit.” According to Little (2003), a lack of trust “occurs when team members are reluctant to be vulnerable with one another and are unwilling to admit their mistakes, weaknesses, or needs for help. Without a certain comfort level among team members, a foundation of trust is impossible.” (p. 929).

A PLC that operates with trust will ask the following questions:

1. Which students seem to struggle with the key concepts and skills identified by the team?



2. Which skills or concepts do I struggle to teach?
3. If our students do not do well on the state writing test, then what strategies should we incorporate at our grade level? At the grade levels prior to our grade?

During the focus group, trust was an area that needed improvement. “There is a lack of trust and respect, stated Melissa. Melissa continued, “There is too much gossiping going on. I’m just going to throw it out there; it’s the truth. Everybody is worried about everybody else. They should be concerned about what is going on in their classroom.” Shannon added, “There is also a lot of blame. Well, this didn’t happen because this person didn’t do this.” “Take ownership of it,” stated Melissa. Shannon also stated, “My kids are not where they are supposed to be because of this person and this person. I hear a lot of that.” Melissa reiterated, “Lack of ownership.”

**Supportive conditions-relationships.** Another theme for the study on elementary teachers’ perspectives is supportive conditions as they pertain to relationships. When asked how relationships build among staff on trust and respect, Leigh stated, “We must trust different staff members to do what they are expected to do.” Betty replied, “We shouldn’t take things personally. We are here for the kids. I want to be able to trust people, but our turnover rate is high. I don’t get the chance to know teachers who are going to be serving my students.” Melissa stated, “Sometimes, there is too much gossiping. People play the blame game, but overall, we trust and respect each other.” Jackie said, “In our TKES, it evaluates us on professionalism. We are held to a higher standard to trust and respect each other.”

**Shared and supportive leadership.** One benefit of the study included shared and supportive leadership. The leadership of one of the schools included the principal, assistant principal, two coaches, counselor, and media specialist. The other school represented has the same leadership, However, it only has one coach. Approximately 80% of participants felt their

principal listened to them and made decisions accordingly. Greg stated, "This is our principal's first year, but I think she did a good job listening to our concerns." Maria agreed with that statement. Maria stated, "Our principal has done an excellent job listening to our concerns. Anytime I want to talk to her, I can. She does a great job of hearing my concerns and finding solutions to solve those problems." "At the beginning of the year the year, she asked a lot of advice about the different situation," replied Leigh. Renee stated, "We had a concern about the way our Honor's Day Program was set up. And um she made adjustments based on what we said. Now, Honor's Day Programs run a lot smoother." Tiffany replied, "You can always go to the principal. She has an open-door policy." Renee stated, "Typically, it is brought to the team leader during leadership meetings. Then, the team leader will get the information back to their team." Samantha stated, "We are given a voice, but don't really have a say. It is just for the sake of saying we have a voice. Sometimes I think our opinion comes too late, and then decisions are made all throughout the year. Instead of hearing from the teachers at the very beginning." Christian said, "We have a PLC every Thursday, and they bring the information to the team." Renee stated, "We supposedly have PLCs." Samantha confirmed that, "They are not like what they are supposed to be. We were told we would be able to lead them, and that is not what is happening. The roles have flip-flopped. We are no longer following the ATLAS protocol as we were told we would at the beginning of the year." Renee replied, "They are no longer functional PLCs. I think the PBIS does a good job relaying information." Samantha told Renee that the question said, "Principal." Renee said, "Yeah, but she listens to the PBIS committee." Samantha stated, "Principals attend occasional PLCs, but we do have the agenda. That kind of help tie in, I guess, making sure everyone knows what is going on. We alternate between math and reading every other week. Christian stated, "Our principal, assistant principal, and academic coach is

always there. They lead it most of the time. Ours isn't always just about academics. Sometimes it's discussing those questions that they have. We have faculty meetings where they sit and discuss what we are going to do." Samantha replied, "Our PLCs can be about other things too. We have had English as a Second Language (ESOL) training. Enrichment training, but as far as communicating with the Principal, we don't always have admin. there. We do have our agendas that are shared to keep information transparent and flowing." "It is her first year at [school], and I think she is learning the ropes," answered Samantha. Renee stated, "Umm, I feel like it is new for our school to be participating in PLCs, so I think right now there is an emphasis on doing it, but not a lot of instruction on how to. We have only been observed once. So far, there is not a lot of guidance." Samantha followed up, "I also know our 4U Team consists of two academic coaches, principal, and assistant principal meets weekly to figure out things that need to be addressed in the next week's meeting."

When asked about how leadership is promoted, Renee stated, "I don't know if it necessarily is. Being a team leader is tough. I don't know of many people who want that position. It is additional work, and a lot of people don't want the extra stress for the extra \$40 a month that is given to them. Christian stated, "We have a team lead." Renee suggested that "We need to work at building more leaders in our school and focus on getting them excited to lead. Positions should not just be assigned. People should want to be in those positions." Christian chimed in, "That's like our cadres. You get to choose what you want to do." Samantha stated that "We have always struggled with people being willing to do something outside of school. School spirit is lacking"

Stakeholders have a shared responsibility, also. Renee stated that "Stakeholders, PTSO, just started, and it's slowly growing. They are trying to get them more people involved, but it

seems to be the same ten parents each year.” Renee also said, “Stakeholders try to be involved, but usually a donation instead of coming in and helping. Yes, money is great, but we need people to be here physically.” Samantha stated, “Police officers placed in our schools, the board members recognize schools at board meetings.” Christian said, “We have Career Day and Careers on Wheels. Any career on wheels could participate.” Samantha stated, “We also have the Heritage Luncheon. People volunteer their time to tell our kids about different careers.”

**Collaboration.** Collaboration is another theme that became evident in the study. Forced collaboration does not work. School administration should help all members of the school community feel attached and committed to the work. Greg stated in the focus group, “I enjoy collaborating with my team. It has been a few years since I had a homeroom, and I am thankful for the opportunity to collaborate.” Collaboration thrives when there is a shared purpose. Without teachers uniting behind a common vision for improved student achievement and improved instructional practice, teacher collaboration will lessen. Communication problems occur when teams operate without established norms or goals. Some communication barriers occur because teachers fail to take advantage of e-mail, discussion threads, Web 2.0 tools (e.g. blogs, wikis, Google docs), and other methods for communicating between meetings. One way to facilitate the development of shared purpose rests on the school leader. Renee discussed in the focus group, “Collaboration is the biggest benefit I had in professional learning communities. I mean, it is awesome to be able to learn from teammates and other educators. I enjoy receiving feedback on what I’m doing; and ways to improve and reflect.” In the focus group, Melissa replied, “Well, when we get in PLCs and they say what do you see. And so we have to get in there and really look at it, but the only...here’s the thing. It’s great that we do our PLCs by grade levels, and they type in what’s being said that, to me, is not a discussion across the whole school.

We need that at one point. Maybe we need to go in and say look at the data of the whole school, and what do you see as a whole.” Shannon stated, “And we see certain deficits in certain grade levels. We need to put strong teachers there.”

Collaborating can be beneficial, especially when looking at different samples of work.

Melissa stated:

I think that is in the beginning stages. We go back to our writing. Bringing that piece of writing and sitting down, and everybody was looking at it. In your grade level asking what you would give this student instead of you grading them yourself. You sit there, and you think I’m not grading this right. It just helps out.

**Collective learning and application.** Another theme is collective learning and application. Staff members work together to seek knowledge, skills, and strategies that they need to apply the new learning to their current practices. Greg stated, “We use zoom conferences, in-house professional learning, and Bookworms PLCs.” Shannon replied, “We use weekly grade-level meetings and conferences we attend to hone in on our craft.” Melissa stated, “That’s when we have weekly grade-level meetings.” Shannon stated, “We also get to attend conferences. We can collaborate and get new skills.” Melissa stated, “It is in your PLCs or weekly grade-level meetings. Also, we can throw in PBIS. That’s where we able to discuss behavior, which is the root cause for some of them not learning or meeting their goals.” Shannon stated “PLCs” very quietly. As if she is not sure why every answer she has started giving connects to PLCs.

The participants believed PLCs offer teachers a chance to have a dialogue with one another. Shannon stated, “I know in kindergarten during our PLCs we talk about different strategies we can use. We discuss different parts of the programs. The programs can be drastically different from the other grade levels, so it takes a little digging. We also had the gifted

PLC, where it focused on the gifted teacher giving enrichment ideas. The ESOL PLC was where the ESOL Coach gave us strategies for the ESOL students.” Melissa stated, “And RTI,” Shannon said, “Oh yeah, RTI.”

Stakeholders can also work with teachers in a collective way. “I think that has a lot to do with the teachers meeting with their parents and giving them strategies on what they can do at home,” stated Tiffany. “Um, [counselor] had set up a program to meet monthly with parents that touched on different things to help the parents,” stated Melissa. “There is a new topic every month, and it is translated by the parent coordinator,” Shannon agreed.

**Shared personal practice.** During the data analysis process shared personal practice is another theme that emerged from the study. Different opportunities exist for staff members to observe peers and offer encouragement. Betty stated, “We have done Pom Pom Observation. I don’t know if we will do them this year.” Tiffany replied, “We can record ourselves.” Shannon stated, “The coaches will come in to view a lesson and leave us feedback. They also give us chocolate. I like getting chocolate. It makes getting the feedback less threatening.” Shannon continued, “We had it last year, but not this year.” Melissa stated, “It’s not happening this year unless you request it.” Shannon said, “I know my parapro has requested to go and observe other parapro, but it never happened for her.” Melissa chimed in and said, “I actually, honestly think, now I can be wrong—but it is almost that you get that vibe that if you’re in another classroom, then you’re not doing your job. Because it seems as if you can’t handle your job in your classroom, then we will send you to another class to observe. Do you want to say, I want to go to their class to see what I can do to get better, or you might feel like someone will say they are not doing what they are supposed to. I think it turns into why they are in your classroom thing.” My

parapro is on a plan, but they are not giving her the tools she needs to improve,” stated Shannon. Melissa agreed, “Mmmhmm, Mmmhmmm, Mmmhmmm! I totally agree!”

**Support conditions-structures.** Another theme from the study was support conditions as it relates to structures. A way to support structures exists when there are fiscal resources available for those who would like to enhance their knowledge. Brenda stated, “If you want to learn something, the school will pay for it.” Shannon stated, “They paid for us to go to that kindergarten conference.” Melissa stated, “Well, they have that grant.” Shannon helped her remember the grant, “L4GAgant, we also have the bookworms that we usually do.” “That shows that anytime there is something that has to do with Bookworms, we as ESOL teachers are never offered to go, but they want us to serve these students using it,” Melissa responded, sounding a little frustrated. 100% of the participants have laptops given to them to use from their district. “We all have a laptop. We are technology-rich,” stated Jackie. Erica agreed with Jackie, “Our students have Chromebook. We have one to one technology. It is a blessing to have all this technology. We just need to make sure we use it correctly.” Melissa stated, “Well, they did give us a computer.” Shannon agreed, “Mmmhmm.” “We also have all these programs online,” replied Melissa. Another support structure in place is the many systems that are in place for the flow of information. “We have email, Remind, calendar, and Have you Heard,” stated Christian. “We also have Tiger Tracks, which is a continuous document that contains important events and who will be absent that day,” replied Renee. “We use Google Documents to keep our minutes from meetings,” stated Samantha.

### Summary

Chapter four described the participants included in the study and discussed the process used to develop themes from the data collected. This case study sought to understand how a

sample of 12 elementary teachers' perceived PLCs. Results were presented in narrative form and organized by themes used to answer the three research questions that guided the study. The themes that emerged included: (a) data, (b) pointless, (c) openminded, (d) coaches (e) need more training, (f) norms, (g) roles, (h) agenda, (i) time and (j) trust as barriers, and (a) collaboration, (b) shared vision, (c) collective learning, (d) shared practice, and (e) supportive conditions as benefits. The chapter also provided results by answering the research questions addressed within the context of the study. The first research question revealed the following themes: (a) data, (b) pointless, (c) openminded, and (d) coaches need more training. The second research question showed themes of (a) norms, (b) roles, and (c) agenda. The last research question revealed the theme of (a) time and (b) trust as barriers, and the benefits were (a) collaboration, (b) shared vision, (c) collective learning, (d) shared practice, and (e) supportive conditions. Teachers agreed that they are engaging in more professional conversations and activities due to PLC implementation. Teachers discussed how the time set aside for PLCs increased instructional strategies and methods. Teachers agreed that sharing ideas and effective methods increased their effectiveness in the classroom. Teachers emphasized that trust between the faculty and some leadership team members needed improvement. The use of data was a common theme that the teachers discussed. They agreed that the use of data and progress monitoring students allowed them to develop individual instruction.

Furthermore, data designed to allow for either intervention or enrichment activities specifically designed for that student. This study added to the current literature concerning elementary teachers' perspectives on professional learning communities in several ways. The study may have meaningful implications in describing elementary teachers' perspectives of their experiences in PLCs.



## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this case study was to understand elementary teachers' perspectives of their experiences in PLCs in Southeastern United States elementary schools. A total of 13 participants agreed to participate. The participants in the study were from varying backgrounds and possessed different characteristics concerning age, content specifics, grade levels taught, the number of years in education, as well as the number of years that they participated in PLCs. All the participants participated in the questionnaires, individual interviews, and focus groups. Chapter five summarizes the findings by briefly restating the answers to the research questions from Chapter One. I discussed Herzberg, Mausner, and Synderman (1959) and Herzberg's (1964) two-factor theory of motivation, and Bandura's (1965) social learning theory. Implications of the research is described, followed by a discussion of delimitations and limitations. I made recommendations for future research. Finally, a summary reviews the chapter and the study.

### **Summary of Findings**

Through the analysis of data through participant questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups, I identified major themes regarding each research question. RQ1. How do elementary teachers describe the purpose of a PLC? The themes for this question included: data, pointless, openminded, coaches need more training, and shared values and visions. RQ2. How do elementary teachers describe their experiences in PLCs? The themes that emerged from this research question included: norms, roles, and agenda. Finally, RQ3. What are elementary teachers' perceptions of benefits and barriers of PLCs? The benefits were shared and supportive

leadership, collaboration, collective learning, and application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions-structures. The barriers to PLCs that emerged were time and trust.

I examined the research questions concerning the discovered themes and sub-themes. An answer to each research question was evident. I presented each question and followed by relevant findings developed from participant responses. The findings showed that teachers agree that they are engaging in more professional conversations and activities because of participating in a PLC. Teachers discussed how the time set aside for PLCs increased instructional strategies and methods. Teachers agreed that sharing ideas and effective methods increased their effectiveness in the classroom. Teachers emphasized that trust between the faculty and some leadership team members needed improvement. The use of data was a common theme that the teachers discussed in the PLCs. Teachers agreed that the use of data and progress monitoring students allowed them to develop individual instruction that allowed for either intervention or enrichment activities specifically designed for each student.

To answer the research questions, I collected data from 13 elementary school teachers. Data sources included questionnaires, individual interviews, and focus groups to create triangulation, which I used questionnaires, individual interviews, and focus groups to determine the themes. The focus of this study was to understand elementary teachers' perspectives of PLCs. As a result of the data analysis, many themes emerged from the data analysis. Analysis of the data revealed elementary teachers believe one of the purposes for PLCs was to look at the data. The second research question attempted to discover elementary teachers' experiences in PLCs. The third research question attempted to uncover the benefits and challenges of PLCs. While the teachers had positive experiences with PLCs, the teachers also found negative aspects of PLCs, too. Time was a barrier. Trust also posed a challenge for many of the participants.

### **Research Question One**

The results suggested that elementary teachers describe the purpose of PLCs in positive and negative terms. The participants indicated that they were committed to looking at data in PLCs to address the immediate needs of their students. The participants understood the importance of being openminded. Additionally, the participants took on the approach that “everyone will come to the PLCs with different views, but it is important to keep an open mind.” Participants felt that having a shared vision was more important than having an individual vision. Not everyone’s perceptions of PLCs were the same. Some teachers believed PLCs were pointless and lacked focus. The last theme that emerged from how teachers describe the purpose of the of PLCs was coaches need more training.

### **Research Question Two**

Participants shared many common experiences as it relates to the second research question. For the participants in this study, the participants indicated, that having established norms is a requirement for success. Many participants described their experience in PLCs as having roles. The participants knew what to expect because each participant had a job to do during the PLCs. Most of participants discussed how helpful having an agenda was to the flow of the meetings.

### **Research Question Three**

The results of this study suggested participants shared benefits and barriers they face with PLCs. The benefits of PLCs were (a) supportive conditions in relationships and structures, (b) shared and supportive leadership, (c) collaboration, (d) collective learning and application, and (e) shared personal practice. Some barriers the participants discussed were not having enough time for the PLCs as well as not being able to trust colleagues.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this case study was to understand elementary teachers' perspectives of their experiences in PLCs in Southeastern United States elementary schools. This study was grounded in the theoretical and empirical literature. Herzberg, Mausner, and Synderman (1959) and Herzberg's (1964) two-factor theory of motivation, and Bandura's (1965) social learning theory were the theoretical frameworks presented and used to support the research questions. The following section established the contribution from the results of this study and the theoretical and empirical literature by shedding light on the relationship between the study's findings and the information documented in the literature review. This section includes how this study confirmed previous research, contributes to the field of education, and extends on the literature presented in chapter two.

### **Theoretical Literature Discussion**

The theories I used to guide this study included: Herzberg, Mausner, and Synderman (1959) and Herzberg's (1964) two-factor theory of motivation, and Bandura's (1965) social learning theory. One theory I used to guide this study included Herzberg, Mausner, and Synderman (1959) and Herzberg's (1964) two-way theory of motivation. Herzberg's (1968) research indicated a two-factor theory model in which experiences that impact job satisfaction are different from experiences that impact job dissatisfaction. This two-factor theory delineated between experiences that impact individuals to persevere and experiences which challenge their motivation to persevere. Herzberg referred to experiences that challenge an individual's ability to persevere as hygiene factors. Herzberg found that company policy and administration, supervision, interpersonal relationships, working conditions, safety, status, and security were experiences, which were most associated with job dissatisfaction. The current study found a

delineation between factors that influence job satisfaction and dissatisfaction, the factors did align with those identified by Herzberg. The current study identified interpersonal relationships, such as collaboration, as important. Most of the participants believed collaboration was a big part of making PLCs work well. Motivators identified by Herzberg included recognition, achievement, responsibility, advancement, and growth. Herzberg found that these factors were related to the individual. The participants of the current study indicated that factors, such as achievement and responsibility were important. Teachers expressed their commitment to students learning and achieving goals. The teachers also looked at data to guide their instruction, so their students could make growth and achieve their goals. The study also revealed that teachers were more motivated when they had more responsibility. The teachers wanted to take more ownership of the meetings during PLCs; for example, they wanted to set the agenda for the meetings. Teachers liked when they had the opportunity to facilitate over the PLCs. The teachers also enjoyed discussing topics that were important to them. Teachers were participating in this study often referenced finding satisfaction in looking at data from students' diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments to drive their instruction. For the teachers, this achievement or growth in their students affirmed the importance of their work.

According to the study conducted by McMillan, McConnell, and O'Sullivan (2016), it focused on the motivating and inhibiting factors involved and examined Herzberg's two-way theory of motivation. McMillan, McConnell, and O'Sullivan 's study took place across two jurisdictions, the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, and therefore explored the experiences of teachers within slightly differing policy contexts regarding continuing professional development (CPD). The study provided ample evidence that Herzberg, Mausner, and Synderman's (1959) and Herzberg's (1964) two-factor theory of motivation, while not

providing all of the answers to the complex question of what motivates teachers to engage in CPD, remains highly useful and relevant as an analysis tool within the field of teacher CPD today (McMillan, McConnell, & O'Sullivan, 2016).

I used social learning theory (Bandura, 1965) to provide the foundational theoretical framework for elementary teachers' perspectives of PLCs. Bandura stated that three factors determine human behavior. Those factors are environmental, behavioral, and cognitive. In this case study, participants discussed environmental factors, such as norms and accessibility to a community that influences others. Having the agenda in PLCs made the participants feel in more control because they knew what to expect. The behavior factors helped determine what the learning participants were able to accomplish. The knowledge that each teacher displayed indicated what they learned was very satisfying. When someone in the PLCs showed a lack of knowledge, the participants felt less likely to trust that person. For example, some of the coaches were not able to answer participants' questions about the reading and math curriculum. This lack of knowledge from the coaches happened frequently. As a result, the participants began to build a lack of trust.

Bandura's (1965) social learning theory stated that learning happens when people observe others. Bandura emphasized that children learn in a social environment. Not only do children learn socially, adults learn in that way, too. Three critical ingredients needed for social learning are observation, imitation, and modeling. Bandura's social learning theory indicated that observing a person's behavior helps them learn. Observational learning will not occur unless the cognitive process was at work. Participants in the study indicated that teachers should observe each other so that they can share different instructional strategies. There were few opportunities for the teachers to observe their colleagues. Some participants mentioned that the coaches should

do more modeling instead of telling. The modeling used to occur in the schools more consistently, but most of the participants discussed how there had been less emphasis placed on modeling. Some teachers have wanted a coach to come into their classroom and model how to execute a lesson. Unfortunately, because of the coaches' lack of knowledge and time, modeling rarely happened. Participants described how coaches would be unprepared when modeling lessons. The coaches lacked the knowledge of what the standards meant and how to teach the lesson. Participants believed that they were teaching the coaches instead of the coaches teaching them what to do.

Participants also mentioned how they would benefit from being able to grade papers together. When teachers are ready to sit down and discuss grading practices, it allows for productive conversations to happen. Classroom observation does not have to occur when a teacher was going into a classroom and watching another teacher. Insights into classroom instruction may happen when teachers discuss the grades a student receives or how to handle a parent conference.

Bandura's (1965) social learning theory stated that there are steps involved in observational learning. During PLCs, teachers must first pay attention. To get teachers to pay attention, participants discussed having an agenda, norms, and roles during PLCs. The norms were established to make sure teachers are focused and paying attention. Next, retention is another important step in the observation process. Third, once teachers have paid attention and retained the information, then it is time to reproduce the observed behavior. Like the Herzberg, Mausner, and Synderman(1959) and Herzberg's (1964) two-way theory of motivation, motivation is the last step in the modeling process. If teachers were not motivated to implement what they have learned, then the process will not be successful.

## **Empirical Literature Discussion**

The study confirmed that the purpose of PLCs is to help students. One way to help students were looking at the data. Data provides the key to student achievements. Using data to guide instruction will allow teachers to intervene when students need additional support. Data will also allow educators to accelerate learning when students need a challenge. Just having data does not mean students will automatically have their needs met (DeLuca, Bolden, & Chan, 2017). Professional learning communities should include pieces of training that teach and model the effective use of data, and skills necessary to become data-literate. Effectively using data to drive instruction is no easy task (Çolak, 2017). Educators have access to so much data but lack the understanding or training to use this information effectively. Data-driven instruction requires time to understand the data, disaggregate the data, and effectively use the data toward school improvement efforts (Marsh & Farrell, 2015).

Leadership is an essential factor in determining if PLCs will be effective. Literature acknowledges the role and influence administrators have within a school (Patton & Parker, 2017). As great as one leader is, he or she cannot do everything all by themselves. Leaders must be willing to share authority. Staff should have input in the decision-making process (Chauraya & Brodie, 2017). The research confirmed that it is imperative to distribute leadership. According to Futernick (2007), teachers' felt greater personal satisfaction when they believed in their efficacy and were involved in decision making. The participants in this study thought their opinion should be asked before a decision is made. The participants felt that after a decision is made. It is often too late to intervene and make a change. A 2010 research report commissioned by the Wallace Foundation, *Learning from Leadership: Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning*, found that a distributed approach to leadership is often a key to the success of



high-performing schools (as cited in Burkman, 2012). Most of the participants had a leadership team that consisted of a principal, assistant principal, and two coaches. The leadership team also had a team leader from each grade. The team leaders would have meetings to make important decisions that would affect student learning (Zheng, Yin, Liu, & Ke, 2016).

Olivier and Huffman (2016) discussed how a successful PLC needs effective leadership. The current study supports these findings because the coaches need effective training. Fajardo (2014) stated that a leader's role is considered pivotal within a PLC. If the leadership is not in place, then PLC will not run efficiently.

This study supports that the previous research in PLCs have beneficial factors. One benefit of PLCs the analysis revealed was collaboration. Collaboration can occur in small groups made up of teachers. The teachers on PLC teams are usually in the same department, content area, or grade level. Teachers meet regularly and work on clarifying purpose and priorities. During the collaboration time, teachers also (a) create common assessments to generate student data, (b) form strategies to help students learn, (c) assist each other as they put the plan into action, and (d) gather new data to determine the outcome of their efforts. Within the professional learning community, structures are put into place for faculty to engage in professional dialogue that extends beyond topics about social climate or operational procedures and focuses on instruction (Hallinger et al., 2014). DuFour (2004) stated, "the powerful collaboration that characterizes professional learning communities is a systematic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practice" (p. 9). As team members engage in a continuous cycle of inquiry, profound learning opportunities occur for them. The inquiry process leads to gains in student achievement. The benefit of collaboration also encourages individuals to share common goals. The participants of the study agreed that sharing common goals was

important. According to Williams (2012), sharing goals and interests will benefit the greater good.

PLCs function through informal and formal collaborative methods. Teachers look for any moment of the day to try to carve out time to collaborate. Teachers often visit in the hallways, during lunch, or in the teachers' lounge. Teachers discuss what they are doing in the classrooms, students who are struggling, and strategies that have worked for them. Teachers frequently swap ideas and teaching methods. Informal collaboration occurs more frequently and is a vital part of every school. Effective PLC teams discuss their results in terms of data that indicate improved student learning. Achievement data should drive the actions a collaborative team takes to improve student learning. DuFour et al. (2010) identified four critical questions on which PLC collaborative teams should focus on to improve student learning:

1. What do we want our students to learn? This question meant to focus the team on the curriculum to give to the students. Using State Core Standards as their guide, teams discuss what they see as the essential outcomes for each subject. They identify what knowledge and skills each student must acquire by the end of the course, class, or unit of study.

2. How will we know they are learning? This question helped the team come together to create and administer common formative assessments to determine if the students have met the essential learning outcomes. Each team member shares the data produced by the assessments with the team, and the team identifies weak areas and shares ideas on how to improve instruction to meet the needs of all students.

3. How will we respond when they do not learn? This question enables the team to create timely, direct, and systematic intervention strategies to give extra time and support to the

individual students or student groups who did not learn. Interventions should not be left up to the individual teacher but should be a team effort.

4. How will we respond when they have already learned it? This question allows the team to create challenging academic programs for students who are ready for more challenging content. Then, students can achieve at higher levels. These questions were the guiding questions used by the teachers in PLCs. If these questions did not get answered, then the PLC was not as effective. Teachers in the current study discussed how these questions kept the PLCs focused and on task.

The current study extends the previous research in PLCs face challenges. Time is one of the most common barriers prevalent in the literature about PLCs. Time represented a barrier to implementation because participants shared that they were unable to effectively implement and evaluate strategies to ascertain whether they contributed to student growth. Participants did not have the chance to see if what they were learning in PLCs was effective for students. Analysis revealed that participants did not think enough time was allowed effectively collaborate about issues related to student learning or improved teaching. Time was an issue for the participants in Maloney and Konza's (2011) because some participants found the training valuable, while others did not attend due to lack of relevancy or scheduling conflicts. PLC attendance was scarce, and participants did not think enough time existed to engage in collaboration and collegial discourse. Findings revealed that some teachers viewed time spent in PLCs as taking away from valuable class time and instruction, while others believed the time was needed to collaborate and discuss best practices. Leclerc et al. (2012) described time as a crucial organizational factor that affected PLC implementation and revealed that time allocated during school hours for collaborative

meetings. PLC attendance should be non-negotiable, made a priority, and respected, so all can attend during their scheduled time.

Trust was another barrier PLCs faced. This research found trust is developed among members of collaborative teams when the participants fulfilled their assignments and responsibilities. It takes time for members to build an active PLC where there is interpersonal trust, where new ideas can develop, and where members feel comfortable raising sensitive issues (Barton & Stepanek, 2012; Lui, 2013). The teachers in this study described how important it is to hold each team member accountable for their responsibilities. When the teachers honored their commitments, they were competent. In some situations, team members failed to do what they said they would do. As a result, other team members would be agitated, but others would show patience. Those team members who showed patience helped to build an environment of trust.

Sutarsih and Saud (2019) found the impact of professional development of teachers are raising self-reflection awareness and self-renewal capacity, understanding characteristics, and developing potential learners, and improving the quality of learning services. When compared with the findings of this study, the findings indicated that the functional orientation of the principal as an instructional leader, motivator, and facilitator is necessary for providing a learning environment in the school as well as supporting the improvement of leadership and teacher capacity by developing collective capacity. The study also found that the elements of professional development of teachers through PLC, are (a) commitment, (b) responsibility, (c) utilization, (d) collaboration and sharing, and (e) school culture and climate. Research shows a very positive response to school culture in terms of openness to improvement and to explore new teaching practices, as well as reflective dialogue and discussion of the specific situations and

challenges faced in the school's learning community (Stoll et al., 2006; Hord, 2009; Furqon et al., 2018).

### **Implications**

The findings in this case study have implications for the district, administrators, and teachers. This section discusses the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications derived from the research. The research provided important information to educators about the implementation of a professional learning initiative. Decades of research about professional learning communities has shown that creating opportunities for teacher collaboration is (a) a highly effective practice to support job-embedded, (b) sustained professional learning that can reform teaching practices, and (c) improve student learning. Installing and continuing a PLC initiative that does not strive to effect positive change and reform in teacher learning and practices can become a wasteful endeavor.

### **Theoretical**

Learning within the social learning theory is reciprocal and based on the interactions and behaviors of the participants (Biniecki & Conceicao, 2016). Social change through improved collaborative relationships and communication in our educational institutions, results in improved student performance and teacher quality. This professional dialogue leads to (a) teacher collaboration, (b) acquisition of new knowledge and skills, (c) teacher empowerment, (d) sharing of best practices, and (e) experiences. Herzberg, Mausner, and Synderman (1959) and Herzberg's (1964) two-way theory of motivation supports relationships. The school culture needs to create an environment built on respect and trust. In the current study, the participants discussed how important it was for teachers to trust one another. Motivating teachers by giving them responsibility is a part of Herzberg's two-way theory of motivation. That responsibility can

surface by giving teachers roles in PLCs. Another way schools can motivate is by giving them training. The participants confirmed that strengthening training was an area that needed improvement. The coaches needed more training to be able to facilitate PLCs.

### **Empirical**

School leaders must strive to implement PLCs with fidelity, ensuring that the necessary components and protocols that facilitate success and improvement are evident, efficient, and functional. PLCs should focus on understanding data first to ensure proper use in the development of instruction that addresses the needs of students. Supportive structures must be in place to discuss all aspects of data use. Professional learning communities implemented with fidelity create a culture of learning that increases academic achievement for all. When PLCs are effectively implemented and sustained, professional development is relevant, relatable, applicable, and based on the real-time needs of students and teachers.

### **Practical**

The school district could develop and provide protocols to guide collaborative discussions. Teachers would receive directions and paperwork beforehand so they could prepare for discussions. Discussions during PLCs would be related to classroom-level assessments and provided the teachers an opportunity to collaboratively evaluate what worked, what did not work, and use any suggestions shared to develop an action plan.

#### **District level.**

The implementation of professional learning communities must be a district priority in which support begins at the central office administration and the board of education level. The individuals who work at the top positions of school systems and the governing bodies of these organizations control the resources needed for teacher collaboration. Participants discussed the

lack of having a shared vision. Having a shared vision that articulates clear and transparent goals for the PLCs must be understood and embraced by those who control the organization. Based on the findings, districts need to provide schools with more training opportunities for schools to properly implement PLCs.

#### **Administration level.**

Building level leaders shoulder the most complex responsibilities in a PLC professional learning program, but building leaders also have the potential to make the greatest impact. The principal, the assistant principals, coaches, and the department heads make decisions daily that impact how the school functions. Building leaders receive and respond to communications from the central office, teachers, students, and parents, so they have an intimate insight into the concerns of all these stakeholders. The participants of the study stated how it is important for communication to flow from administration to stakeholders. Participants indicated that sometimes information is not communicated in a timely manner from administration to teachers. Based on what the participants confirmed, the administration needs to make sure coaches have plenty of training. Leadership skills are essential before facilitating PLCs.

#### **Teacher level.**

The teachers in this study demonstrated an interest in nurturing collegial relationships and in responding to district and administrative requests with professional dedication. Teachers must learn about the different types of formative and summative data they can collect from students. The current study gave insight that teachers also need to receive training on how to analyze student work and draw conclusions about student learning needs. Educators are wasting hours of work on producing information that does not increase their ability to help students. The other major area in which teachers need training is around the elements of group communication.

Teachers understand the difference between superficial conversations and those that are truly collaborative.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

In any qualitative study, there will be some delimitations and limitations. Delimitations are decisions made to limit a study. Delimitations are results made by the researcher (Wiersma, 2000). Limitations address factors that were beyond my control. A limitation as it relates to a qualitative study is connected to the validity and reliability. Since qualitative studies happen in a natural setting, it is difficult to replicate the study. There were both delimitations and limitations in my case study.

#### **Delimitations**

This research included delimitations. The first one included how participants were chosen for the study. I used purposeful sampling to select participants. I also limited the number of years for participants. I invited those who had participated in PLCs for at least two years to participate in the study. Another delimitation was that I focused on elementary teachers' perspectives. This delimitation eliminated middle school and high school teacher perspectives from the study.

#### **Limitation**

The first limitation was researcher bias. I have worked in PLCs for over five years. Although I tried to lay aside my prejudgments, human nature dictates a certain amount of bias and how I reported the data. Limitations also affect the conclusions I made about the research. Another limitation of the study included the study was limited to one geographic region. The study spanned over one county. The participants were all from the same district.



Furthermore, 92% of the teachers were from one school. A third limitation included the number of years teachers needed to participate in PLCs. I requested elementary teachers to have at least two years of PLC experience. A final limitation for the study was that the study was voluntary in nature and included 13 participants. While I met data saturation, this limited the study to only one male teacher, one connection teacher, and one special education teacher.

A qualitative approach was used in this study and was suitable to gather the descriptive remembrances of the participants, but the findings may not pertain to other populations and settings. The participants were willingly engaged in the study and wanted to discuss their experiences in PLCs. Some of the participants may have remembered and presented information different from reality. Other participants may have forgotten essential descriptions that would have added to the study. Some participants may have been hesitant to share their thoughts and beliefs during the focus groups. Finally, the participants may have given answers they thought were sought by the researcher or members of the focus group.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Given the findings of this study, along with its delimitations and limitations, further research is recommended. Specifically, I recommend further research that replicates the methods of this study in other geographic locations, research that further investigates male teachers' perspective of PLCs, and teachers' perspectives in secondary schools. This study was limited to the Southeastern region of the United States. It would be beneficial to see teachers' perspectives in other regions of the United States. I only had one male teacher participate in the study. There tends to be fewer male teachers in an elementary setting. It would be interesting to investigate more elementary male teachers' perspectives of PLCs. The male teacher's perspective tended to be a little different from the other teachers' perspectives. The male teacher was quiet and agreed

with many of the things the other teachers said. My study focused on elementary teachers. It would also be interesting to study teachers' perspectives in secondary schools because secondary teachers usually focus on just one subject. When secondary teachers are in PLCs, their conversations might be more focused on just that subject. Secondary teachers also have more planning time than elementary teachers. I would like to investigate to see if more time provides teachers more opportunities to collaborate during PLCs. Another area for further research would be elementary teachers' perspectives on the time allotted for PLCs. Most teachers had 45 minutes a week to discuss every subject taught, such as math, writing, reading, science, etc. The participants might have benefitted from having two 45-minute blocks of time each week to have PLCs. Time was a barrier for the participants, so diving into that research topic would shed more light on the topic.

### **Summary**

I conducted a case study on elementary teachers' perspectives on PLCs. Based on the theoretical framework of Bandura (1965), Herzberg, Mausner, and Synderman (1959), and Herzberg (1964), my goal was to find elementary teachers' perspectives of PLCs. This research study examined the purpose of PLCs, how to describe PLCs, and the benefits and barriers of PLCs. The results of the study found the purpose of PLCs was to provide teachers with opportunities for growth through increased knowledge and skills that contribute to improved student learning, teacher learning, and teaching practice looking at data. Other purposes of PLCs were that they were pointless, participants need to be openminded, the coaches needed more training, and there should be shared value and vision. Just because a school has PLCs in place does not necessarily guarantee teacher improvement and increased student achievement. PLCs can be beneficial if done correctly. The study's findings also revealed that PLCs need norms,

roles, and an agenda. Participants also found benefits and barriers to PLCs. PLCs can allow for teachers to have collaborative discussions. The right conditions must exist for them to be successful. Teachers are supposed to differentiate for their students. The administration should do the same for teachers. PLCs are not a one size fits all. PLCs need to be tailored to the needs of each teacher and their students.

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**APPENDIX A: SITE APPROVAL LETTER**

Attachment E

**Application to Conduct Research****DISPOSITION**Researcher Chanel Bess

Title of Proposed Research Study

A Qualitative Study of Elementary Teachers' Perspectives of Professional Learning Communities

Date Considered by the Administration and Board of Education:

March 2019

Administratively or Board approved:

 Yes No**Note: Teachers who have volunteered for the research project have been identified.****Please provide the school district a copy of the results of your research upon completion.**



**APPENDIX B: IRB APPROVAL LETTER****LIBERTY UNIVERSITY**  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

March 20, 2019

Chanel Bess

IRB Approval 3664.032019: A Qualitative Study of Elementary Teachers' Perspectives of Professional Learning Communities

Dear Chanel Bess,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. (NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. [45 CFR 46.101\(b\)\(2\)](#) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.)

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,



**G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP**

*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*

**Research Ethics Office**

*Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971*

## APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM

### A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF ELEMENTARY TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Chanel Bess  
Liberty University  
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study elementary teachers' perspectives of professional learning communities. By understanding Southeast U. S. elementary school teachers' experiences in PLCs, researchers, and educators will provide a better understanding of the factors and conditions that influence successful implementation, and as a result, offer specific steps to increase the effectiveness of collaboration among teachers. You were selected as a possible participant because you are an elementary teacher who has participated in a PLC. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Chanel Bess, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

**Background Information:** The purpose of this study is to understand elementary teachers' perspectives of PLCs in a Southeastern United States elementary school. The following questions will guide this study: How do elementary teachers describe the purpose of a PLC? How do elementary teachers describe their experiences in PLCs? What are elementary teachers' perceptions of benefits and barriers of PLCs?

**Procedures:** If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things: Your participation will involve a semi-structured interview that will take approximately one hour. A short follow up interview or phone call may be necessary for clarification of your comments if needed. A focused group interview will be conducted, as well. It will take approximately 1-2 hours. The interview will be audio recorded for accuracy.

**Risks:** The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

**Benefits:**

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

**Compensation:** Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

**Confidentiality:** The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Participants will be assigned a pseudonym. I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation. Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and

then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings. I cannot assure participants that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:** Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty. If you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or withdraw at any time.

**How to Withdraw from the Study:**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

**Contacts and Questions:** The researcher conducting this study is Chanel Bess. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty chair, Dr. Billie Holubz, at [REDACTED].

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

*Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.*

**Statement of Consent:** I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record/video-record/photograph me as part of my participation in this study.

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Signature of Participant

Date

---

Signature of Investigator

Date

**APPENDIX D: RECRUITMENT LETTER**

November 20, 2018

[Recipient]

[Title]

[Company]

[Address 1]

[Address 2]

[Address 3]

Dear [Recipient]:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am researching as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of this study is to understand elementary teachers' perspectives of PLCs in a Southeastern United States elementary school. The following questions will guide this study: How do elementary teachers describe the purpose of a PLC? How do elementary teachers describe their experiences in PLCs? What are elementary teachers' perceptions of benefits and barriers of PLCs? I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

If you are 18 years of age or older, have participated in a PLC, and are willing to participate, you will be asked to If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things: Your participation will involve a semi-structured interview that will take approximately one hour. A short follow up interview or phone call may be necessary for clarification of your comments if needed. A focused group interview will be conducted, as well. It will take approximately 1-2 hours. The interview will be audio recorded for accuracy. It should take about two weeks for you to complete the procedures listed. Your participation will be completely anonymous, and no personal, identifying information will be collected.

To participate, [go to [webpage] and click on the link provided/complete and return the consent document to the researcher, complete the attached survey/contact me to schedule an interview at [redacted] or [redacted].

A consent document is provided as the first page you will see and is attached to this letter you will receive at the time of the interview/focus group. The consent document contains additional information about my research. Please sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the interview or focus group.

Sincerely,

Chanel Bess  
Liberty University Doctoral Student

## APPENDIX E: DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

These questions designed to collect information about the demographics of a teacher who works in a professional learning community will be delivered through Survey Monkey before the Interview Protocol (Appendix C). Data collected from this survey will be used for dissertation research purposes only.

1. How many years have you served as a teacher in a professional learning community?

- a) Less than three years
- b) 3 to 5 years
- c) 6-10 years
- d) More than 10 years

2. Please indicate your age range.

- a) 21 to 35
- b) 36 to 45
- c) 46-55
- d) 56-65
- e) 66+

3. What is your race?

- a) Caucasian
- b) African American
- c) Hispanic
- d) Asian
- e) American Indian
- f) Other

4. Gender

a) Male

b) Female

5. What is your level of education?

a) Bachelor's degree

b) Master's degree

c) Doctoral degree

## **APPENDIX F: PLCR ASSESSMENT**

Directions: This questionnaire assesses your perceptions about your principal, staff, and stakeholders based on the dimensions of a professional learning community (PLC) and related attributes. This questionnaire contains questions about practices that occur in some schools. Comments after each dimension section are optional. Key Terms: • Principal = Principal, not Associate or Assistant Principal • Staff/Staff Members = All adult staff directly associated with curriculum, instruction, and assessment of students • Stakeholders = Parents and community members

### **FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS**

#### Shared and Supportive Leadership

1. What are some ways staff members are involved in the decision making about most school issues?
2. How does the principal incorporate advice from staff members to make decisions?
3. How do staff members have accessibility to key information?
4. How are the principal proactive and address areas that are needed?
5. What opportunities are available for staff members to initiate change?
6. How does the principal share responsibility and rewards for innovation actions?
7. How does the principal participate democratically with sharing power and authority?
8. How is leadership promoted and nurtured among staff members?
9. How does decision-making take place through committees and communication across grade and subject areas?
10. How do stakeholders assume shared responsibility and accountability for student learning without evidence of imposed power and authority?
11. How do staff members use multiple sources of data to make decisions about teaching and learning?

#### Shared Values & Visions

12. What collaborative process exists for developing a shared sense of values among staff?
13. How do shared values support norms of behavior that guide decisions about teaching and learning?
14. How do staff members share visions for school improvement that have an undeviating focus on student learning?
15. How are decisions made in alignment with the school's values and vision?
16. What collaborative process exists for developing a shared vision among staff?
17. What school goals focus on student learning beyond test scores and grades?
18. What policies and programs are aligned to the school's vision?
19. How are stakeholders actively involved in creating high expectations that serve to increase student achievement?
20. How is data used to prioritize actions to reach a shared vision?

#### Collective Learning & Application

21. How do staff members work together to seek knowledge, skills, and strategies and apply this new learning to their work?

22. What collegial relationships exist among staff members that reflect a commitment to school improvement efforts?
23. How do staff members plan and work together to search for solutions to address diverse student needs?
24. What opportunities and structures exist for collective learning through open dialogue?
25. How do staff members engage in dialogue that reflects a respect for diverse ideas that lead to continued inquiry?
26. How does professional development focus on teaching and learning?
27. How do school staff members and stakeholders learn together and apply new knowledge to solve problems?
28. How are school staff members committed to programs that enhance learning?
29. How do staff members collaboratively analyze multiple sources of data to assess the effectiveness of instructional practices?
30. How do staff members collaboratively analyze student work to improve teaching and learning?

#### Shared Personal Practice

31. What opportunities exist for staff members to observe peers and offer encouragement?
32. How do staff members provide feedback to peers related to instructional practices?
33. How do staff members informally share ideas and suggestions for improving student learning?
34. How do staff members collaboratively review student work to share and improve instructional practices?
35. What opportunities exist for coaching and mentoring?
36. When do individuals and teams have an opportunity to apply to learn and share the results of their practices?
37. When do staff members regularly share student work to guide overall school improvement?

#### Supportive Conditions-Relationships

38. How are caring relationships exist among staff and students that are built on trust and respect?
39. How does a culture of trust and respect exist for taking risks?
40. When is outstanding achievement is recognized and celebrated regularly in your school?
41. How do school staff and stakeholders exhibit a sustained and unified effort to embed change into the culture of the school?
42. How do relationships among staff members support honest and respectful examination of data to enhance teaching and learning?

#### Supportive Conditions-Structures

43. When is time is provided to facilitate collaborative work?
44. How does the school schedule promote collective learning and shared practice?
45. What fiscal resources are available for professional development?
46. What appropriate technology and instructional materials are available to staff?
47. How do resource people provide expertise and support for continuous learning?



48. When is the school facility is clean, attractive, and inviting?
49. What are the proximity of grade level and department personnel that allows for ease in collaborating with colleagues?
50. What communication systems promote a flow of information among staff members?
51. What communication systems promote a flow of information across the entire school community, including, central office personnel, parents, and community members?
52. How is data organized and made available to provide easy access to staff members?

## APPENDIX G: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Part I: Notes for the Interviewer
-----------------------------------

1. Tape-record the interviews if permission is granted
2. Interview in a neutral setting.
3. Each interview lasted 60 to 120 minutes.

Interviews will be implemented with a customized approach allowing for an in-depth investigation. Follow-up questions will be used to stimulate interviewee memory. The interviewer will use a semi-structured question design (Part III). The interview will contain:

1. A predetermined set of 10-15 questions
2. Predetermined questions will be the same for all participants.
3. Designation of Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Location of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_
5. Date: \_\_\_\_\_
6. Start Time: \_\_\_\_\_
7. Finish Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Part II: Components of the Interview
--------------------------------------

- 1. Components of the Interview**
  - a. Introduction (5-10 minutes)
  - b. Review confidentiality and consent form.
  - c. Create a relaxed environment
  - d. Dialogue

Question: Have you received my introductory correspondence explaining my research and the format that will be used?

Question: Are there any questions?

## **2. Explain the purpose of the interview**

The purpose of this interview is to explore the factors that influence your decisions. During the time we have together, I would like to get an understanding of your experiences and observations pertinent to the subject matter of the study.

## **3. Ask permission to record the interview**

With your authorization, I would like to tape-record our discussion to get an inclusive record of what is said, since the notes I take will not be as comprehensive as I will require. No one other than I will listen to anything you say to me. Only I will have access to the records. The research results will describe what you and others have said predominantly in summation. No responses will be ascribed to you by name.

The open-ended questions are intended to obtain your personal experience and perceptions. The interview time may take about 2 hours. If you agree to volunteer and participate in the research process, please sign the informed consent page and confidentiality agreement.

1. Would you give me permission to tape the interview?

2. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Part III: Interview Questions
-------------------------------

*RQ1. How do elementary teachers describe the purpose of a PLC?*

Interview Question 1: Describe your experience in a PLC.

Interview Question 2: What are some of the things you discuss in a PLC?

Interview Question 3: What characteristics do you feel are necessary to succeed in a professional learning community?

Interview Question 4: What skills do you feel are necessary to succeed in a professional learning community?

*RQ2. How do elementary teachers describe their experiences in PLCs?*

Interview Question 5: What are some norms that should be established in a professional learning community?

Interview Question 6: How should a PLC be organized?

Interview Question 7: How are discussions made in a PLC?

Interview Question 8: How does the professional learning community influence collaboration?

*RQ3: What are elementary teachers' perceptions of benefits and barriers of PLCs?*

Interview Question 9: What are the factors that facilitate or hinder communication in PLCs?

Interview Question 10: What are some negative drawbacks if any, would you describe, in regards, to Professional Learning Communities?

Interview Question 11: Describe the most valuable benefits that you have experienced from PLCs.