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Educator's Perceptions of Effective Professional Learning Communities

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Educator’s Perceptions of Effective Professional Learning Communities

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Abstract

This paper explores the perceptions of educators to what they see as the essential elements of an effective professional learning community (PLC). The research will then connect this perception to how they perceive their experience in a PLC team. A review of the literature shows there are common themes that emerge that predict the effectiveness of a PLC team.

The research study I will be conducting will explore the element present (or lacking) that contribute to the success and effectiveness of PLC teams as perceived by its team members.

My research will try to understand the dynamics of each PLC team as individuals bring their own personalities and beliefs that affect their perceptions and interactions within a PLC team.

Introduction

Research continues to explain the importance of school’s having effective professional learning communities fine-tuning the core characteristics necessary for a PLC to be effective. PLCs need to be founded in student learning, collaboration, trust, reflection, data-driven and professional development (Blank, 2013; Dufour & Fullan, 2013; Dunne, Nave & Lewis, 2000; Graham, 2007; Hsu, 2012; Williams, 2013; Adams & Vescio, 2015). PLCs are not a “program” but a change in culture (Dufour & Fullan, 2013).

But not all PLCs are effective and individuals bring their own beliefs, strengths and challenges which add to the complexity and dynamics of a group of educators trying to do what is best for students. When an educator and member of a PLC team perceives their team to be effective, there are common elements in place that help create an atmosphere of trust and collaboration and in turn, help make the PLC effective.

Literature Review

Until recently, the education model has been based on teachers working in isolation, top-down management and an assembly line structure for students. Donaldson (2001) called this the “classical leadership” model in which policies were developed by “wiser and more powerful people” (p. 34) including the government. “The square-peg model of classical leadership’s very purpose was to bring ‘squareness’ to the round-hole qualities of teachers’ lives and schools’ performance” (Donaldson, 2001, p. 34). This system seemed to work well for America until the 1960s when there came a “level of political activism that insisted that public schools serve all children” (Donaldson, 2001, p. 34). Further reform continued to be demanded.

“The outcomes-and-accountability movement of the 1980s and 1990s turned up the pressure by publicly condemning schools for their past performance and insisting on public tests to determine which schools were failing and which were succeeding with all their children” (Donaldson, 2001, p. 34).

With this, came a change in how educators and administrators worked together (Donaldson, 2001; Anrig, 2015). Research “consistently finds that a high degree of trust between administrators and teachers is an essential ingredient in making successful schools tick” (Anrig, 2015, p. 32).

As part of the reform and changes in education, the concept of professional learning communities has gained a strong foothold as a new way to look at education, student learning and teacher practices. This is not about an implementation of a program, but about a fundamental change in school culture, changing deep-seated beliefs and traditional ways of doing things (DuFour & Fullan, 2013; Hsu, 2012; Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2007). Education has moved from an industrial mentality to an era where learning is paramount. In order to prepare

students for their future, education needs to move from industrial age thinking into a “learning age in which the work force must be flexible and collaborative to adapt to an ever-changing economy” (Doerr, 2009, p. 26). Fullan (2011) described the idea of “relational coordination (shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect), and transparent communication (frequent, timely, accurate, and problem-solving communication)” (p. 94). DuFour & Fullan (2013) believed “PLCs are central in improving school performance, student engagement, and educators’ job satisfaction, across districts and states” (p. 4).

This article will provide an understanding of professional learning communities, the core elements that make an effective PLC and the role of administrators. Teachers’ perceptions of PLCs will then be examined, including the impact on student learning, and teacher practices. A look to the future through professional learning networks will also be discussed. Finally, questions for future research will be posed.

Effective Professional Learning Communities

Key elements. There are many definitions of professional learning communities with similar attributes. Burke, et al. (2011), stated PLCs are “designed to enable teachers to collaboratively address problems of practice, and understand their work as interdependent with others in their building and district” (p. 36). Adams and Vescio (2015) stated PLCs are a ‘powerful form of collaborative professional learning’ impacting both teacher practice and student learning outcomes (p. 26). Researchers agree there are several core characteristics that are the basis of professional learning communities: student-focused, collaborative, reflective, evidence-based, strong leadership and ongoing (Blank, 2013; DuFour & Fullan, 2013; Dunne, Nave & Lewis, 2000; Graham, 2007; Hsu, 2012; Williams, 2013, Adams & Vescio, 2015). Graham (2007)

stated foundational factors like common planning time, creating norms and protocols, along with administrative support were important but not enough. To be an effective PLC teams need to work in small, supportive groups with an intense focus on student learning, using student data to analyze and ultimately change and improve practices and student outcomes. In addition, trust among members of the team was imperative to build relationships (Dunne, et al., 2000; Graham, 2007, Sims & Penny, 2014). Effective PLCs include open and reflective conversation, open practice and focus on student learning as key elements. Of these elements “the strongest was trust” (Sims & Penny, 2014, p. 43). This allowed for both conversation and conflict (Graham, 2007).

...excellence is everyone’s responsibility, and they push each other to take risks, dig deep into each other’s instructional methodology, and together try to figure out what works best for their students. (Hsu, 2012, p. 2)

This collective commitment helps to eliminate the isolation felt by teachers. Donaldson (2001) warned that isolation “leaves teachers out of touch with professional and emotional resources that can make their work both more effective and more rewarding” (p. 26). Instead, PLCs create a sense of “our” students versus “my” students (Lujan & Day, 2010). DuFour & Fullan (2013) refer to this idea as “mutual allegiance and collaborative competition” (p. 60). Educator’s care and commitment broadens to include others, while a common focus and collaboration encourage team members to not only push themselves, but others as well (DuFour & Fullan, 2013).

Role of administrators. When looking at the big picture, a strong leadership is essential to the success of PLCs. Research has shown that the active support of administrators have a strong influence on whether a PLC will be successful or not (Doerr, 2009; Dunne, et al., 2000; Sims & Penny, 2015). DuFour & Fullan (2013) described six characteristics of effective PLCs including: “shared mission (purpose), vision (clear direction), values (collective commitments), and goals

(indicators, timelines, and targets), which are all focused on student learning” (p. 14). They further emphasize that “it is not the turnover of leadership per se that is the problem... but rather the discontinuity of direction” (DuFour & Fullan, 2013, p. 71). To truly support the work of PLCs, school leaders need to provide common time, and common language, create ways to monitor the PLC process, prioritize and build capacity of teacher leaders (Hsu, 2012). At the same time, teachers need the ability to make decisions regarding their own PLC processes feel empowered and have a sense of autonomy (Vescio, et al., 2007; Anrig, 015). Teamwork and shared responsibility with administrators “reaching out to teachers... to develop a more inclusive culture focused on improving the learning experience of all students” is what generates commitment (Anrig, 2015, p. 33). DuFour & Fullan (2013) refer to this type of leadership as a balance of “simultaneously loose and tight” (p. 39). To effectively change the way educators engage in their own PLCs, Doerr (2009) felt it was the role of leaders to change teacher’s perceptions from “behavioral accountability, showing up to meetings because they have to, to intellectual accountability where they understand the benefits of the collaboration on their practice and in their students’ learning” (p. 29). Donaldson (2001) referred to the problem administrators had as “collective decisions do not always mean collective support “ (p. 22). Fullan (2011) discussed the importance of “impressive empathy” for leaders.

“...empathy that enables them to understand where people who disagree are coming from...” and “...impressive is the ability to put yourself in other people’s shoes, particularly those who hold values and experiences very different than yours” (p. 30).

Sims & Penny (2014) noted a strong indicator of a failed PLC was “members of the administration appeared disengaged from the PLC process and unsupportive of its goals” (p. 43).

The importance and commitment of educational leaders are key to successful, committed PLC communities.

Teachers' perceptions. Research has shown PLCs are successful when the right elements are in place. Hsu (2012) went as far as to say that “the issue is not so much whether PLCs are effective but how can PLCs be implemented successfully?” (p. 3). Various research have supported the idea that teachers believe PLCs and the ability to work collaboratively made a positive impact in not only their students' learning, but in their own professional development, and morale (Dunne, et al., 2000; Lujan & Day, 2010; Vescio, et al., 2007). Trust, as perceived by educators was essential for sustaining an effective PLC and allowed for risk taking and created a culture where colleagues were comfortable challenging each other's beliefs and practices (Webb, Vulliamy, Saria, Hamalainen & Poikonen, 2009; Anrig, 2015; Sims & Penny, 2014).

Common themes have emerged through research showing teachers have a positive perception of PLCs when these characteristics exist including: school community and culture, collaboration, professional development around curriculum, instruction and student learning, and trust and accountability (Webb, et al., 2009; Williams, 2013; Anrig, 2015). One study found teachers felt obstacles that prevented collaborative work in the past dissolved when PLCs were formed (Lujan & Day, 2010). Lujan and Day (2010) stated that obstacles included lack of common time to meet, a feeling of isolation, and resolving conflict when there were differing viewpoints. In this study, teachers felt they now met on a regular basis and their meetings were more focused and structured (Lujan & Day, 2010). Further evidence of the need for common planning time was stated by Sims and Penny (2015) as part of a failed PLC. Common time was taken away after a couple of years and now “teachers did not have a class period or a common conference period to work on PLC” (Sims & Penny, 2015, p. 42) and this resulted in teachers

feeling they had “insufficient time” (Sims & Penny, 2015, p. 43). Similar results were obtained in a different study in which teachers expressed appreciation to learn from each other versus in isolation and their knowledge increased by comparing different techniques they used when working with students (Williams, 2013).

Though teachers felt more supported by colleagues, other studies have found:

There is emerging evidence that PLCs positively impact teacher collaboration and professionalism, but these same studies found less support for the contention that PLCs change teachers’ practice, and even less to indicate they impact student achievement. (Hord, 2004; Key, 2006; Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2008 as cited in Burke, et al., 2011, p. 37).

Burke, et al. (2011) found a “disconnect between knowing and doing is particularly evident as teachers confront the notion of shared professional practice as a means to improve instruction and student achievement” (p. 37). Further, this study found that individuals’ reported beliefs and principles did not always equate to how they actually behaved (Burke, et al., 2011). Lujan and Day (2010) found this to be true in regard to PLCs meetings. Members reported focused, structured meetings, but the meetings did not always stand up to this rigor (Lujan & Day, 2010).

DuFour and Fullan (2013) identified possible barriers that could sabotage the success of PLCs: First, because there is a strong demand for education reform, and evidence shows that PLCs work, school systems may be quick to adopt it as a program. As earlier stated, PLCs are not a program but a process and a change in culture, not a quick fix. Second, a lack of understanding of what it really takes to establish the PLC process can cause a breakdown of the PLC process. Sims and Penny (2015) examined a failed PLC as perceived by the teachers involved. The group became so focused on data only, and “did not allow for the conversation and collaborative decisions needed to help students achieve” (p. 43). The teachers felt meetings

were “consistently about data and not about how to teach more effectively, to improve their students’ achievement, or to improve their lessons” (p. 44). The researchers concluded “teachers need the time, training, and leadership to help develop a culture where ideas on student achievement and educational practice are shared openly” (p.44).

Adams and Vescio (2015) discussed how “professional learning communities consist of individuals who need different things in order to learn and who may be at drastically different places in their careers or their teaching capabilities” (p. 26). PLCs are a group of “individual learners who might want to be on the same page, but rarely are” (Adams & Vescio, 2015, p. 30).

A study done by Hadar and Brody (2013) (as cited by Adams & Vescio, 2015), outlined four stages of group learning processes to help understand individual learning within a group: breaking isolation, discussing student learning, improving teaching practices and professional growth (Adams & Vescio, 2015). The study found the “key to engagement of individuals beyond the withdrawal stage was the group process of talking student learning and the key to moving individuals beyond awareness was the group process of improving teaching” (Adams & Vescio, 2015, p. 26).

Adams and Vescio (2015) stated how conversations had to go beyond the PLC meeting and cautioned that “individual knowledge may increase, but teacher practice many not change” (p. 28). In addition to PLCs, connections needed to continue into the classroom. “... more powerful when combined with lesson study, coaching, or instructional rounds that occur in the classrooms with students” (Adams & Vescio, 2015, p. 28).

Professional Learning Networks. With the ever changing world of the internet and social media, a new form of professional learning communities have evolved. Known as professional

learning networks (PLNs), they are an online form of PLCs. PLNs allows educators to connect with others and “expand opportunities for teachers to reflect and collaborate without the usual limitations of time, space, and pace” (Blitz, 2013). Sheninger (2014) stated that the “evolution of the real-time Web has dramatically altered how we communicate, gather information and reflect” (p. 124). Evidence indicates that PLNs can achieve the same goals as PLCs. Blitz (2013) stated the flexibility of PLNs is the “strongest advantage” over the traditional face-to-face meeting but studies indicate that “teacher’s motivation to engage their peers and contribute regularly to the group was lower online...” (p. i). Though, “online collaboration appears most productive when membership is diverse (in roles, areas and levels of expertise), the group has an effective moderator, and the group members have opportunities to socialize in person” (Blitz, 2013, p. ii).

Not all PLCs are created equal. Research continues to show strong support that teachers perceive PLCs as valuable and meaningful when PLCs are based on core values of collaboration and student focused. But evidence also has shown that knowing is not the same as doing, unless support continues beyond the meeting, into the classroom. PLCs have helped to shape and change school culture from an isolated profession to one that is more supportive, trusting and empowering to educators. To reiterate, the key elements to an effective PLC include:

1. Shared mission, vision, values, and goal which are all focused on student learning
2. A collaborative culture with a focus on learning
3. Collective inquiry into best practice and current reality
4. Action orientation or “learning by doing”
5. A commitment to continuous improvement
6. A results orientation (DuFour & Fullan, 2013, p. 14)

“PLCs are about people, practices, and processes – they are not a program. They are fundamentally a change in culture – the way we do work around here” (DuFour & Fullan, 2013,

p. 17). Each individual brings their own personalities, strengths and challenges to the table which adds a complexity to the dynamics of each PLC team. In this study, the researcher will investigate the perceptions of elementary teachers in a rural school. PLCs have been in place for several years at this school and yet there are some teams that are perceived to be more successful than others.

This research will try to answer the question: How do K-2 teachers’ and administrators’ perceptions of the essential elements of an effective PLC at W.G. Mallett School, Farmington, Maine? The scope of this research will focus on grade level PLC teams and members. Future research might include parents’ perception and awareness of PLCs and perhaps inclusion of parents on PLCs; inclusion of special education teachers; and/or inclusion of “specials” teachers (art, music, gym, etc). Also the use of online professional learning networks should be explored a way to connect with teachers in other schools, both in district and out of district.

Research Design

Purpose of the Research

Professional learning communities have been a fundamental change in school culture, changing deep-seated beliefs and traditional ways of education, student learning and teacher practices (DuFour & Fullan, 2013; Hsu, 2012; Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2007). There are many definitions of professional learning communities, designed for teachers to work collaboratively, focus on student learning and improve teacher practices. Researchers agree there are several core characteristics that are the basis of professional learning communities. PLCs are successful when the right elements are in place. Various research have supported the idea that teachers believe PLCs and the ability to work collaboratively made a positive impact in not only their students' learning, but in their own professional development, and morale (Dunne, et. al., 2000; Lujan & Day, 2010; Vescio, et al., 2007).

PLCs have been the new norm for how educators meet and communicate. With this new theory of collaboration between educators, the goal of this research is to see if the elements that researchers have identified as essential elements for effective professional learning communities are being practiced and perceived by those in the field. The findings will serve as a reference point for understanding theory put into practice. It could benefit both researchers and practitioners in understanding how PLCs have evolved and if the essential elements of an effective PLC are truly what drives successful collaboration amongst educators, improve student learning and teacher practices. The results of this research will connect the link between research and practical application of an effective PLC as perceived by educators.

Research Question

How do K-2 teachers’ and administrators’ perceptions of the essential elements of an effective professional learning community (PLC) compare to previously identified (by research and/or experts in the field) essential elements of an effective PLC at W. G. Mallett School, Farmington, Maine?

Professional learning communities have been embedded into the culture of this rural school in the foothills of western Maine for many years. The PLC structure has changed and evolved into various formats and procedures. How does the current PLC structure align to what researchers have identified as essential elements for success in PLCs?

The purpose of this inquiry is to examine what elements are currently in place as perceived by the various PLC team members- including teachers, specialists and administrators. The study will describe PLC routines and procedures currently in place and explain how these meetings are perceived by its members. This research will explain if educators perceive PLC as a valuable resource for their student learning and their own teacher practices and if there is a positive correlation between educator’s positive perceptions and the effectiveness of their PLC. Further this research will investigate the role of the administrator in PLCs, as perceived by both the administrator and the teachers.

Much of the data will be qualitative in nature, pulled from a questionnaire and interviews, along with observations of PLC meetings. The findings will uncover common themes which can then be examined and compared to already identified essential elements of an effective PLC. If, at W. G. Mallett School, PLC teams are perceived as successful, are these same elements in place? Are there new or different elements that are perceived as essential? If there are PLC

teams perceived as not successful, what elements are missing? What elements are in place that might be creating a negative impact of the PLC team and preventing success? By answering these questions through this inquiry, there will be new insight as to what creates successful PLCs as perceived by educators in this small community elementary school.

Core Concepts

There is a great deal of research that shows professional learning communities are an effective way to increase student learning, increase collaboration amongst educators and improve teacher practices. The issue is not so much whether PLCs are effective, but can they be implemented successfully (Hsu, 2012) and continue to be successful.

When PLCs were first introduced in W.G. Mallet School, there was not a lot of definition as to how they should be implemented. A few articles were read by staff and then this new form of “grade level meetings” was put into place. Much of the beginning work was to create consistency between grade level teacher practices and assessments. Common assessments and curriculum timelines were developed. There was a great deal of inconsistency within the school. Some teams were successful with collaboration and made progress, while other teams floundered, mired down in mistrust and contention. The value of PLCs, as perceived by teachers was directly related to their experience and whether it was a positive experience or negative experience.

Donaldson (2001) referred to the problem of decisions being made for teachers that then lacked a commitment from the teachers; “collective decisions do not always mean collective support” (p. 22). Doerr (2009) described the need to change teacher’s perceptions from “behavioral accountability, showing up to meetings because they have to, to intellectual

accountability where they understand the benefits of the collaboration on their practice and in their student learning” (p. 29).

DuFour and Fullan (2013) cautioned that PLCs were not a program, but a process and change in culture and that time and understanding of what it really takes to establish the PLC process were essential for a PLC to be successful and to change deep-seated beliefs and practices. Adams and Vescio (2015) explained that PLCs are a group of “individual learners who might want to be on the same page, but rarely are” (p. 30).

As PLCs at Mallett School continued to go through growing pains, it was evident that what these researchers described as elements of a failed PLC were often in play. Educators with very different ideas were not always able to come to agreement. Teachers were reluctant to share information for fear of being judged and PLCs stalled.

One of the key elements of an effective PLC is trust. Trust among members of the team was imperative to build relationships (Dunne, et al., 2000; Graham, 2007, Sims & Penny, 2014). Sims and Penny (2014) emphasized that trust was “the strongest” element for an effective PLC.

The role of administrators play an important part of creating an atmosphere of trust and collaboration. To support the success of PLCs, school leaders need to provide common time and common language (Hsu, 2012). Research “consistently finds that a high degree of trust between administrators and teachers” (Anrig, 2015, p. 32) pave the way to success.

Fullan (2011) believed “relational coordination (shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect), and transparent communication (frequent, timely accurate and problem-solving) (p. 94) created collaboration and changed the traditional way of doing things. There needs to be a sense of “our students” vs. “my” students (Lujan & Day, 2010). Teachers need to feel

empowered and have the ability to make decisions, along with a sense of autonomy (Vescio, et al., 2007; Anrig, 2015). Again, trust is key. Many researchers found trust, as perceived by educators, essential to allow for risk taking and for colleagues to have the comfort level needed to challenge each other’s beliefs and practices.

DuFour and Fullan (2013) described six characteristics of effective PLCs. Additional research has continued to include these essential elements for an effective PLC.

The key elements for an effective PLC include:

- Shared mission, vision, values, and goal which are all focused on student learning
- Collaborative culture with a focus on learning
- Collective inquiry into best practices and current reality
- Action orientation or “learning by doing”
- Commitment to continuous improvement
- Results orientation (DuFour & Fullan, 2013, p. 14)

This researcher would caution that members of PLC teams also need to remember and honor that each individual brings their own personalities, strengths and challenges, which add a complexity to the dynamics of each PLC team. There is no “one size fits all” and each team should remember that PLCs are not a program, but are about “people, practices and process” (DuFour & Fullan, 2013, p. 17).

Since PLCs were first implemented at W.G. Mallett School, they have morphed into a very different-looking process. Now, either the literacy specialist or the math specialist guides the meetings. Meetings are alternated between math and literacy, not by need, but by calendar schedule. The principal is often present in the meetings but not always. Title I literacy teachers

sometimes join the literacy meetings, but not always. The purpose and focus of the PLCs have become very strong and is driven by student data and ways to improve teacher practices.

This research will uncover what essential elements are embedded in the PLC process and which may be lacking, how those elements are perceived by educators, specialists and administrator and how that correlates to the perceived value and success of the PLC teams at this rural elementary school.

Approach

This researcher has been an active member of a PLC team at W. G. Mallett School since its beginnings - a team that has always been regarded as highly successful and a “model” for other teams in the school. The investigation will be seen through the eyes of all members of all the PLC teams at this school. This will be in the form of questionnaires, interviews and observations. This research will be unique to this school and by the fact that the researcher is part of the research and PLC teams. The study is similar to previous research as it seeks to reiterate the key elements of an effective PLC. The use of questionnaires and interviews will allow PLC members to explain their experience and how it relates to their perceptions of PLCs. From this data, themes will be analyzed, interpreted and compared to previous research. What new themes emerge? What are similar or the same?

Caution will be needed with regard to perceptions and reality. Burke, et al (2011) cautioned that there can be a “disconnect between knowing and doing” and that “individuals’ reported beliefs and principles did not always equate to how they actually behaved.” By observing meetings with each team, this will help connect perceptions to what the researcher observes during meetings.

Methods of Inquiry

A mixed-methods study will be used in this research. This study will focus on the perceptions of K-2 teachers (including Title I teachers), one math specialist, one literacy specialist and one principal. All participants will be emailed a questionnaire. In addition, six participants will be interviewed. Grade level PLC groups will be observed in their PLC meetings.

Responses to the questionnaire will be analyzed using a scale. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. PLC meeting observation notes will be taken during meetings.

Though most of the inquiry will be qualitative, the questionnaire will give some quantitative data. The advantage of using a questionnaire is that it is good for measuring attitudes and perceptions of participants.

Considering the qualitative nature of the research question, the use of interviews will provide a good tool for measuring attitudes and probing deeper for more in-depth information. Observations of the PLC meetings will provide a “real world” picture that can be related to the perceptions of the participants. It will allow the researcher to experience the PLC process in a natural setting, and observe behavior which will provide good descriptions. However, participants may react differently, knowing they are being observed and the observer may also be bias (selective perception).

Overall, the advantages of a mixed-methods approach, with a strong qualitative component will be the best way to delve into the perceptions of the essential elements of an effective PLC, as perceived by the participants in this study.

Research Methods

Setting

I will be conducting my research in a K-2 elementary school. W. G. Mallett School is located in Farmington, Maine which is a small rural town in the foothills of western Maine. This site is appropriate because professional learning communities have been a part of this school’s culture since 2008. The professional learning communities (PLCs) have changed and evolved since that time. The study will focus on educator’s perceptions of the essential elements of an effective PLC. As a teacher in this school, I am a member of a PLC second grade team. I will use the teachers, specialists and administrator as participants for this study.

Sampling/Participants

The participants consists of five teachers at each grade level, K through 2, one math specialist, one literacy specialist, two title one literacy teachers and a principal. All of these individuals are part of a professional learning community. The specialists and principal participate in PLCs at each grade level. Teachers are members of same grade PLCs. I will send a questionnaire to all participants. This will provide me with potentially 21 responses to the questionnaire. In addition, I will interview at least one teacher at each grade level, one specialist and the principal. I will also observe PLC meetings at each grade level.

Asking all members of a PLC to respond to the questionnaire will give me a broad basis of educator’s perceptions of an effective PLC. The interviews will attempt to gain deeper understanding of perceptions of each team and the differences that may emerge based on the team and role of the participant. Observations will help to connect perceptions to reality.

Methodology

I will be using mix-methods for this research. Responses to the questionnaire will be analyzed using a scale. I will be collecting data through interviews which will then be recorded and transcribed. PLC meeting observation notes will be taken during meetings.

Since the research is about the perceptions of educators, I will rely heavily on qualitative information gathered from interviews and observations. The use of these qualitative measures will allow me to look for common themes and understand the perceptions of PLC team members. Observations will help me compare perceptions that teachers have to what is observed during their PLC meetings. There can be a “disconnect between knowing and doing” and that “individuals’ reported beliefs and principles did not always equate to how they actually behaved” Burke, et al (2011). Comparing observations in the field to perceptions expressed in both the interviews and questionnaire will help me see if what is actually observed in a PLC meeting equates to the perceptions of its members.

The use of a questionnaire will allow me to measure attitudes and perceptions of participants using a scale. This adds some quantitative data to my research. The questionnaire also allows for participants to make comments which increases my database for open-ended responses. It is inexpensive and allows for quick turnaround. It also allows me to include all school personnel who are a part of a PLC team. The analysis of close-ended items will be fairly easy. Participants perceived anonymity is high. Some disadvantages of a questionnaire is the possibility of a low response from participants and a lack of response to key questions. Data analysis for open-ended questions can be time-consuming.

Considering the qualitative nature of the research question, the use of interviews will provide me with a good tool for measuring attitudes and probing deeper for more in-depth information. Some disadvantages are the possibility of my reaction and bias and participants perceived anonymity might be low. Data analysis can be time-consuming.

Observations of the PLC meetings will provide a “real world” picture that can be related to the perceptions of the participants. It will allow me to experience the PLC process in a natural setting, and observe behavior which will provide good descriptions. However, participants may react differently, knowing they are being observed and since I am a part of PLCs, I may also be bias (selective perception). Data analysis can also be time consuming.

Overall, the advantages of a mixed-methods approach, with a strong qualitative component will be the best way to delve into the perceptions of the essential elements of an effective PLC, as perceived by the participants in this study.

Operational Measures

I developed the questionnaire I am using based on Dufour and Fullan (2013) six elements an effective PLC. These six elements are:

1. Shared mission, vision, values, and goal which are all focused on student learning
2. A collaborative culture with a focus on learning
3. Collective inquiry into best practice and current reality
4. Action orientation or “learning by doing”
5. A commitment to continuous improvement
6. A results orientation (DuFour & Fullan, 2013, p. 14)

The questionnaire begins with a statement about each of the elements and then there are several statements related to each element to help dig deeper into the components of each. I designed it

this way so that I can compare my results to Dufour and Fullan’s (2013) elements and how that relates to successful PLCs in my study group. I allowed a comment section in each of the categories for participants to add their own thoughts if they choose to. Comparing my data to already established key elements of a successful PLC, will give reliable results to the analysis of my data. My interview questions are designed to probe deeper into how the participants perceive the PLC they are a part of and connects back to Dufour and Fullan’s (2013) six essential elements. Further, the interview questions are designed with the particular nature unique to this study group and school.

Data Collection

The questionnaire will be in a Google form and emailed to all participants. The participants will be asked to complete the questionnaire and will give consent through the email. I will need to transfer my questionnaire into Google forms and gather all necessary email addresses. Concurrently, I will select a teacher from each grade level, one of the specialists and the administrator and ask to interview each of them. I will also observe each PLC team once during the research period. All participants will be asked to do the questionnaire, five will be asked to take the time for me to interview them. All participants will be asked to allow for me to observe their meetings. All participants will be treated with respect and with complete confidentiality. The research project is explained in the consent form so they will be fully aware of what I am researching. They will be offered to view my final research project.

Data Analysis

From my questionnaire, I will be able to obtain quantitative data. I will use Google for my questionnaire which will help organize and code the results. I will analyze the data to identify general trends (Creswell, 2012). The questionnaire is designed in a way that it models

the six essential elements of an effective PLC as defined by Dufour and Fullan (2013). I will look for perceptions that are both negative and positive and how that relates to the essential elements.

From my qualitative data (questionnaire comments and interviews), I will organize my notes from each and use a coding process to make sense of the data. I will reduce the codes into five to seven major themes (Creswell, 2012). I will be looking for a connection between a positive experience in PLCs and a positive attitude to the effectiveness of the PLC. I will be able to organize my notes from PLC meeting observations and compare this to educators’ perceptions. I will use a “narrative discussion” (Creswell, 2012) to summarize the findings of my data analysis. Included in the narrative will be direct quotes from participants.

From both the qualitative and quantitative data analysis, I hope to be able to determine what essential elements are present in the PLCs studied and how teachers perceptions relate to these elements.

Expected Findings

I expect my findings will support much of the research already done as discussed in my literature review. I expect to find a spectrum of varied opinion as to the purpose and success of PLCs, with a positive correlation between positive perceptions and perceived success of PLCs. I expect to find PLCs vary in effectiveness across grade levels. I also expect to be able to determine themes and factors that work against a positive feeling towards PLCs. Current research is starting to emerge as to what prevents PLCs from being successful and I hope that my findings will add to this, along with support and perhaps add to what the essential elements of a PLC needs to be successful.

Potential Issues and Weaknesses

Getting a timely response with a good response rate from my questionnaire is a potential issue. Teachers are extremely busy and asking them to do one more thing may be a deterrent. My questionnaire is long and that may be a problem to get a good response rate. The time factor can also be an issue for interviewing participants. I also need to be aware of my own bias and experience since I am a member of a PLC team. I need to be careful as I observe teams that I am not comparing them to my own experience.

Some of my data collection is through observations and I need to record what I see without bias. Another possible barrier is that people often act differently when they are being observed and this may affect my findings. I hope as a trusted colleague, teachers will feel comfortable in my presence and behave naturally.

Finally, the amount of data I will collect is a lot but my time to do the research and data analysis is limited and so that creates a potential problem as I try to sift through the data to analyze it and interpret it. I may find the need to shorten the interview questions and the questionnaire in order to be realistic in the time allowed - both for me as the researcher and for my participants.

Research / Inquiry Narrative

Questionnaire

Twenty-one educators were emailed a questionnaire about their perceptions of what essential elements were needed for an effective professional learning community (PLC), along with the consent form and explanation of my research project. Background information was asked for in the beginning of the questionnaire, so that I could get a sense of “who.” Out of the 21 educators, 19 responded to my survey. This strong response rate allowed me to see an accurate picture of who made up the staff at this school. The questionnaire revealed an experienced staff with 73.7% having 11 or more years experience in education. Only 5.3% were first or second year teachers. In addition to years experience, 57.3% of the staff have been in the same position for 11 or more years. 78.4% have been in their current position for 5 or more years. In addition, the principal has been in her position for 11 years.

The questionnaire then examined the make-up of the PLCs and what was included in PLC meetings, as perceived by the participants including how often PLCs met and what was discussed during the meetings.

Each question on the survey related directly to six essential elements of an effective PLC as identified by Dufour and Fullan (2013). Under each element, an additional three questions were asked to delve deeper into the workings of each element. Participants were given space to add additional comments. They were also asked two direct questions: one relating to the purpose of PLCs and the other relating to what they considered the most important element was to make a PLC successful. These two questions allowed me to separate purpose from essential elements, as perceived by the participants.

Interviews

Five educators participated in interviews. I choose one from each grade level, the school principal and the math specialist. I interviewed a first year teacher, a teacher who has worked at this school for two years, but has taught elsewhere and two veteran educators. This allowed me to get the perspective from beginning teachers and veteran teachers and compare their experiences. Interviews allowed me to ask more probing questions and expand on their answers. They also allowed me to hear participants’ perspectives that could not necessarily be directly observed in meetings or apparent in the questionnaire.

Observations

Each grade level PLC team meeting was observed for a total of three meetings. The first meeting I observed was my own grade level PLC meeting. I let them know ahead of time that I would be observing the meeting. It was difficult to observe and participate in the meeting at the same time. The second meeting I observed, I let the team know what day I planned to observe them and found this influenced what they did in their PLC meeting. One of the participants explained to me afterwards they were nervous that I would be observing them and planned an agenda and a meeting that was not typical of their usual meetings. After that, I sent out an email which explained that at some point, I would be observing all grade level PLC team meetings. The participants of the last meeting I observed did not know I was coming until their meeting started. This allowed me to see a meeting that was not as influenced by being observed and did not allow them to prepare because of it. Because of the inconsistency of the observed meetings, I did not use the observations directly in my findings. I also felt I had enough information through the questionnaire and interviews to analyze and draw conclusions.

Through the qualitative portion of the questionnaire, where participants were free to express their own thoughts and not confined to a scale, several important themes emerged about the purpose and essential elements of an effective PLC. Comments from interviews and observations of the interaction between members of a team further uncover the key elements that were part of the PLC culture in this school.

Data Analysis

The objective of this research was to look at the key elements of an effective professional learning community (PLC) as previously identified by researchers. The questionnaire was designed around six key elements identified by Dufour and Fullan (2013) in their research. The goal of this research was to see if these same elements were perceived by educators and put into practice. This research creates a link between research and practical application.

The participants were teachers, specialists, title teachers and an administrator. Out of 21 staff members who were asked to complete the survey, 19 of them responded. The data showed the majority of the staff were veteran teachers. Of the 19 who responded, 15 have been in education for eleven years or more. In addition, 13 educators have been in the same position for five or more years.

The essential elements of an effective PLC had common perceptions between beginning teachers and veteran teachers. When asked if participants were knowledgeable about the purpose and processes of an effective PLC, 100% strongly agreed or agreed. Yet the purpose of the PLC and role of specialists and administrator were seen differently, based on the teachers' years of experience.

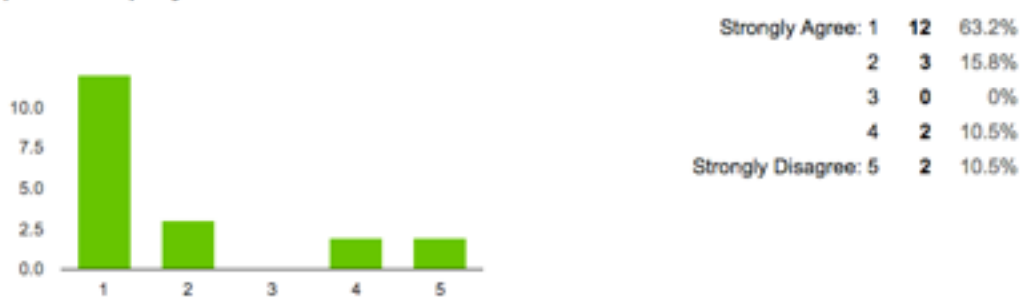
(beginning teacher) “...I think it’s helpful to have the specialist lead the PLCs the way that we do.”

(veteran teacher) “From my experience, the most powerful PLC experience was when all of the members were perceived to have an equal knowledge base. There were no experts or specialists - just teachers discussing student progress with other teachers.”

The Six Essential elements (Dufour and Fullan, 2013)

1. “My PLC team has a shared mission, vision, values and goals which all focus on student learning.” Participants agreed 100% with this statement, with twelve members who “strongly agreed.” However, when asked about creating and sharing norms, the results were very different.

I helped develop my PLC norms.



We evaluate and share our norms often.



The survey showed that norms were not developed nor shared by all members of the PLC team, with 21% who “disagreed or strongly disagreed” with helping to develop norms and 68.% felt norms were not evaluated or shared often. One member felt, “Some teams do not need

revisiting norms regularly as they function well without them.” Yet another team member felt, “...weekly revisiting of norms would be ideal. That you quickly check in at the beginning and then check at the end, but I don’t think we’ve maintained that frequent.”

If a team is to have a shared mission, vision values and goals, norms should be part of the foundation. Dufour and Fullan (2013) felt it was important to “establish coherence and clarity regarding purpose and priorities throughout the organization” (p. 19) and further cautioned that “failing to communicate purpose and priorities clearly and consistently” (p. 23) was one of the common mistakes made when establishing an effective PLC.

The core of the PLC process is a “relentless focus on learning for all students” (Dufour and Fullan, 2013, p. 14). All respondents “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that the main purpose of their PLC team was to improve student learning.

“Reflecting on student data, student focus/strategies to try with struggling students, professional development.”

“To problem solve as a team about how to get students’ needs met and to ensure their success.”

“The most important purpose of a PLC is the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues, to review assessment and instruction as well as improve student learning opportunities.”

“To monitor all students and to work together to make sure we do our best to meet all of their needs and therefore improve student learning.”

“...we’re trying to give the best education to all students and as a team, we are all familiar with all students within our grade level.”

“...to improve instruction for students and to improve instructional expertise of teachers...”

“Improve student learning by improving our teaching.”

These comments clearly showed PLC team members have a shared mission and vision when it comes to the purpose of PLC process and teams functioned with the common goal of student learning.

2. “My PLC team has a collaborative culture focused on learning.”

This statement focused on the collaborative nature of the teams as perceived by the team members. People felt very positive about the collaborative culture in which their PLCs operated. 95% “strongly agreed” or “agreed” with this statement. 95% “strongly agreed (11) or “agreed” (7) their opinion matters and that they trust the members of their PLC team. However, one person consistently did not agree with these three statements, although this person did agree with the statement, “my team trusts me” which made 100% who “strongly agreed” or “agreed” to this statement. The results of this statement clearly showed that for at least one person, their PLC experience was perceived differently than others. No comments were made to help understand this person’s perception. However, there were many positive comments about the importance of collaboration.

“Becoming comfortable with coworkers, getting to know them better as teachers and individuals so we can share strategies, failures, and celebrate together. They (PLCs) are a place to be open and help reduce stress so we are not isolated behind closed doors.”

“Building relationships and trust that facilitate the openness and risk-taking necessary to examine and strengthen instructional capacity.”

“...to build community and trust among colleagues who work together.”

Though collaboration and trust were perceived to be strong, there was not a feeling of roles and responsibilities being shared equally.

Roles and responsibilities are shared equally in my PLC meetings.



28% disagreed with the statement, “Roles and responsibilities are shared equally in my PLC meetings.” This equates to 5 out of the 19 respondents and one choosing not to answer this statement at all. Does this go back to the inconsistent use of norms? Could this be changed if norms were more clearly established, revisited and adhered to?

3. “My PLC team uses “collective inquiry” into best practices.”

Collective inquiry was defined in the survey as “working together to build shared knowledge.” Again, there was strong agreement with this statement (95% with one “disagreed”), along with 100% feeling comfortable discussing their students in PLC meetings (15 members out of 19 “strongly agreed”). This cultural belief is further supported with the next statement “I think of all students as “our” students vs. “my” students.” Again there was strong support with only one who “disagreed.”

“I don’t feel judged at all by my peers... I feel very confident when it comes to my peers.”

“I feel comfortable sharing student work. ...I think it’s great to share work, and to see how, where other students are.”

However, 15.8% (3 members) disagreed with the statement, “I feel supported by my administrator.” This sentiment was also evident with comments from PLC members when asked if they were comfortable sharing student work at PLC meetings.

I feel supported by my administrator.



“Very comfortable... a little less comfortable when the principal is there.”

“I don’t want to feel, and it’s probably more pressure that I put on myself... I don’t want to feel like a failure. ...there was more stress, I think on the students that are not meeting the standards, then there was support for what strategies would work. ...support that we need just to know that it’s okay to not be a perfect teacher, to not know it all, that we have room for growth too.”

“If she’s often there, I think some people kind of tend to hold back because they might not have as much trust as other people.”

4. “My PLC team is action oriented and we “learn by doing.”

All participants (100%) “strongly agreed” or “agreed” when asked if they were both comfortable sharing teaching strategies and if they felt watching others demonstrate their teaching strategies was valuable use of their time. The foundational trust and respect is evident by these statements between members of the PLC teams.

“We’ve been able to watch other people model it, which just helps you to know how to do it successfully.”

“It’s nice when others share work and it’s similar to yours.”

“I’m okay not knowing it all, ‘cause I don’t and saying, ‘Hey you did really well with that. Can you help me?’”

“PLCs also give insight into what others are teaching and how they are teaching it. We are able to bounce ideas off of each other and focus on students who may be struggling academically and behaviorally.”

However, comments showed that perhaps not all PLC members had the same comfort level.

“It is definitely a gradient of comfort. I can see some people who feel very confident, some who have gained confidence over time and they are much more willing. I also know there are less extroverted, less experienced members of the staff, who I see take more time to, sort of listen, try to figure out what their role is.”

“They have a lot more knowledge so I think my role is just asking questions or giving information.”

“Some of our team members are more timid and less confident...”

“Some members struggled with sharing and seem to feel more nervous about being exposed...”

It is important to note that all these comments, but one were about how members were perceiving other members of their PLC. There were no comments in which a member directly said, “*I* am not comfortable. Therefore, these perceptions may or may not be accurate.

Previous research has shown evidence that although PLCs promote collaboration and trust among educators, they did not necessarily change teacher practices (Hord, 2004; Key, 2006; Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2008 as cited in Burke, et al., 2011, p. 37). Burke, et al. (2011) found a “disconnect between knowing and doing is particularly evident as teachers confront the notion of shared professional practice as a means to improve instruction...” (p. 37).

This is where this current research departs from previous research. In this study, all but one participant agreed with the statement, “I often use new teaching strategies in my classroom that I learned in my PLC meetings.”

I often use new teaching strategies in my classroom that I learned in my PLC meetings.

However time allowed for teachers to practice new learning did not have as strong of a response.

My administrator allows time for teachers to practice new learning.

Lack of time was stated consistently as a problem or challenge to the PLC process. This might help explain the lack of time dedicated to teachers to practice new learning. The statement could also be taken in different ways. Some might consider the time dedicated to new learning and practice in both PLCs and staff meetings enough, while others may have interpreted this statement as time to practice new learning in the classroom.

5. “My PLC team is committed to continuous improvement.”

18 out of the 19 participants “strongly agreed” or “agreed” with this statement, with one who “disagreed.” In this section, the goal of these statements were to try to determine how engaged educators were in their own PLCs. Doerr (2009) felt it was important for teachers to

understand the benefits of collaboration on their own practice and how that would benefit students’ learning. He called this shift of perceptions from “behavioral accountability, showing up for meetings because they have to, to intellectual accountability” (p. 29).

Participants were given the following statements in the questionnaire:

“I can reflect on my own teaching in a safe environment.”

“I am a better teacher since being part of a PLC team.”

“It is valuable use of my time to be part of my PLC team.”

100% of participants “strongly agreed” or “agreed” with all three of these statements.

“I believe PLCs are the most effective way to keep teaching alive and growing. Like anything that is successful, however, it doesn’t happen without hard work. Keeping the standards high, the purpose clear and practicing continual reflection takes constant vigilance. Fortunately, Mallett School has reached a high level of proficiency in the PLCs making it easier to keep those pieces in place. We also have seen the results of having strong PLCs and that helps keep us energized.”

“...learning together...that’s a crucial piece. I don’t think we, as teachers get that opportunity except at a PLC.”

“I think it’s utterly crucial at an elementary level is continually raising the content knowledge for each teacher... especially now.”

“...that when teachers just have a better understanding of what everybody else is doing and how they’re doing, what they’re doing... it’s huge...huge... learning is just huge.”

In addition to this strong support, when given the statement, “My administrator believes in the value of the PLC process,” 18 out of the 19 “strongly agreed” with this.

My administrator believes in the value of the PLC process.



“I will say that the fact that my principal comes so often is super important because she shows these meetings are important, and she participates in the learning.”

“(My principal) gives me a lot of autonomy and trust.”

“But having administrators (support) is really a crucial piece of that, I think.”

Research has shown the necessity of administrator's support for PLCs to be successful. One of the big indicators of a failed PLC was when administrators were perceived as disengaged and unsupportive, as noted in research by Sims and Penny (2014). This current research supports the importance of committed educational leaders as a key element to successful PLCs.

Although there was strong agreement that the administrator was committed and supportive of the PLC process, having her present at the meetings did not always feel comfortable to all members.

“I just sometimes feel like the principal has an agenda and the agenda is to move the target population as a whole, so if you have one of the higher targeted students... and this is just my perception of it... that I feel like I’m meant to resolve that and I’m the weak link, if I don’t have all the tools in my tool bag already.”

“I think there is trust between most of the people in the PLC meetings and with the principal there. I do think there’s times where the meetings are different when the principal isn’t there. We might share more or certain individuals might share more... If she’s often there, I think some people kind of tend to hold back because they might not have as much trust as other people.”

The role of an administrator as perceived by PLC members:

“I think it’s important for them (principal) to just observe and listen and give feedback... So, I think more of an observer and (ask) questions.”

“...to be supportive, to be inquisitive, kinda like the role of an ed teach, when you’re working with a student with special needs. you want to empower the student and give them more and more knowledge so they can start to make those decisions or can start to learn those things on their own.”

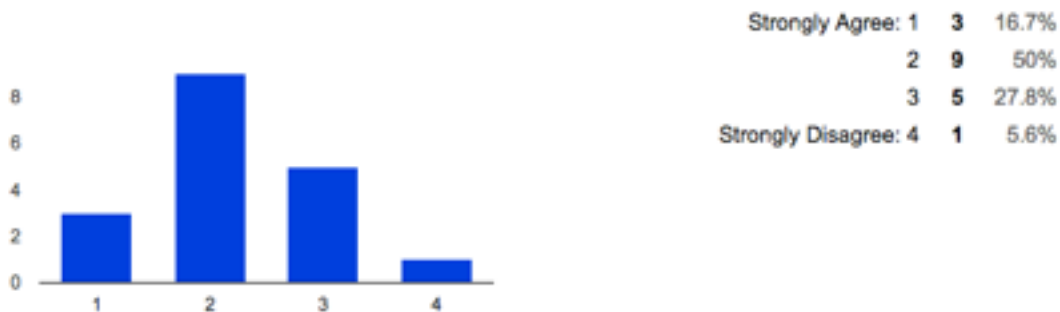
While the administrator’s perception differed:

“I usually try to think of whether I’m usurping something that ought to come from somebody else. But if it looks like it’s helpful with people’s learning, I don’t have a problem chipping in. I feel more on a collaborative level with people, than sitting back and observing the group, so I try to participate as much as I can.”

6. “My PLC team is results oriented.”

The final element of Dufour and Fullan’s (2013) essential elements of an effective PLC did not have the same strong results as the other elements. 89% of participants “strongly agreed” or “agreed” with this statement, while 11% disagreed. Particularly noteworthy is the statement, “We develop assessments together.” 33.4% disagreed with this statement, with one “strongly disagreed.”

We develop assessments together.



Although, educators felt assessments were not developed together, 95% “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that assessment results were shared and were used to help drive instructional practices

We share assessment results to help drive instructional practices and student learning.



and student learning. A question was not asked if educators felt it was important to develop assessments together.

Conclusions

The purpose of this research was to examine the perceptions of educators as to what makes an effective professional learning community. The goal was to understand theory put into practice as perceived by those in the field.

Much of the data gathered from the questionnaire provided a clear picture of the perceptions of educators, while the interviews provided more insight and a deeper level of understanding of how the six elements of an effective PLC, as identified by Dufour and Fullan (2013) worked in this school. Each of the six elements were used as a broad statement for participants to respond to. There were additional statements to delve deeper into each element that provided insight and potential weakness or challenges in the PLCs.

The questionnaire had a 90% response rate. Out of 21 people emailed the questionnaire, all but two completed it. This allowed for a fairly clear picture of the majority of the population at this school. However, the two that did not respond could have changed the results, if they were not in agreement with the majority. In addition to the questionnaire, five people were interviewed. Their comments helped to understand the inner workings of the PLCs currently happening. Many of their comments, along with comments made in the questionnaire, have been used to help clarify educator’s perceptions and experiences. Each grade level PLC meeting was also observed. With regard to these findings, the observed meetings will not be discussed due to an inconsistency of how the observations were handled at each grade level.

The Who and When of PLCs

The rural elementary school used in this research has a large population of experienced educators. 74% of the educators have been in the educational field for 11 or more years, with six teachers who have taught for 20+ years. 57% have been in the same position for 11 or more years. There is only one teacher who has taught two years or less. The principal has been in her position for 11 years. In recent years, the school changed from a K-3 elementary school to a preK-2 elementary school. When this shift was taking place, several long term teachers moved to another school.

Professional learning communities have been a part of the culture of this school for the last seven years. The purpose and process of the PLCs have evolved a great deal over time. Currently, PLCs have three different meetings that rotate. One week is dedicated to literacy, with the literacy specialist and sometimes Title I teachers present; the next week is dedicated to math with the math specialist present and the third week is dedicated as “teacher directed.” In both the math and literacy PLCs, it is expected by the principal that the specialists will facilitate the meeting. The teacher directed meeting was implemented this year because teachers requested time for themselves, to meet in their PLCs without a specialist there. Prior years, the meetings were every other week - math and literacy. However, some teachers felt they had lost some autonomy.

“From my experience, the most powerful PLC experience was when all of the members were perceived to have an equal knowledge base. There were no experts or specialists - just teachers discussing student progress with other teachers.”

Research has shown teachers need to feel empowered and it is important to build the capacity of teacher leaders (Hsu, 2012). Teachers felt more positive about the PLC process when they felt

they were empowered, shared responsibility with administrators and had a sense of autonomy (Vescio, et al., 2007; Anrig, 2015). Dufour and Fullan (2013) cited Pink’s research (2011) that “autonomy is a powerful internal motivator” (p. 38).

The administrator at this school heard what the teachers were saying and tried to find a balance, thus the new schedule of PLC meetings. However, the biggest challenge that was consistently cited was lack of time and distance between literacy and math meetings.

“I get frustrated this year that you know, just a lot of time elapses between meetings.”

“If we spend a lot of time on one topic and don’t get to the others, it’s a long time before we meet again for certain subjects.”

The What of PLCs - Student Learning

The results of this research showed a strong connection between the current research and the findings of this study. The driving force behind the purpose of PLCs is student learning. Research has shown some of the core characteristics of an effective PLC to be: student-focused, collaborative, reflective, evidence-based, strong leadership and ongoing (Blank, 2013; Dufour & Fullan, 2013; Dunne, Nave & Lewis, 2000; Graham, 2007; Hsu, 2012; Williams, 2013; Adams & Vescio, 2015). Teachers at this school understood the main purpose of their PLC meetings to be about student learning. The questionnaire asked what they felt was the most important purpose of the PLC.

“Reflecting on student data, student focus / strategies to try with struggling students.”

“To problem solve as a team about how to get students’ needs met and to ensure their success”

“The most important purpose of a PLC is the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues to review assessment and instruction as well as improve student learning opportunities.”

Mutually important to the educators in this study was collaboration.

“To collaborate, to share ideas...

“Collaboration and talking about the needs of students.”

“To collaborate...”

“Building relationships and trust that facilitate the openness and risk-taking necessary to examine and strengthen instructional capacity.”

Purpose vs. Essential Elements

The six elements of an effective PLC (Dufour and Fullan, 2013) were strongly supported by the members of PLC teams, as perceived through their experience. However, the perceptions of the educators in this school went beyond these six elements. The “purpose” differed from the “essential elements” necessary to create an effective PLC. Common themes emerged that went beyond labeling a PLC successful by a purpose or a particular process in place. Rather, it was the relationships built that drove the success of a PLC. Trust, collaboration and respect emerged as the common themes that enhanced the experience of educators and created a commitment to the purpose and process of the PLC. Although Dufour and Fullan’s (2013) six elements never used the word, “trust,” it seemed to be implied. In order to have a “collaborative culture,” and “collective inquiry,” there must be trust and mutual respect.

Other research found trust among team members to be imperative to build relationships (Dunne, et al., 2000; Graham, 2007, Sims & Penny, 2014). Research has shown that of the key elements, “the strongest was trust” (Sims & Penny, 2014, p. 43). The educators’ perceptions in this study validated the necessity for trust as an essential element of a successful PLC.

The questionnaire asked what was the most important element needed to make a PLC successful:

“Mutual respect, teamwork.”

Communication! ...everyone to be involved in the discussion.”

Clear, concise, respectful communication and teamwork.”

“Trust”

“Trust, honesty, open communication and minds.”

“A team that is respectful to all the difference among themselves.”

“Trust and respect.

PLC team members commented on how they felt in their PLC teams and what it meant to them as educators. All teams exhibited strong ties, trust, respect and collaboration.

“We depend on each other, and feel less isolated because of meeting together.”

“...trusting relationship being able to let your hair down and share something that you know potentially messy, or that you aren’t sure about and I think that does come about because you feel certain degree of comfort with other people, that you’re not, your hangup is not like you have to filter this through all kinds of, “what if I say this, will I be criticized? or will people think I don’t know what I’m doing? So you know, there’s something to really be said for the core relationships and that the trust that comes with that.”

“I think it goes back to that elusive quality of how you trust people, work well with them and sort of have fun with them...”

“It’s like a friendship, it is a friendship, a professional friendship.”

“...to be part of a school team is the best part.”

“I don’t feel judged at all by my peers. I feel very confident when it comes to my peers. I’m okay with not knowing it all, cause I don’t and saying, “Hey, you did really well with that. Can you help me?”

“We have come a long way. We are very, very cohesive, very supportive. It’s like a small family.”

Research has shown the importance of trust, especially when conflict arose. Trust allowed for both conversation and conflict (Graham, 2007). One of the ways the PLC teams in this study proved to be successful was their ability to deal with conflict. Everyone interviewed discussed how conflict arose in their meetings but was dealt with in a supportive and nonjudgmental way, furthering the evidence of the key elements of trust, collaboration and respect.

“In a healthy team that will be okay, you know. I think that’s where some learning can happen because you have to sort of explain why you thought this and another person explains why they think something else.”

“I think it’s a good thing when people are debating about whether something is right or wrong - that’s how we learn.”

“Oh gosh, every time (there is conflict). We feel very passionate about what we feel and in any family, there is rivalry; I want to do it my way, you want to do it your way. ...but after the PLC, we’re able to go back and say, ‘thank you so much for supporting me’ or ‘sorry I didn’t agree to that, I just really feel this way.’ In the moment that we’re trying to reach a decision, it’s tough but once we reach the decision, regardless of whether or not we change our minds, there is support and acceptance.”

“There’s a fair level of freedom of speech in the PLC and humor and then outside the meetings, we’ll say, ‘Hey, what happened? Can we talk about that?’

“We usually have at least one person to, kind of peer mediate it, if there is a disagreement to get us back on track, but never really seen a big disagreement.”

Role of the Administrator

Within these well-established PLC teams, trust, collaboration and respect showed to be very high. However, trust between administrators and teachers were not as strong.

Previous research “consistently finds that a high degree of trust between administrators and teachers is an essential ingredient in making successful schools tick” (Anrig, 2015, p. 32).

Research has also shown that the active support of administrators had a strong influence on whether a PLC will be successful or not (Doerr, 2009; Dunne, et. al., 2000; Sims & Penny, 2015). The results of this study showed the administrator to be highly involved and dedicated to the purpose and process of PLCs. What is it that was causing a disconnect between the administrator and teachers when it came to trust?

Based on the comments from interviews, it appeared the intentions of the administrator to be supportive was perceived by some veteran educators as more of a top-down management, with the reins being held too tightly.

“I feel like a lot is being prescribed to us... our instructional schedule and what we’re doing.”

“That’s why I don’t have an intervention group this time - I’m tired of being under a microscope. I just want to teach. I just want to teach.”

“My classroom management is routine structured - her’s (a colleague) is loosey-goosey, but children thrive in both environments, which is a clear example of how you don’t need to be doing the same, exact thing to get good results. No, I don’t think that’s PLC, I think that’s micromanagement. “

“I’ve become savvy to her signals. You know, I mean, we know when she comes up with an idea, even if we disagree with that, she’s probably gonna dig in her heels. Who’s gonna fight her on it, right? You know... we’ve all learned that.”

“... first of all, I think she should be here all the time. ...but not necessarily leading it. And if they are a part of it, then we have to trust that we’re not gonna get penalized for whatever happens in the PLC.”

“If she’s often there, I think some people kind of tend to hold back because they might not have as much trust as other people.”

To support the work of PLCs, “administrators need to provide common time, common language and create ways to monitor PLC process, but also build the capacity of teacher leaders” (Hsu,

2012). Teachers also need the ability to make decisions regarding their own PLC processes and feel empowered, with a sense of autonomy (Vescio, et. al., 2007; Anrig, 2015).

Although research agreed that a strong leadership is imperative, it also emphasized the importance of teacher leadership and empowerment. Dufour and Fullan (2013) referred to this type of leadership as a balance of “simultaneously loose and tight” (p. 39).

To compound this problem, this study showed norms were not visited often nor was everyone on the team involved when developing the norms. There also seemed to be some confusion as to who should facilitate meetings and not all agreed that roles and responsibilities were shared equally. Both one of the specialists and the administrator saw it as their role to be facilitator and yet some teachers felt the role of facilitator should be shared.

“I am the leader if one of our specialist is not present. Sometimes I am co-leading with them or co-facilitating. Sometimes, I’m just a participant or an observer. And now we have scheduled teacher-led PLCs and I try to get into those once in awhile and walk the line of having their group have their own PLC and sort of checking in with them.”

“From my experience, the most powerful PLC experience was when all of the members were perceived to have an equal knowledge base. There were no experts or specialists - just teachers discussing student progress with other teachers.”

Research has identified some areas in which PLCs may break down and lose their effectiveness. Though there appears to be a great deal of trust among colleagues, the lack of consistently visiting norms and the confusion of roles and responsibilities are things to consider and may be impeding the trust with the administrator. PLCs are not just about a process, but about people and relationships. Many of the educators in this study are seasoned veteran teachers, dedicated to their own learning and their student learning. PLCs are a group of “individual learners who might want to be on the same page, but rarely are” (Adams and Vescio,

2015, p. 30). Adams and Vescio (2015) further emphasized that “professional learning communities consist of individuals who need different things in order to learn and who may be at drastically different places in their careers or their teaching capabilities” (p. 26).

In conclusion, trust, collaboration and respect have been identified as the essential elements of an effective PLC as determined by the perceptions of the educators in this study. Even though the study showed some challenges between the administrator and teachers, overall, the PLC teams are high functioning, effective teams, focused on student learning. Trust between colleagues seemed to be more important to the success of the PLC team, even if there was some discomfort when the administrator was present. Dufour and Fullan’s six elements of an effective PLC were embedded in the school’s culture and the PLC process was data-driven and purposeful.

Implications

It is clear that W. G. Mallett School has professional learning communities that have reached a high level of success, based on previous research in the field and the results of this study. Dufour and Fullan (2013) state that “PLCs are about people, practices and processes - they are not a program” (p. 16). They talk about “systemness”

“The degree to which people identify and are committed to an entity larger than themselves... It is about everyone doing their part in two aspects: being as good as one can be during individual and collaborative work, and being aware that everyone needs to make a contribution to improving the larger system. ...Members of a PLC *are* the system individuals seek to create.”

This philosophy is clearly at work at W. G. Mallett School. Educators have formed a strong, cohesive bond with each other with a focus on improving student learning and teacher practices. Conflict is considered natural and healthy and teachers feel comfortable sharing their thoughts

with each other. Dufour and Fullan (2013) six elements of an effective PLC were strongly embedded in the teams at this school. This study further provides evidence that the theory of the essential elements of a PLC are also being practiced and perceived by those in the educational field. The findings have helped to understand how theory is put into practice.

Dufour and Fullan’s (2013) six essential elements of an effective PLC are:

1. Shared mission, vision, values, and goal which are all focused on student learning.
2. A collaborative culture with a focus on learning.
3. Collective inquiry into best practice and current reality.
4. Action orientation or ‘learning by doing.’
5. A commitment to continuous improvement.
6. A results orientation (p. 14).

No where in the six elements is the word “trust” used. However, it is implied with words such as “collaborative culture” and “collective inquiry.” Research has shown of all the various elements needed for an effective PLC, trust was the strongest (Webb, Vulliamy, Saria, Hamalaiene & Pokonen, 2009; Anrig, 2015; Sims & Penny, 2014).

In this study, although the six elements were strongly embedded in the process of the PLC teams, as perceived by the members, other themes emerged that were more important than the PLC process. The heart of the PLC’s success was trust - particularly trust between colleagues. In addition to trust, collaboration and respect were essential elements. With these three elements in place - trust, collaboration and respect, members of the team were able to openly discuss and share student learning, student data and teacher strategies, in a nonjudgmental, safe environment. Teachers felt comfortable taking risks and talk about struggles - both with student learning and teacher practices. Research has shown that PLCs cannot operate on “opinion and feeling” and that the PLC process needed to be guided by

“evidence-based decision making” (Hsu, 2012). Data-driven decisions and purposeful agendas were the foundations of what drove the PLC meetings in this school, but it was the relationship between members that allowed the process to move forward. The implications of these findings is that effective PLC teams are not just about what they do (process), but about what they feel (relationships). The purpose of PLCs is not the same as the essential elements of an effective PLC. It is trust, respect and collaboration that are the essential elements and if they are present, then the PLC team is able to fulfill its designated purpose.

Additional Implications

Although the PLC teams were highly effective, there were some areas of concern. Much of the research warned that administrators need to be committed and supportive of PLCs for them to be successful. Lack of support by the administrators was a clear indicator of the potential breakdown of a successful PLC. Sims and Penny (2014) noted a strong indicator of a failed PLC was “members of the administration appeared disengaged from the PLC process and unsupportive of its goals” (p. 43). Dunno, Nave and Lewis (2000) found “principals who failed to actively support the work of PLCs were the greatest hindrances to their success.” But, what happens when the administration’s leadership is too strong? When does a strong leader become too strong? Though there was a great deal of trust between colleagues, the trust broke down to some extent with regard to trust between colleagues and administrator in this study. 75% of the staff at this school has been an educator for 11 or more years. This needs to be taken into account when considering the amount and type of support an administrator gives to the PLC teams. The administrator perceived her role as being supportive when some veteran members felt the principal was too controlling. Research has shown the importance of leaders building the

capacity of teacher leaders (Hsu, 2012). Anrig (2015) stated shared responsibility and teamwork between administrators and teachers developed a inclusive culture and generated commitment (p. 33).

Hsu (2012) stated “to be efficient and effective, PLC teams need norms and protocols to guide them through the learning process. ...to ensure continual improvement, PLC teams should monitor and assess their practice on a regular basis” (p. 4). Norms at this school were developed by grade level teams, but did not include the principal and specialists when created. Nor were the norms revisited on a regular basis. The findings of this study implied that not only should norms be monitored for best practice, but to establish the roles and responsibilities of teachers, specialists and administrator during the meetings, to avoid confusion which then can lead to lack of trust. Conversations and expectations between the administrator and teachers, along with clear norms developed by all, might help to clarify roles and increase trust between them.

Much of the research has been based on what processes need to be in place to make PLCs successful. This research departs from other research, by taking this a step further. PLCs are about relationships and not processes, though the processes are important. Just as with baking a cake, the process is important and necessary, but without the right ingredients, (elements) then the correct process will still yield poor results. If salt is added, instead of the sugar, the cake will taste awful. If the baking soda is missing, the cake will not rise. PLCs, without the necessary elements of trust, collaboration, and respect, will not raise student learning or teacher learning, even if the process is in “place.” What to do if there is “salt” on a PLC team and it needs sugar? The salt will need to be replaced with sugar, with spoonful after spoonful of trust. It is the

diversity of the ingredients that makes the cake special, without which it would be nothing. Just as the mix of personalities and individuals create the “mix” of a successful PLC team.

Further Inquiry

It is clear that the PLC process and relationships at W. G. Mallett school have evolved in the right direction. There are some questions to consider going forward, not only at this school, but for any school that has embraced the power of professional learning communities.

- How do PLC teams maintain their current level of trust, collaboration and respect as members change?
- What does effective leadership look like and when does a strong leader become too strong?
- How can veteran teachers be given more autonomy, while newer teachers are given the support they need?

Personal Reflections

I have always been fascinated by behavior - that of people, horses, mother nature. Being a teacher requires a keen sense of observation. I have always said my years in the horse industry and learning about how they communicate and live is what has made me a good teacher. I hear what kids are saying, without them saying it. I sense what they are feeling, even when they don’t know. I can reach out to a troubled kid and find a way to “touch” them and create a bond with them. I can also, on some levels, do this with my colleagues.

I choose to study PLCs for my research project because I was truly interested in the inner workings of what makes (successful) PLCs tick. I am nurturing by nature and have embraced the power of PLCs from the beginning. Teamwork and collaboration enhances the teaching

experience, in my mind. This project has given me the opportunity to observe my colleagues and their teams and talk to them about their feelings in regards to the teams they are on.

It has impacted the way I look at my school in many ways. I admire and am proud of the people I work with. They are truly dedicated, educated, experienced and real. It's a very diverse group, and yet I learned how they feel about each other and the importance of their team meetings. I also uncovered some things I didn't know. I knew my principal was a very strong personality, with very high expectations. I have always gotten along every well with her. I knew there were some "stirrings" but I appreciated some of who I interviewed to trust me to tell me more. They were open and honest with their negative experiences that affected their trust.

I am currently considered a teacher leader, helping facilitate teacher-led PLC meetings and encouraging others to step into that role. I am on the leadership team at school. This research project has greatly increase my awareness and knowledge about PLCs and what it takes to keep them strong and effective. I hope to be a voice at my school to help continuing refine and improve how our PLCs work. I am particularly interested in finding what it takes to develop and maintain trust at all levels.

The research process, itself, was often a bit painful. I often reminded myself of what my professor had said - how it would feel messy at the start and then get messier. It sure did. But, now that I have finished and can see the final results, I am a bit amazed and quite proud of how my project emerged from messy, unorganized, I-haven't-a-clue-what-to-do, to a well-thought intentional design. I unearthed a lot of what I was after, though I feel if I were to go on with it, I would focus on that elusive quality of trust - how to develop it, how to keep it, how to regain it when it's been lost.

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Appendix A - Administrator’s Consent Form

Dear Dr. Thomas Ward,

My name is Sandra Jamison and I am a graduate student at the University of Maine Farmington. I am interested in conducting a research study in the Spring of 2016. I will be collecting data in January-April and presenting my research to my peers in an open symposium. I am interested in the k-2 teachers, specialists and the principal’s perceptions of the essential elements of an effective PLC.

I would like to send an email questionnaire to all teachers, math and literacy specialists and the principal at W. G. Mallett school who are currently active participants of a professional learning community. By completing the questionnaire, teachers will agree to give consent to participate in the questionnaire. Some participants will be asked to consent to an interview. PLC meetings will also be observed. Participation is voluntary and participants can leave the study at any time.

I will not share identifiable data about specific individuals involved in the study. If you have any questions about the research, you may contact the principal investigator, Sandra Jamison, at W.G. Mallet School, (207)778-3529, sjamison@mtbluersd.org You may also reach the faculty advisor on this study, Dr. Christopher Stople, University of Maine, Farmington, (207)778-7015, christopher.stople@maine.edu.

Thank you for considering my request to conduct research,

Sandra Jamison

I have reviewed Sandra Jamison’s research plan for “Effective Professional Learning Communities.” I give my consent to conduct this research in the spring of 2016. I am aware that I can review the data and discuss the research project at any point during the research. I may also ask to view the report at the end of the study.

Date	Name	Position in District
------	------	----------------------

Appendix B - Participant Consent Form**PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

You are invited to participate in a research project being conducted by Sandra Jamison, a graduate student at the University of Maine at Farmington. This project is being conducted as my capstone course. Christopher Strole, advisor for Graduate Programs in Education, is the supervising faculty member. The purpose of the research is to study the perceptions of k-2 teachers, specialists and administrator of what are the essential elements of an effective professional learning community (PLC).

What Will You Be Asked to Do?

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete a questionnaire online. You may also be asked to be interviewed. Your PLC meetings may also be observed.

Risks - There is a possibility you will be uncomfortable with some of the questions. You are free to skip any questions you do not wish to answer. The time and inconvenience of the meeting may be risks of participating in the study.

Benefits

There are no direct benefits to you from participating in the study. However, as a participant you may enjoy sharing your perceptions of your experience in PLCs. In addition, this research might help future PLC members. Aside from this benefit to the participant, this research will help me learn more about the essential elements that make professional learning communities effective at W. G. Mallet School, Farmington, Maine.

Confidentiality

Your identity will be kept completely confidential.

The documents and files from this study will all be kept locked in a filing cabinet at Sandra Jamison’s home and/or on her district owned computer that is password protected. Some data may be shared with Christopher Strole, advisor for the course. All data from the study, including the participant key, will be kept for two years from the completion of this study and then destroyed.

Voluntary

Participation is voluntary. If you choose to take part in this study, you may stop at any time. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

I understand the purpose of this research and the procedures to be followed. I understand that at no time will my identity be revealed. I understand that participation is voluntary, and that I may withdraw at any time without penalty. I also recognize that I may skip any questions I don’t wish to respond to. Results of this research may be shared in class, in publications, or in verbal presentations. If I have any concerns or inquiries about my rights as a subject or the manner in which this research is conducted, I understand that I may contact Dr. Christopher Strople, (207) 778-7015, christopher.strople@maine.edu, advisor on this study.

By clicking the link below and taking the questionnaire, I fully understand the above and give my consent to serve as a subject in this research.

(If you would like a summary of the results, please make the request of the researcher at the contact given above).

MSed in Educational Leadership, University of Maine, Farmington, Maine, Sandra Jamison, Principal Investigator at (207)778-3529, sjamison@mtbluersd.org

Appendix C - Questionnaire**How many years have you been in education?**

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6-10
- 11-15
- 16-20
- 21+

How many years have you been in your current position?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6-10
- 11-15
- 16-20
- 21+

What is your current role while attending PLC meetings?

- K teacher
- 1 teacher
- 2 teacher
- Title teacher
- math specialist
- literacy specialist
- administrator

How long have you been a member of your current PLC team?

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1 | 5 |
| 2 | 6 |
| 3 | 7 |
| 4 | |

Indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements using the scale -with 1 being “strongly agree” and 4 being “strongly disagree.”

1 = Strongly Agree

2 = Agree

3 = Disagree

4 = Strongly Disagree

I am very knowledgeable about the purpose and processes of an effective professional learning community.

1 2 3 4

It is important to me to increase my knowledge to the purpose and processes of a professional learning community.

1 2 3 4

The effectiveness of the PLC meeting is not dependent on any one member being present at the meeting.

1 2 3 4

What do you think is the most important purpose of a PLC?

What do you think is the most important element that is needed to make a PLC successful?

Circle the response that best fits your current professional learning community.**My PLC team meets...**

monthly bi-monthly weekly more than weekly never n/a

We analyze common assessment results...

monthly bi-monthly weekly more than weekly never n/a

We analyze student learning to guide instruction...

monthly bi-monthly weekly more than weekly never n/a

We discuss interventions for improved student learning...

monthly bi-monthly weekly more than weekly never n/a

We share teaching strategies...

monthly bi-monthly weekly more than weekly never n/a

My principal comes to the meetings...

monthly bi-monthly weekly more than weekly never n/a

Comments:

Indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements using the scale -with 1 being “strongly agree” and 4 being “strongly disagree.”

1 = Strongly Agree

2 = Agree

3 = Disagree

4 = Strongly Disagree

1. My PLC team has a shared mission, vision, values and goals which all focus on student learning.

1 2 3 4

I helped develop my PLC norms.

1 2 3 4

We evaluate and share our norms often.

1 2 3 4

The main purpose of my PLC team is to improve student learning.

1 2 3 4

My administrator shares a belief in the mission, vision, values and goal of my PLC.

1 2 3 4

2. My PLC team has a collaborative culture focused on learning.

1 2 3 4

My opinion matters in my PLC team meetings.

1 2 3 4

I can trust the members of my PLC team.

1 2 3 4

My team trusts me.

1 2 3 4

Roles and responsibilities are shared equally in my PLC meetings.

1 2 3 4

My administrator trusts me.

1 2 3 4

3. My PLC team uses a collective inquiry into best practices.

1 2 3 4

I am comfortable discussing my students in my PLC meetings.

1 2 3 4

I think of all students as “our” students vs. “my” students.

1 2 3 4

I feel supported by my administrator.

1 2 3 4

4. My PLC team is action oriented and we “learn by doing.”

1 2 3 4

I am comfortable sharing teaching strategies in my PLC meetings.

1 2 3 4

It is valuable use of my time to watch others demonstrate their teaching strategies.

1 2 3 4

I often use new teaching strategies in my classroom that I learned in my PLC meetings.

1 2 3 4

My administrator allows time for educators to practice new learning.

1 2 3 4

5. My PLC team is committed to continuous improvement.

1 2 3 4

I can reflect on my own teaching in a safe environment.

1 2 3 4

I am a better teacher since being a part of a PLC team.

1 2 3 4

It is valuable use of my time to be a part of my PLC team.

1 2 3 4

My administrator believes in the value of the PLC process.

1 2 3 4

6. My PLC team is results oriented.

1 2 3 4

We use various forms of data to examine student work.

1 2 3 4

We develop assessments together.

1 2 3 4

We share assessment results to help drive instructional practices and student learning.

1 2 3 4

My administrator shares school-wide results with staff.

1 2 3 4

Comments:

Appendix D - Interview Protocol

Hello, Thank you for taking the time to speak with me. As part of my master’s program, I am doing a research project about educator’s perceptions of the essential elements of an effective professional learning community. The goal of this interview is to hear your thoughts on

1. How long have you been at this school?
2. What is your current position?
3. What is your background in education?
4. How long have you been at this school?
5. What is your role in professional learning communities?
6. Are you on more than one PLC team? If so, explain.
7. How often are you in a PLC meeting?
8. How would you define the purpose of PLCs?
9. What do you discuss in your PLCs?
10. Does your PLC have norms? How often are they revisited?
11. Does your PLC team have shared goals focused on student learning?
12. What are some goals your team has developed?
13. Have you developed common assessments in your PLC? Are they formative assessments?
Summative assessments?
14. How are results of assessments shared in PLCs?
15. What other data is used in PLC meetings?
16. How often are best practices discussed and shared?
17. Do you feel you are given the opportunity to “learn by doing?” (Can you give an example?)
18. Do you feel your PLC is committed to continuous improvement?

19. Do you feel other members of your team feel the same or differently than you do?
20. How comfortable do you feel sharing your thoughts in your PLC?
21. How comfortable do you feel sharing student work in your PLC?
22. How comfortable do you feel sharing teaching strategies in your PLC?
23. What is the most important element, in your opinion to a successful PLC?
24. Do you feel this element is part of your current PLC?
25. What is the most positive thing about being a member of this team?
26. What is the most frustrating thing about being a member of this team?
27. Do you have any ideas for ways to improve your current PLC?
28. On a scale of 1 - 10 (ten being the highest) how would you rate the collaborative culture of your PLC?
29. In your opinion, how important is trust between colleagues in PLC meetings?
30. In your opinion, how important is trust between the principal and teachers in PLC meetings?
31. What happens if members of a team disagree?
32. Do you feeling collaboration and trust has changed since the implementation of PLCs?

Explain.

33. In your opinion, what should the role of the principal be in PLCs?
34. In your opinion, what should the role of specialists be in your PLCs?

Is there anything else you'd like to tell me that I have not asked?