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Community: Collaboration For Leadership And Professional Learning In Rural Northern New England

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COMMUNITY:
COLLABORATION FOR LEADERSHIP AND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING
IN RURAL NORTHERN NEW ENGLAND

By

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MS (Saint Joseph's College of Maine) 2007

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Leigh Reagan Alley
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Community:
Collaboration for Leadership and Professional Learning in Rural Northern New England

Through instrumental case study, this research sought to better understand a potentially effective model for rural principals' professional development, illustrated by one bounded case--here a self-convened professional learning community. Research questions included inquiry into the needs or interests that compel these area principals to participate in the PLC; the benefits and challenges of their participation in the professional learning community; how the participating principals would characterize their professional growth associated with participation in the PLC; and the recommendations participants would offer to other rural principals interested in convening a professional learning community. Though the case may or may not be typical of other cases, this study can inform rural principals in other settings seeking to create professional learning communities. And though much more needs to be known about professional support for rural principals--as well as about effective models for rural principals' learning--the participants in this case study avow that their PLC is a personalized, effective, and valuable learning resource for them all--particularly in providing them with a safe learning environment in which to enjoy social community and support for troubleshooting problems unique to their rural context.

University of New England

Doctor of Education
Educational Leadership

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by

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Prologue

It's four o'clock on a Wednesday and twelve principals trickle into a small conference room just off the entrance of one of the state's most famous restaurants. Winter coats and scarves are draped over chair backs. Cuffs are unbuttoned and rolled up. Legs are crossed, ankle on knee. They relax. Nods and hellos are shared all around. As they smile and settle, they're already sliding into conversation at their corners of the table.

So sorry for your loss. How's your dad holding up?

How was Jamaica? Hope you bottled some of that sun. Eleven below with the wind chill last weekend.

The waitress knows them all . . . is already bringing tea, and coffee, and Moxie--a glass with ice for one . . . straight from the bottle for the other, who argue good-naturedly that their way is superior: *The only way for Moxie is cold--ice cold!* and *I don't want ice diluting my Moxie!*

Because it's Wednesday, the waitress already has tucked away the last piece of bread pudding for one of these principals, knowing he'll want it boxed up for home once he has finished his haddock burger and polished off his fries.

The snow outside the window slow-dances in the light from the streetlamp flooding the parking lot. Just a little snow. Not enough to keep away principals across the region from coming to the county seat. The cold they carried in on their skin gives way to the warmth of the restaurant they gather in monthly for book study--to the warmth of their exchange.

They divided up reading assignments in the Fall. Tonight Mick and Patsy will present, and the group will adopt some action steps for applying the text to their school setting, but first comes sharing and troubleshooting.

Hey, does anyone have a screening tool they're using instead of NWEA? My primary teachers really want an alternative.

Were any of your schools lucky enough to get in on that Smarter Balanced *pilot? Oh, really? How'd your kids feel about it? I've heard that "writing intensive" is an understatement. This group of kids I've got this year is really going to struggle.*

Any of you high school principals already adopted a standards-based report card? I hate to bring the staff in over the summer, but it looks like I'm going to have to. I have no idea where that stipend will come from.

For several years, I have been part of this mix. The Moxie straight from the bottle is mine. For the cost of a textbook and the price of a monthly meal out, I have been welcomed as part of a professional learning community comprised of principals who have supported my development for years, whom I have in turn come to "grow" as literacy learners and leaders of leaders, through my role directing a consortium for school improvement, bringing professional development to the county's educators. When I undertook a degree program to earn a certificate of advanced study in educational leadership, to culminate in my own principal's credential, these administrators invited me into their circle--into the partnership of their collaborative learning. Though I was pleased and eager to participate with them, my involvement in the first year was not strictly elective. At that time, I was placed as an intern with one of the area principals who believed that my involvement in the book club would be an important complement to my pre-

service study, and it was. I wondered, then--and in the years since--what compelled those principals to participate (they were not required to), and how participation in the professional learning community benefitted them. Despite my curiosity, those were questions I never asked.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In conducting the qualitative study described herein, I sought to ask those questions--to explore the factors that prompted this group of principals to convene and sustain a professional learning community (PLC) in their region of rural Northern New England--and to uncover these principals' specific learning needs.   Through interviews, artifacts, and participant-observation, I examined one model of professional learning for principals, specifically the benefits members would ascribe to their participation in the PLC. Additionally, I sought their recommendations to other rural principals seeking to convene a PLC in their own communities.

Matthews and Crow (2010) note that, while available literature emphasizes the principal's role as an instructional leader, few writers underscore the needs of the principal as a learner. Preston, Jakubiec, and Kooymans (2013) write that the available research into the needs of principals sheds relatively little light on the plights of the rural principal; therefore, there is little research to recommend or inform professional development models within rural contexts. Exploration into the needs of the group of rural principals at the focus of this research was worthy study in relation to the transformation of self, organization, and community. In coming to better grasp their needs as learners, I began to better understand a role to which I aspire, as well as better understand how I can support the group in my current role as an educational consultant, gaining information that will help me to match professional development to their unique needs. Ultimately, I hoped that this study would help the members themselves to

articulate the support they require, and would lend them insights into ways they might support each other more fully and directly.

The Problem

Duncan and Stock (2010) argue that the needs of the principal as learner must be met before the principal can in turn function effectively as an instructional leader. That discrepancy between what is known of rural principals' needs and how best to scaffold their professional learning posed the opportunity for original, meaningful research--necessary, perhaps especially, for states where half or more of students are educated in rural school systems, as is the case with the Northern New England states of Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont, according to the Rural School and Community Trust (2014).

Among the professional learning needs of rural principals are those brought about by the demands of unfunded mandates which Lewis (1992) found are far costlier for rural districts to implement than for non-rural districts. Those findings remain salient, and that inequity endures, as noted by Starr and White (2008) who argue, "[S]tandard compliance requirements issued at the federal, state, and district levels involve the same responses from all schools, irrespective of size or location" and "contextual differences encountered by principals of small, rural schools create either additional leadership challenges to those experienced elsewhere, or challenges that are intensified in impact" (p. 1). Thus, rural principals are faced with meeting the same expectations as their non-rural peers with fewer resources.

These factors are complicated by rural principals' insularity. Starr and White (2008) write that in striving to meet these challenges, rural principals often feel unsupported by state and federal agencies or governments, noting that rural principals report a sense that 'central

education'--departments of education and other influential boards and bodies--feels antipathy toward the plight of the small, rural school. The effect of those challenges, the authors note, for many principals, is a deepening sense of isolation--service in a silo, without support from other principals to whom they might look for help or advice. It is challenging to work effectively in a silo, which is one of the reasons the support of peer mentors is particularly important. Salazar (2007) writes, "Effective instructional leaders must be developed and supported with the latest knowledge about what works" and "principals need continuous opportunities to upgrade their knowledge and skills" (p. 26). Despite this need, Daresh (2004) posits that it is only in the last two decades that such support has become somewhat commonplace for educational leaders. We cannot hope to transform organizations or communities we do not understand.

Purpose

This study proposed to spotlight a group of rural principals' perspectives about one model of professional development. In conducting this qualitative study, I sought to understand their needs and to explore whether they perceive those needs as better met because of their involvement in a self-convened professional learning community--herein defined utilizing Browne-Ferrigno's (2007) definition of the PLC: a group of learners working together on the same curriculum in the same time span, building trusting relationships, creating a safe learning environment, expanding collegial networks, and developing high-performing teams.

Research Questions

The philosophical framework of this qualitative study is one of social constructivism, through which I sought to better understand the "world" in which a group of rural principals live and work. Accordingly, as Creswell (2013) describes, I sought to invite a complexity of views

by posing a series of broad, general, open-ended questions, focusing on the specific context in which these principals engage together.

Broadly, I sought to understand how a group of rural school principals who have been actively involved in a professional learning community would describe their experiences, specifically:

- What needs or interests compel these area principals to participate in this professional learning community?

- What are the benefits and challenges of their participation in the professional learning community?

- How would these principals characterize their professional growth associated with participation in this PLC?

- What recommendations would these principals offer to other rural principals interested in convening a professional learning community?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is derived from research by Browne-Ferrigno (2007), which indicates that a cohort model is an effective vehicle for professional development for principals at every stage of leadership, from preservice onward, as well as from Mitgang and Maeroff (2008) who underscore peer mentoring as an essential ingredient to continuing professional growth and attainment. Mitgang and Maeroff write, "Leadership training should not end when principals are hired" (2008, p. 8). Lifelong learning with the support of critical friends, Mitgang and Maeroff note, furnishes educational leaders with the wherewithal to overcome what they term the "chronic mismatch between the daily realities of school leadership and the training

those leaders typically receive" (2008, p. 4).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope

This case study explored the perceptions of a small group of rural, Northern New England principals having participated in a professional learning community from October 2014 through May 2015, coming together monthly as a book club. For several years prior, while in service to the principals of the region as the director of its school improvement consortium, I took part in the Professional Learning Community herein described; thus, my role was one of participant observer--a role that Creswell (2011) argues can offer "excellent opportunities to see experiences from the view of participants" (p. 214). Merriam (2009) concurs, but writes that the trade-off for a participant observer lies "between the depth of the information revealed to the researcher and the level of confidentiality promised to the group in order to obtain this information" (p. 124). Taking the stance of participant as observer, Merriam writes, is a schizophrenic activity. Researchers are rarely completely immersed in either role of participant or observer, Merriam notes, and participant observers rarely engage in the activity at hand to the point of total absorption, due to the need to remain adequately detached for the purposes of observation and analysis.

Merriam (2009) cautions that an important consideration for researchers acting as participant observers is the degree to which the observer's presence affects what is being observed, noting that the process of observing, and of being observed, can bring about changes in the behavior of both the researcher and the participants. The observer's presence can also affect the climate of the setting, Merriam warns, effecting a more formal atmosphere in which participants will attempt to portray themselves in a more favorable manner. In the case of action

research, Merriam notes that time with the researcher influence diminishes, and those effects often lessen. Though in the short term participants may be more guarded or behave more formally, those changes in behavior cannot be sustained, and the setting will return to normal function, being, overall, rarely disrupted. In addition to cautions Merriam raises, Creswell (2013) writes that concerns for any qualitative observer are potential deception, impression management, and marginality of the researcher.

Significance

This study brought into focus a timely and important issue, filling a gap in the existing knowledge base about models of support for the rural principal. Despite the position of authors such as Browne-Ferrigno, as well as Mitgang and Maeroff, concerning the benefits of a professional learning community for principals, it is interesting to note that in surveying more than 300 principals across the seven states served by the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges, more than 61 percent of whom served in rural schools, Salazar (2007) found that, of the vehicles for professional development, mentoring/coaching--or networking with other principals in small study groups--was of limited interest to the rural principals. The rural principals Salazar surveyed preferred to attend a workshop or a conference, rather than to engage together in ongoing peer learning relationships. Of those rural principals Salazar surveyed, there was no consensus among them that administrative mentoring increased their capacity. Additionally, they did not identify networking as a means by which to reduce their sense of isolation. Because those survey responses do not align with findings in the literature concerning professional learning communities cited herein, such a contrast prompted further exploration into professional learning communities as a vehicle for rural principals' professional development.

Ultimately, greater inquiry into effective professional development models for rural principals can invite further conversation about redress for the professional learning inequities rural principals face. Through eliciting the insights of these rural principals, I endeavored to give voice to one group of underserved and under-resourced professionals.

Conclusion

Because little is known at present about the professional needs of rural principals, as Matthews and Crow (2010) note, particularly in regard to effective models for rural principals' professional learning, as authors Preston, Jakubiec, and Kooymans (2013) propound, further exploration was warranted. Boerema (2011) as well as Mitgang and Maeroff (2008) assert that supportive peer interactions are a powerful tool for principals' professional growth, a position echoed by Browne-Ferrigno (2007), who argues that a cohort model of supportive peers engaged together in professional learning and mentoring is an effective tool for professional development for all principals, regardless of their varying levels of experience. These positions are further explored in the following review of the literature, detailing the nature of the professional learning community, as well as possible benefits to rural principals taking part in such a model for professional development.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review that follows addresses the importance of peer support--specifically in the form of the professional learning community--to educators' professional development. After the definition of relevant terms, first explored is the foundational and recent literature on peer learning/peer mentoring itself--particularly the social construction of knowledge--with a narrowing focus toward the literature surrounding the potential benefits of participation in professional learning community. Those benefits are organized into two categories: increased professional skills, and increased personal support. The literature review then segues to available literature on the topic of a professional learning community for rural principals--the area in which I sought to add to the research base.

Definitions

- *Professional Learning Community (PLC).* An extended learning opportunity to foster collaborative learning among colleagues within a particular work environment or field, often used in schools as a way to organize teachers into working groups.

- *Peer Coaching/Peer Mentoring.* Peer coaching, or mentoring, is a process through which professional colleagues work together to reflect on current practices; expand, refine and build skills; share ideas; teach one another; conduct classroom research; or solve problems in the workplace.

- *Job-Embedded Professional Development.* Learning that occurs while teachers and administrators engage in their daily work. Participants learn by doing, reflecting on their

experiences, and then generating and sharing new insights and learning with one another.

- *Scaffolding*. The support given during the learning process, tailored to the needs of the student or professional learner.

Peer Learning/Peer Mentoring

Mentoring relationships among students are described in the 1960s writings of Freire, though only recently has that model been applied to adult settings. The writings of Robbins (1991), as well as Showers and Joyce (1996) and Mutchler (2000), are key foundational pieces upon which one can build an understanding of the peer learning or peer mentoring model. Robbins (1991) writes that peer mentoring is a confidential process through which colleagues reflect; expand, refine, and build new skills; share ideas; teach each other; conduct classroom research; and solve problems collaboratively. It is not, Robbins writes, a remedial activity meant to "fix" educators. Robbins' work is particularly useful in that it proposes a number of forms peer coaching can take, particularly when educators balk at the term 'coach.' Robbins proposes co-planning, book study, and walk-and-talk as alternatives to peer coaching relationships that seem hierarchical. Of the value of peer coaching, Robbins writes, "The mastery of a technical repertoire increases instructional certainty; reflective practice enhances clarity, meaning and coherence; research fosters investigation and exploration; collaboration enables one to receive and give ideas and assistance" (p. 7). Robbins's work serves as a powerful reminder that "[r]egardless of the type or approach, peer coaching efforts all share a collaborative quest to refine, expand, and enhance knowledge about the teaching profession. These approaches make learning about the business of teaching accessible to all teachers in the workplace" (p. 7).

Showers and Joyce (1996) write that, oftentimes, educators must redefine the term 'coach' in order to better understand their roles as part of a peer mentoring relationship. Any time that an educator offers another feedback that is somehow evaluative, the authors write, collegial relationships tend to disintegrate. Rather, they propound, educators who offer each other feedback in the vein of the positive techniques they are gleaning from each other tend to help make each other's strengths more uniform. Teachers who plan together, teach together, and pool their skills and resources, Showers and Joyce (1996) write, are better able to expand their repertoires than are teachers who do not enjoy this same level of collaboration and collegiality.

Mutchler (2000) posits that the benefits of peer coaching extend to teachers new to service and to veteran educators alike. Local professional development and program innovation are deepened when supported through peer coaching relationships. Beginning teachers and beyond, Mutchler writes, benefit from the accumulated wisdom of their peers. Career enhancement, Mutchler propounds, is the end result for all teachers involved in a peer mentoring relationship. Both gain greater capacity and concrete skills.

More recent literature on the topic of peer mentoring testifies to beneficial outcomes for professionals. Datnow (2011) delineates the difference between teacher collaboration and contrived collegiality. True collaboration, Datnow posits, stems from a culture of inquiry and from letting data drive school improvement efforts. No effort will bring about change or be sustainable, Datnow writes, unless the collaboration is authentic. Anchored in accountability, Datnow propounds, collaborative efforts work best.

Professional Learning Communities

The type of peer learning at the focus of this study is the Professional Learning Community, a topic upon which research abounds. Lave and Wenger (1991) introduced the idea of communities of practice through a case study exploration of apprentice relationships. Through their research, the authors found that communities of practice serve as a living curriculum for apprentices--not necessarily novices--a concept Wenger (1998) later expanded upon, contrasting the concepts of education and training. The aim of a community of practice, Wenger (1998) asserted, is education meant to transform participants' way of being, rather than training meant only to create a competence or skill.   Hord (1997), an author of foundational literature on the specific topic of the PLC, concurs that communities of practice are transformative in nature, writing that the professional learning community is a collaborative culture whereby educators can build not only skills, but also personal strengths. The foundation of the effort, Hord writes, is two-pillared, building upon supportive structures--the use of time, communication procedures, and the like--as well as collegial relationships. DuFour (2007), whose work is informed by that of Hord, concurs that Professional Learning Communities are a powerful means by which educators can collaborate together for school improvement. Cautioning that many groups call themselves PLC's but do none of the things that true PLC's are intended to do, DuFour writes of the requisite structures that must be in place for PLC's to be effective.   Schools, DuFour writes, must convene teams that focus on student learning. Those teams must have opportunity to meet, to reflect, and to focus on the essential questions that drive their efforts. Further, DuFour posits that teams must develop norms and protocols to clarify expectations among the team, and that teams must adopt student achievement goals linked with

school and district action planning goals. These elements in place, DuFour writes, schools have

the tools with which to bring about substantive, and sustainable, school improvement.

Similarly, Henderson (2008) writes that in order for PLC's to be successful, they must

focus on student learning as the end goal, invite school-wide discussion, and agree on a unified

mission. Focusing on assessment and accountability, Henderson writes, is one of the most

critical elements of the successful professional learning community. Henderson acknowledges

that PLC's can be daunting to teachers used to working in relative isolation as they seek to move

beyond their comfort zones, but posits that working collectively toward creating a collaborative

culture, and being persistent in those efforts, pays off in the form of positive student achievement

outcomes.

Of successful Professional Learning Communities, Thessin and Starr (2011) write that

the most effective schools are the ones in which staff are taught explicitly how to collaborate.

The authors write that districts interested in implementing successful Professional Learning

Communities must involve educators and administrators alike in developing and leading the PLC

process; that they must teach administrators and teachers how to work cooperatively and

effectively in PLCs; that they must show how PLCs fit into the district's improvement process

and align with district action plans for continuous school improvement; and, finally, that they

must support schools according to their unique needs.

Routman (2012) describes the change that can result from teachers' shared commitment

to the culture of collaboration. The collaboration and shared goals of PLC's, Routman writes, are

the essential ingredients for sustainable school-wide change efforts. In order for PLC's to

flourish, however, Routman notes, staff members must have a strong foundation of trust so that they can give each other the kind of critical feedback necessary to improving practice.

Foord and Haar (2012) concur, adding that equally as essential are measurements of effectiveness. The authors encourage regular progress monitoring, documentation, and assessment tightly aligned to professional learning goals to ensure gains. The authors also cite the power of systematic coaching, underscoring its importance to continuous school improvement, evidenced in student achievement outcomes. Foord and Haar posit that each of these elements is at the crux of a sustainable effort, and undergird and support the effort primarily from within.

Increased Professional Skill

One of the benefits of the PLC is increased professional skill through peer support and the social construction of knowledge. Vygotsky's (1978) theory concerning the social construction of knowledge lays the foundation for understanding how learners assimilate new skills by working collaboratively to understand deeply what they could not grasp alone. Those ideas inform best practices in professional development--particularly as pertains to the importance of a gradual release of responsibility model. Vygotsky posits that instruction is only effective when it runs at the front of development. The Zone of Proximal Development, in which educators situate the "just-right" challenge for students, remains an essential consideration for adult learning and professional development. Vygotsky also emphasizes the importance of context to the social construction, and subsequent application, of new knowledge.

Fitting with Vygotsky's philosophy is Collet's (2012) recent research, which explores an adaptation of Gallagher's Gradual Release of Responsibility model called Gradual Increase of

Responsibility (GIR). Recognizing that the zone of proximal development and schema-activation are integral to teacher learning, Collet recommends a professional learning approach heavily dependent upon peer modeling. Through peer modeling, educators can offer probing questions, affirmations, and effective praise with the objective of withdrawing scaffolding in appropriate increments over time. By implementing a Gradual Increase of Responsibility model, Collet writes, we move professionals toward the interdependence and collaboration that transforms practice.

Context is as important as collaboration is to increased professional skill. Dana (2010) writes of the importance of context to professional learning--particularly job-embedded professional development activities. Of the concept of improving teachers' instructional practices--and, consequently, student achievement outcomes--Dana notes a correlation between teachers' abilities in the classroom and career-long, job-embedded professional learning. The most effective efforts, writes Dana, are those in which educators' basic work is renormed around identifying, striving to solve, and revisiting critical problems. Job-embedded development, Dana posits, is the only ripe context for learning.

Another crucial ingredient to increased skill is the learner's involvement and investment in criteria and goal setting. Zepeda, Parylo, and Bengtson (2014) write that leaders need autonomy for directing their professional development. Cho and Shim (2013) examine the correlation between teachers' professional goal setting and their efficacy. Finding that the most effective teachers set their own goals for professional growth, Cho and Shim found that educators with highest levels of efficacy maintained personal achievement goals even when their schools emphasized conflicting goals, and that educators with lowest teaching efficacy merely

assimilated the goals promoted by the school. These findings speak to the importance of goal

setting and action planning. The most effective educators, Chim and Sho demonstrate, are those

for whom the locus for growth setting is internal.

Personal Support

Cox (2012) underscores mutual trust as the key to the long-term success of a peer

mentoring partnership, writing of the importance of feeling safe enough to make oneself

vulnerable, and the centrality of confidentiality to that. Further, Cox propounds that the only

effective peer coaching relationships are ones in which individuals feel secure enough to be open

with each other—particularly in the giving and receiving of critical feedback. Forging a bond

from openness and reciprocity, Cox writes, is the formula for trusting, lasting, productive

professional peer-learning partnerships.

Duncan and Stock (2010) write that, while formal mentoring is important--perhaps

especially for principals new to service, support networks are vital for growing and retaining

competent leaders. The value of such networking, they write, lies as much in an awareness that

they are not alone in facing difficulties and challenges as it does in growing knowledge.

Similarly, Boerema (2011) argues that a primary source for growth is supportive peer

interactions. Those interactions--ranging from active listening; to expressing concern; to

affirmations; to check-ins; to shared information--remind members that they are connected.

Boerema suggests that a trusted ear and access to the multiple perspectives of trusted colleagues

act as powerful tools for professional growth. Through peer mentorships, educators enjoy

professional feedback, role clarification, socialization, a lessened sense of isolation, as well as

customized, individualized professional development responsive to their unique needs (Daresh, 2004; Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004).

PLC Support for Principals

While the literature above indicates the power of peer mentoring support for growing professional capacity, Daresh (2004) posits that it is only in the last two decades that such support has become somewhat commonplace for educational leaders. While programs structured to offer this professional support abound, Daresh notes that, historically, the majority of those efforts have been geared only toward the preparation of novice professionals or pre-service leaders.

Browne-Ferrigno and Allen (2006) argue that having mentors in the field helps rural principals to unravel the complex contemporary principalship, and supports exploration of alternate ways to practice school leadership. Starr and White (2008) write that despite feeling marginalized by the larger, centralized education system, rural principals report feeling empowered within the local context. Prompted by the problems of limited resources and the demands of structural reforms, establishing professional learning communities in rural areas could represent a powerful kind of self-help. For these reasons, it is important to examine whether peer mentoring partnerships can reduce the marginalization of professionals who live and serve in isolated, impoverished areas where those conditions cut them off from the main and leave them feeling dislocated or alienated from policymaking in the profession.

Conceptual Framework

Review of the literature indicates that professional learning communities encompass the peer mentoring partnerships--the social construction of knowledge--necessary to learners'

assimilation of new knowledge. Of the impact of the professional learning community, Starr and White (2008) write that collaboration in a professional learning community is the highest level of clustering--encompassing networking, coordination, the sharing of resources and trust, and, above those, enhancing the capacity of critical-friend partners toward a common purpose. Those findings corroborate the earlier cited research of Browne-Ferrigno (2007), and Mitgang and Maeroff (2008), which points to the PLC as a cohort model of lifelong learning that can help principals to better face the unique challenges they meet. Through the qualitative research presented here, I explored the ways participating in a professional learning community enhances a group of rural school principals' assimilation of knowledge and skills, as well as the sense that they are supported.

Conclusion

The formal and informal mentoring that occur as part of involvement in a PLC have powerful implications for both professional and personal growth. This sampling of the available literature undergirds the thinking that the collaborative study of a professional learning community stands the potential to transform the practice of the rural principal in the same way that it can transform the practice of the rural educator. In exploring this particular professional learning community of rural Northern New England principals, I hoped that lessons or patterns might emerge that, if translatable, could help to connect other principals in remote locales, providing for them a vehicle for professional development not previously enjoyed.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

It is through a case study approach that I sought to understand how a group of rural

school principals who have been actively involved in a professional learning community would

describe their experiences. Of specific interest to me were the needs or interests that compel

them to participate; the benefits and challenges of their participation; the way they would

characterize professional growth resulting from their participation in the PLC; and the

recommendations these principals would offer to other rural principals interested in convening a

professional learning community. As an instrumental case (described in Stake, 1995), this

research endeavored to understand a specific issue, illustrated by one bounded case which may

or may not be typical of other cases--here a self-convened professional learning community.

Though this case study did not propose to represent the experiences of rural principals

everywhere, but, rather, to represent a single case study, this case study can inform rural

principals in other settings seeking to create professional learning communities.

Case study proved an appropriate vehicle for exploring the perceptions and interactions

of the participants in that, as Creswell (2013) notes, the research involved the study of a case--in

this instance a group of rural principals convened in a PLC--within a real-life, contemporary

bounded system. The multiple sources of data typical to case study (e.g. observation notes,

interview data, and artifacts) allowed me to develop an in-depth description and analysis of the

case, exploring the reasons participants take part in the PLC, as well as whether participants feel

that they have benefitted from their involvement in the professional learning community.

Setting

The case study identified for research was a professional learning community comprised of a small group of K-12 principals in rural Northern New England. This setting was a fitting one in that the principals are ones Starr and White (2008) would identify as serving in a silo, for the isolation and poverty of the region. In the region in which these principals live and serve, poverty is twice as prevalent as in more populous counties of the state. Most of these principals' student populations are incredibly small; only two of the principals serve student populations larger than 300. The student populations they serve are also adversely affected by poverty, with 20.1% of students living in poverty--the highest rate of student poverty in the state. More than half of their student populations these principals serve receive free or reduced lunch. Consequently, in an already impoverished state, students in this rural New England county-- among the most isolated of counties, as well as among the most poverty-stricken of them--face stark inequities in educational and experiential opportunity. Budgets in the districts these principals serve range from just more than $1 million per annum for the smallest of schools represented, serving 75 students, to $11 million for the school located in the county seat, serving nearly 400 students. Few of the schools these principals serve received better than a "C" rating on the governor's recent grading of school performance. In each of the schools, more students have been referred for special services than a decade ago, and of those students serviced by special education programs, greater numbers of those students learn in a mainstream classroom setting.

My longstanding relationship with these principals permitted me access to this particular learning community and to the members' experiences. Having taken an active role in this professional learning community in years past, my involvement with them was one of participant observer. Inquiry as a participant observer in this setting allowed me to explore whether participants feel less isolated and more supported, professionally and personally, for having participated in this PLC.

Sampling Strategies

The sample of participants was selected from the full pool of principals participating in the PLC identified above. The sampling strategy to select participants from this pool was the sort of maximum variation sampling Creswell (2013) describes, representing a wide range of experience relating to the phenomenon of interest. The criteria for maximum variation included a range of experience serving as a principal, from novice to veteran; a range of grade spans served; as well as a range of student populations and kinds served (e.g. elementary school versus high school; public school versus private school settings). Creswell (2013) writes that "when a researcher maximizes differences at the beginning of the study, it increases the likelihood that the findings will reflect differences or different perspectives--an ideal in qualitative research" (p. 157). This sampling strategy, Merriam (2009) notes, involves a deliberate search for disconfirming instances or variations of the phenomenon--important because it challenges subjectivity, addressed more fully in subsequent explanation of the limitations of this research.

Participants

From the larger pool, six principals were selected, with five ultimately participating in the research--an adequate number of participants in that interviewing them through a series of

conversations, those interviews remained manageable in number. Creswell (2011) writes that the study of few individuals or cases is typical of qualitative research, and that the "overall ability of a researcher to provide and in-depth picture diminishes with the addition of each new individual or site" (p. 209). The larger the number of sites or individuals, Creswell writes, the more unwieldy, resulting in what Creswell terms to be "superficial perspectives" (p. 209). Additionally, five participants represented approximately half of the total PLC membership. From the other half, I conducted pilot interviews. Of particular importance was selecting participants from whom the fullest information could be acquired. That is, in order to best ascertain the community's experiences, attitudes, and beliefs, I employed purposive sampling, based on my knowledge of this population.   The participants selected through this purposive sampling were those I deemed most likely to understand the culture of the communities in which they serve, regardless of their level of experience in the principalship.

As mentioned previously, participants were selected through maximal variation sampling. In order to explore myriad perspectives as described in Creswell's (2011) explanation of types of purposeful sampling, the five participants were chosen because they run the gamut of experience in the principalship. The five participants range in their level of experience; they range in grade spans served, and they range in student populations and kinds served (e.g. elementary school versus high school; public school versus private school settings). The selection process also aligned to Mutchler's (2000) assertion that professional learning communities benefit both the novice and the veteran, as well as Salazar's (2007) argument that all professionals--regardless of experience--need continuous professional development to upgrade skills.

Data Collection

Creswell (2013) writes that data collection in case studies can take many shapes, ranging from interviews, to observations, to documents, to artifacts. For the purposes of this study--to elicit the perspectives of principals participating in a PLC, and to observe the interactions within the PLC--I gathered data in the form of personal interviews, observation notes collected as part of my engagement as a participant observer, and artifacts solicited from participants.

In qualitative research, Creswell (2011) writes, "our approach relies on general interviews and observations so that we do not restrict the views of the participants," collecting data with a few open-ended questions of the researcher's design (p. 205). This served as my primary mode of data gathering, so that participants could speak freely in response to questions for which there was no "right" answer. In short, I endeavored to let their experiences speak.

I conducted two telephone interviews per participant--one round of interviews prior to my participant observations, and one round following those. Participants were contacted to identify an agreeable time for interviewing. In order to capture the content of those interviews, I utilized a recording and transcription service. The duration of each interview was approximately one hour. The purpose of the initial interview was to solicit the perspectives of individual principals surrounding their needs and their experiences participating in the PLC. Questions for the first interview included:

- How would you characterize your role as a principal in this region?
- What interests or concerns compel you to participate in this professional learning community?
- What are the benefits of participation in this professional learning community?

- What are the challenges of participation in this professional learning community?

- What new insights or skills have you gained from participating in this professional learning community?

- Has your participation in the professional learning community helped you to better meet the needs of your staff and students?

- How does your participation in this professional learning community inform your practice?

The questions posed in the second interview built from the first, taking the form of probing questions. Merriam (2009) writes that probes are questions that follow up something already asked, and, thus, it is virtually impossible to specify them ahead of time, which proved to be the case with this study. Clarifying and elaborating probes that emerged from the principals' interview responses and my subsequent reflection notes, as well as from my field notes recorded in participant-observation, helped me to attain additional information, inviting participants to expand on earlier ideas. Planned questions included whether the principals anticipated continued participation for another academic year, and for what reasons; and the recommendations each participant would make to others wishing to convene a PLC.

Another means by which I gathered data was through participant observation. Merriam (2009) writes, "Observation [. . .] offers a firsthand account of the situation under study and, when combined with interviewing and document analysis, allows for a holistic interpretation of the phenomenon being investigated" (p. 136). My involvement as a participant observer provided data in the form of observation notes, which Merriam (2009) writes are "analogous to the interview transcript" (p. 128). While in the act of participatory observation, I jotted notes

about what was observed, recording events and conversations in detail immediately afterward.

Citing Taylor and Bogdan (1984), Merriam (2009) writes that recall is helped if, during

observation, one pays attention; shifts from a wide angle to a narrower one, focusing on a

specific individual, interaction, or activity; attunes oneself to keywords and first and last

remarks; and mentally plays back scenes and remarks during pauses in action. I took care to

develop highly descriptive notes, as Merriam urges, including detail enough that raw data was a

reflection of all I saw and heard. An observational protocol is necessary for gathering data, and I

utilized one Creswell (2011) suggests, containing a header in which I recorded information such

as time, place, and setting; and two columns dividing the page, in which I recorded two types of

data: a description of activities in one column, and a reflection about themes, quotes, and my

personal experiences in the other. I supplemented those two-column notes with descriptions of

individuals and settings, as well as reflective notes about emerging themes or insights for further

analysis.

In addition to conducting interviews and recording participant observations, I collected

from participants artifacts to illuminate their stories and add to the context of the research, asking

participants to share a photograph depicting professional growth they attribute to their

participation in the PLC. Creswell (2011) writes, "Interviews and artifacts [. . .] are important

forms of data" in that they "help [the researcher] to develop an in-depth understanding of the

shared patterns" (p. 477). This open-ended artifact sharing will allow for ideas and themes to

emerge that I had not considered, and also open the study further to disconfirming evidence,

which will help to counter my subjectivity as the principal instrument for data gathering and

interpretation.

Analysis

At the culmination of the interviewing process, I had amassed more than a dozen hours of transcripts, as well as field and reflection notes, and five artifacts from the participants involved. Each interview was transcribed, dated and coded. All field and reflection notes and artifacts were dated and coded as well. Exploring and coding that data followed the process prescribed by Saldana (2012), a process outlined in greater detail in Chapter Four. Initial open coding was condensed to concepts and categories; subsequent, cyclical axial coding--rereading and revisiting data--allowed me to identify the key aspects of the data in order to disaggregate core themes.

Once done, I interpreted the findings, as Creswell (2011) describes: by stepping back and forming "some larger meaning about the phenomenon based on personal views, comparisons with past studies, or both" (p. 257). To interpret the findings, I summarized them; conveyed my personal reflections, remarked on the larger meaning of the data; made comparisons to the literature; and offered limitations and suggestions for future research, as Creswell (2011) outlines.

Creswell (2011) writes that validating findings means determining accuracy or credibility, which is of utmost importance. Creswell offers three strategies for ensuring the accuracy or credibility of findings: triangulation--corroborating evidence from different individuals, types of data, or methods of data collection, examining each to find evidence that supports a theme; member check--through which participants check the accuracy of the account; and external audit--in which someone outside of the study reviews different aspects of the research. For the purposes of this case study, validity and trustworthiness were ensured through

triangulation of data sources—interviews, observation notes, and artifacts--as well as member-checking and constant comparison.

Participant Rights

In conducting this qualitative research of an organization and people with which I am closely familiar, it was particularly important that I afforded participants anonymity and confidentiality. Precautions that protect these participants and the data they offered are my responsibility. Participants were assigned pseudonyms. Data were scrubbed of personally-identifying information. Participants were informed of their right to refuse to answer any interview question presented to them, as well as to decide against participation at any time. Member check was conducted with each participant, through which he or she reviewed and approved the content of all transcripts. Participants were welcomed to request to have content expunged from the transcript if necessary; no participant did so. I kept secure all data gathered; I gathered only what I needed, and I kept that data for only the time necessary to conduct the research.

Potential Limitations

Stake (1995) writes that it is the researcher who decides what is the case's story, inasmuch as the story is condensed down into what he or she decides to report. Stake argues that, in any qualitative study, more information will be pursued than will be volunteered, and less information will be reported than what was learned. My lens of pre-understanding may tint my view of the landscape. I am aware that my pre-existing relationship with these people colors my perspective. Thus, I remained particularly mindful of keeping my assumptions in check, as well as my biases. I was especially vigilant against closing myself to what Coghlan and Brannick

(2009) term 'dis-confirming evidence.' Keeping my own subjectivity in check was imperative to my research as it unfolded. Throughout the research process, I challenged my own supposition that I understand the contexts of these principals completely and implicitly, aware that, in fact, my understanding is only partial, if intimate. Coghlan and Brannick suggest seeking disconfirming evidence through interviewing--an approach I took. Additional measures I adopted to ensure objectivity included revisiting transcripts repeatedly over time to check that identified themes still "rang true," as well as keeping a reflexive journal.

Pilot Study

In February 2015, I conducted a pilot interview with five members of the professional learning community not chosen as part of the sample, who similarly ran the gamut of professional experience, summarizing initial findings. The pilot interviews were conducted by telephone, recorded and transcribed. None of the data gathered in pilot interviews appears here because the purpose of those interviews, primarily, was refining instrumentation--in this case, the initial interview questions. By conducting the pilot interviews, I was able to test the adequacy of my research instrument, to assess the feasibility of the study, to assess whether my protocols were realistic and workable, and to assess my proposed data analysis techniques to uncover any potential problems.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

This chapter presents the findings of case study research focused on the experiences of a group of five rural principals serving in one of the most isolated and impoverished regions of Northern New England, coming together monthly to support each other in the context of a professional learning community. The data are not presented in the order in which they were gathered, but rather in the order in which they best portray the most salient ideas of the data, as well as the convergence and divergence of the themes at play. Thus, the chapter opens with interview data gathered from each principal, presented as five cases. Artifacts gathered from each principal serve as a coda to each of those entrance interviews. Observation notes gathered in the monthly meetings of the principal's PLC--and the exit interviews spurred by those observations--are treated as a separate data set, with the emergent themes of previous interviews providing the lens through which I viewed their interactions.

Analysis Method

In order to analyze the data gleaned from interviews, artifacts, and observation notes, I first engaged in the process of open coding, as described by Saldana (2012), arranging the data and identifying the key concepts and categories present in each. For example, if a participant underscored the idea that rural education presents unique challenges, that idea was highlighted as a concept, under which related ideas tacking back to that idea--such as the pressure to be a "Jack of All Trades"--are subsumed as categories. In examining those transcripts, observation notes, and narratives, I utilized color-coding to distinguish the various broad concepts and their categories from each other. At the close of the process, the concepts and categories emerging

from the transcripts, observation notes, and narratives were coded to represent the five most prevalent ideas. Concepts and their related categories were transferred to a brief outline, with concepts serving as the heading and the categories subsumed beneath.

The outline guided the process of axial coding, revisiting each data set as Saldana (2012) describes--as a cyclical act. The concepts and categories served as a lens for rereading through second and third reexaminations of those data. Through that cyclical re-visitation of the data, the concepts and categories identified were confirmed to represent accurately the perspectives of the participants, and relationships between concepts and categories became clear. This axial coding focused my examination of the data. Rereading through that lens--and subsequently revising and expanding upon initial coding in this way--ensured the identification of the key aspects of the data. Through this process, I was able to disaggregate the core themes, represented in the tables that follow.

Presentation of Results

In the text that follows, I first present introductory vignettes for the five principals participating in this study, then segue to their five individual cases. First presented are the entrance interviews conducted with each participant, as well as the artifacts each provided me to characterize his or her professional learning as part of the PLC. Next presented is a cross-cases analysis of those interviews and artifacts, from which I condensed the themes that served as the lens through which I observed this PLC in action as an affiliate member. Observations and exit interviews round out the section. Tables summarize the themes of the various data sets throughout. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

Participants

Participant	Years of Experience	Highest Degree Attained
Mick Cyr	37	Post-Master's Degree
Dwight Owens	26	Master's Degree
Nina Rockwell	23	Master's Degree
Trish Joyner	26	Master's Degree
Carrie-Beth Halberd	17	Post-Master's Certificate

Meet Mick Cyr

Mick Cyr was born in the mid-1950's in the county seat--the community in which he serves. He attended the high school adjacent to the elementary school in which he is now principal. Upon high school graduation, he attended the local teacher's college, years later receiving a Master's Degree from the state university--in the days when, he says, one had no choice but to travel back and forth to get to Master's classes. Ultimately, several years ago, he earned a C.A.S. from another university in the state.

All of Mick's years of service have been to schools in his home county. His first 10 years in education, from 1978 to 1988, were spent teaching in the school he now serves. After earning his Master's Degree in administration, he took his first principalship in another district elementary school a few minutes' drive away, staying on for three years before joining the ranks at a neighboring district, serving as a K-8 principal there for seven years. He then transferred "home again" to the school he now serves, where he is completing his 17th year as principal.

Mick is largely responsible for the formation of this Professional Learning Community (PLC)--something he helped to catalyze during his tenure as president of the region's principals'

association, when he and a handful of other area principals remarked on how beneficial it would be to come together around common issues "more than three or four times a year," which had been the extent of their professional networking to that point. Initially, he facilitated the PLC, but later shared that leadership with the body, which now shares that function equally.

Mick comes across as youthful, amicable, approachable, and sharp. In the years I have known him, I often have admired his savvy and his talent for asking the right questions. Mick retires at the end of June.

Meet Dwight Owens

Dwight Owens is finishing his 26th year in education--11 years in the classroom and 15 years as an administrator. He is certified to teach all grades at the elementary level, and taught in grades six, seven, and eight for 11 years. After he transitioned to administration, Dwight was an elementary principal for two years. One of those two years he spent serving as a teaching principal. He served as principal of a public high school for seven years before returning to the private academy from which he graduated, spending the last the last six years there, serving now as the Associate Head of School--the equivalent of a building principal.

Dwight volunteered on the Principals' Association Professional Development Committee for six years, planning professional development for more than 600 administrators across the state. Currently, he is involved for the second time in training new administrators. To serve in that capacity as a mentor for other educational leaders, he was trained himself, works with a new administrator for two years, and helps that principal to get his or her bearings.

Educated at the county's teachers' college, like Mick, Dwight knows well the challenges that face rural educators and administrators. Dwight's commitment to service has led to his

taking protégés under his wing many times over the years, among them two other area administrators currently taking part in the PLC--Trish Joyner and Carrie-Beth Halberd. Dwight is likeable and intelligent. He is eloquent, a deep thinker, and a listener. His staff sees him as their "go-to guy" to keep the balls in the air. Dwight anticipates putting his Master's Degree in administration to service here in the region for a decade or more to come.

Meet Nina Rockwell

Nina has lived her entire life in her home community. She can see the house that she was raised in from the windows of the school in which she now serves. She graduated from high school here, went to college, came back, started as a substitute at her local elementary school, and worked her way up into a paraprofessional position. She went back to the university to earn a teaching degree and returned to that elementary school as a teacher. Soon after, she began work on her Master's Degree in a cohort program through the state's school leadership network. A local superintendent with whom she interned gave her the encouragement and confidence to persist. All of the schools she has served have been in towns she describes as both small and poor. After fourteen years in various positions in her hometown elementary school, she was principal in a neighboring district for four years, and served as principal in another district in the county for an additional year--a position she enjoyed, though the hour-long commute each way proved to be too much. She returned to her hometown at that time, and is completing her fourth year back where her heart has always been. In the time I have known Nina, I can say she is a doer. She is direct, no-nonsense, energetic, dependable, and even-keeled. Having invested more than two decades in rural education, she shows no sign of slowing.

Meet Trish Joyner

Trish Joyner was born in Canada, but moved to the U.S. before she started her school years. She was raised and educated in a paper mill town, attending the same school at which she is currently principal. She attended one of the state universities for four years and earned her degree in special education before taking a job at a Native American reservation school for seven years. She worked as a behavioral specialist for most of those years, but served one year as a third grade classroom teacher.

She then transferred to work in her home community as a special education teacher. She has devoted 26 years to education. For ten years, she worked as a resource room teacher in her school, then became principal. This is her tenth year as principal at this school. During her tenure, she completed online courses and enrolled in a cohort to earn her Master's Degree in education. As part of her journey to principalship, she was involved with the state's mentoring program for new administrators. Throughout that experience, Dwight Owens served as her mentor--a relationship they both have said was a 'near-perfect fit.'

Trish is wise. She picks her battles with care. Her word is good. She works hard. As a leader, she is down-to-earth, straight-shooting, fair-minded, visible, and available. She makes it a point to know each and every one of her students, and to make her staff feel supported. Trish is hitting her stride. She has many more years of service to offer to her home community.

Meet Carrie-Beth Halberd

Like the other participants, Carrie-Beth was raised in this county, where she also attended elementary school. Because her little town didn't have its own high school, she elected to pay tuition at the county's private academy--the academy at which her mentor, Dwight Owens,

currently serves as Associate Head of School. After high school, she attended one year at the state's flagship university, ultimately finishing her degree at the branch of the university system located in her home county. She completed a Master's degree in literacy online through another university located in the state, ultimately earning a graduate certificate in educational leadership from that same university.

This is Carrie-Beth's 17th year in education. She has served in roles ranging from that of a substitute teacher, to paraprofessional, to a classroom teacher, to an afterschool coordinator, to an assistant principal. This academic year was her first year of service as building principal; she serves at a reservation school. Dwight Owens mentors her as part of her recertification requirement.

Carrie-Beth comes across as reflective and as intuitive. She is apt to listen more than speak, but when she speaks, she says something worth hearing. She is keen and sharp. She stays abreast of best practice and actively seeks continuous professional development. With a young family putting down roots in her home county, Carrie-Beth has a long and bright career ahead of her.

The Five Cases

Mick Cyr

From Mick's perspective, the PLC is particularly important for the ways in which it helps him to ameliorate the challenges of serving in an incredibly impoverished, isolated region. In a place where school budgets are smaller than elsewhere, he says his region's educators have had to develop a "make the best of what you have" mentality. That mindset means school administrators are more careful and more creative with the dollars that support both student- and

teacher learning. Because of the region's pronounced rurality, Mick notes, professional development opportunities do not come this way. Typically, to avail themselves of trainings, courses, and other types of development, he and his staff have to travel at least a couple of hours away to attend--which means they are unable to attend as much development as they would like. Though asynchronous options exist, he argues that those offerings are inferior to the benefit of sitting with peers in shared space, tackling shared text and shared problems. Because of those challenges, Mick feels it is more difficult to stay abreast of best practice here, and to feel connected to the state department that hands down mandates. Though he says that many would make the argument that "rural is rural," he doesn't agree. The remoteness and the poverty are tougher obstacles for his region, he argues, because they are more pronounced.

These challenges, Mick says, are what make the PLC so essential to him and to the other participating principals of the region. For his own professional preparedness and his ability to serve as a leader of learning for his staff, the PLC is pivotal. Mick finds the meetings to be profoundly beneficial to his practice. "I am not sure how many people on their own necessarily read professional articles, professional journals, professional books on a regular basis," he says. "Sometimes people have to be kind of enticed. An effective book study means combining a good place to talk with people in a relaxed atmosphere, and feeling like you can gain something from the book and gain something from your colleagues." Mutually important, he says, are the dual aspects of professional learning and personal support in a business that he argues is becoming increasingly more complicated--more difficult. "Misery likes company sometimes," Mick says. "You put your head together with somebody else, and I think you come out feeling a little bit stronger. You feel like you are not alone." In fact, he says, he comes out of their sessions

feeling empowered. The support of the PLC alone is a critically important benefit to participation. Mick reports that, despite often feeling isolated in the profession, he feels uncommonly supported in the context of his school and the surrounding community, for which the school is its hub, its center. Participating in the PLC means feeling more "dialed in" to best practice, more connected, more supported, more encouraged, more excited, and ultimately more capable.

Another primary benefit of participating in a regional principals' PLC, from Mick's perspective, is that the professional development is personalized. Mick shares that it's impossible to overemphasize the value he experiences when communicating, interacting, and learning with people in similar positions in his region. Every time they gather together to learn, he says, he takes away important new knowledge. The text study they engage in, and the sharing and group troubleshooting of their real-time challenges, provide him with what he needs to make an impact in his school setting. The safe space the PLC provides for speaking confidentially with other principals and seeking advice from them about the specific challenges they are facing is a benefit that no other professional development opportunity provides. Mick values the PLC as a platform for sharing what works. He is both more creative and more reflective in his practice, he argues, because of the PLC. "It's hard to keep up with everything that is going on [particularly the mandates]," he says. "The PLC helps me to stay out in front of it a little bit."

The artifact Mick shared to illustrate the effect of the principals' PLC on his professional practice underscores all that he argues to be most important about participation in a learning community. Those benefits of learning in a shared space, set against the backdrop of real-time concerns in your school community are ones he works to impart to his own staff. For them, he implemented a learning community as standard protocol in the school he serves. Weekly, teachers who share grade spans convene to talk, troubleshoot, and to plan. This text serves as their touchstone.

For Mick, the empowerment that comes from his staff's collaborative learning--that feeling of togetherness in tackling unique challenges of teaching in an isolated region, beset by poverty--is reason alone for participation. As the teaching profession becomes increasingly complex to navigate, he is confident that learning communities are the compass. Partnering with

peers to stay abreast of best practice, he posits, is the way forward. That model for professional

learning is sustainable, he argues, despite shrinking budgets, and despite remote settings.

Three themes emerged from Mick's interview and the artifact he shared to illustrate the

impact of the PLC on his practice. First to emerge was the "incredible support" he experiences in

his region and his school community, despite experiencing a disconnect in his profession--both

from principals outside of his region, and from the bureau of education. Next was the idea that

misery likes company--that there is great value in knowing that one is not alone in the challenges

he or she faces. The last was that the safe space of a PLC affords participants a special kind of

empowerment as they share their learning and troubleshoot their real-world, context-specific

challenges.

Dwight Owens

Dwight echoes that dichotomy between feeling significantly isolated in the profession,

yet profoundly connected in his school and community. "You build lifelong relationships with

people and there is a level of trust," he says. "For the most part, [the community] really do[es]

trust that you're trying to do the right thing [as a school administrator]." Dwight agrees with

Mick's perception of the county is a single community where everyone is mutually dependent.

"We have to rely on each other, being so isolated," he argues. "I'm not sure how much that

happens in other places."

As it does for Mick, the regional principals' PLC lessens the impact of isolation on

Dwight's efficacy. "No principal has a teacher's room," Dwight says. Without the support of his

PLC there would be virtually no place to turn. Fortunately, because of his PLC, he can simply

pick up the phone. For Dwight, involvement in the PLC is about much more than the support,

though. "I have this strong, urgent need to keep learning," he says. "I don't feel I'm getting

stagnant. I don't feel I'm getting cynical about the whole business of being a leader. I think I'm

still working very hard to stay fresh." That need to stay current and to expand his professional

capacity--growing through text study, reflection, and collegial conversation--is what brings him

back to the table when his many other professional commitments compete for his time.

Also important for Dwight is the validation that the PLC can provide. Learning from his

colleagues' successes and setbacks, and hearing from them affirmations that he is making the

right professional choices, is invaluable in a far-flung region where it would be easy to feel he is

going it alone. Much of the value of the professional development, for him, lies in sharing trust,

private space, and face time with the other principals in the region--which he says he would

choose over any other kind of professional development. The confidential sharing of real

problems and what works and what doesn't regarding solving them in the context of their own

region--and applying their shared professional learning to the context of their region--is

powerful, Dwight says.

As for additional benefits of the PLC, Dwight shares that the collegial conversations of

the PLC, particularly about common issues and common challenges inspire him to use collegial

conversation to drive professional learning forward for his staff. "I share my new learning with

staff constantly," Dwight says. "I want my staff and my students to benefit from my excitement,

from my enthusiasm, from my new discoveries. So I keep learning. If our [regional principals'

PLC] was nonexistent, I'm not sure where my resources would be."

███████████████

STAFF MEETING AGENDA

MARCH 3, 2015

Administrator update

Up coming events.....Mrs. ████████

Guidance Update

Technology Update....Senior Systems

Student Engagement: Cold Call....*Teach Like A Champion*

Tech Slam

Other

GO████████!!

Dwight's commitment to sharing his own learning with his staff and engaging them as a community of practice is evident in the artifact he shared. *Teach Like a Champion*--one of the earliest texts these principals' PLC engaged with together--remains one of the foundational texts for the professional learning of his staff, with whom he in turn had instituted a book group centered on this text. The staff meeting agenda Dwight shared represents his staff's commitment to "chipping away" at this text, tackling a new technique each quarter, seeking to implement that technique with fidelity. With nearly 50 techniques demonstrated in the text, Dwight is committed to revisiting this text with his staff for some time to come. This shared learning gives his staff common goals, and helps to make their strengths as educators more uniform as they seek to maximize instruction for their students.

The artifact is one that embodies what Dwight values most. Through shared learning and collegial conversation, his staff combats stagnation and routine. They also come away better

equipped for the unique challenges they face as educators in the region. Dwight acts as the

leader of their learning. This artifact illustrates his commitment to leveraging his own learning

in the interest of creating of his staff a high performing team.

In his interview and artifact, Dwight presented two distinct themes. The first, that though

his school and community are tight-knit, administration is terribly isolating by itself,

compounded further by the remoteness of the region in which he lives and serves, and that a PLC

ameliorates that isolation. The second is that the safe space in which to share, and the trusting

relationships forged in a PLC, serve to customize professional development in a way that no

other mode of learning could. In the principals' PLC, for example, they apply the ideas in the

text to their unique situations and troubleshoot the real challenges to which they all can relate.

Without the PLC, Dwight posits, he would be without the resources he needs to do his job well.

Nina Rockwell

Like Mick and Dwight, Nina speaks at length about the uncommon connectedness of her

community. But deeply knowing kids and their families, she says, can be a double-edged sword.

Worry and a sense of responsibility is heightened because her students and their families are so

familiar. Sending food home with students experiencing food instability, and pulling together

money for ski pants and jackets during the winter holidays are not uncommon activities. Nina

shares that as a rural principal serving in a particularly impoverished area, she wears hats she

never thought she would have to wear. She stands in as nurse, counselor, advisor, nurturer. But

the rewards, she says, far outweigh the challenges in a region where people are famous for

pulling together. For Nina, the most important benefit of the PLC is the way in which it prepares

her for the uncommon challenges of living and serving in the region--a region so far-flung that

her superintendent is housed a 45-minute drive away, which makes the opportunity to pick up the phone and reach out to other principals in the region even more powerful and more important.

The PLC also provides for Nina's professional learning in a way that no other professional development could. "There is a piece in education that they can't teach; they don't teach it. And that's what the book study--the PLC--gives me. There are times when you need a resource outside. You need to be able to talk to somebody else who is not close to an issue--to try to get a different perspective." That importance of that safe place to share, she says, cannot be overemphasized. "We are comfortable opening up," she says. "The closeness means looking in the mirror at yourself and that is tough to do, looking in that mirror and being honest." Her reflexive practice, strengthened by her participation in the PLC, makes her a better learner and a better leader.

Chapter 1 (pages 27-56)

Surfacing Significant Ideas

Here's What! (Important Information)	So What? (Interpretation)	Now What? (Implications for supervision)
- pg. 28 - No Opt Out	pg 28 - It's not okay to not try pg 29 - Charlieders will do it he wants pg 33 - Cue - definition pg 34 - feigning ignorance & delay; you off task.	- Teach the technique - DVD - Monitor - Learn/know the class/expect - Learned behavior - older grades - Start young
- pg 35 - Right is Right	pg 35 - Let students complete answers pg 35 - Let students "pause" pg 37 Keep pushing pg 38 - 39 Watch for answers to the questions asked	- Teach the technique DVD - pg 55 # 3

The artifact Nina shared, like Dwight's, illustrates her engagement of staff in text study, centered on *Teach Like a Champion*. Nina and her staff have participated together in a book

study based on the text, setting aside some portion of each staff meeting for the purpose of discussing a technique it illustrates. For her staff, the text serves as a catalyst for whole-school application as they seek to implement the techniques of the text with students as young as pre-kindergarten. By building a common language for instruction through text study, the team of teachers is able to agree on expectations and provide continuity for students' academic experiences.

What Nina values most about her membership in the PLC manifests itself in this book study--that reflexive practice that helps every educator to cultivate most fully his or her skills. Nina reports feeling the pressure to be a "Jack of All Trades" because of her rurality and the school's small budget, and she knows that her staff faces the same pressures. By engaging together in professional development of this nature, both Nina and her staff--whether through Nina's own involvement in a PLC, or the involvement of her staff in shared text study--tap into what Nina sees as the greatest power of a PLC--the power to impart the "unteachable" aspects of education: the things one can learn only through action and subsequent reflection in professional discussions with peers, in the setting of one's own school community.

Two distinct themes emerged from Nina's interview and artifact. Nina argues that the principals' PLC helps her to solve the unique problems posed by her school's poverty and rurality--particularly the challenge of wearing many hats. She also posits that the PLC is important in its ability to impart to principals knowledge that preparation courses cannot teach--the capacity developed from experience--and she feels fortunate that in the context of the PLC, she has both safe space and willing peers to explore important issues. To that end, she values the mirror the PLC provides for reflexive practice.

Trish Joyner

Trish concurs with her peers in their consensus that their greatest challenges stem from geographic isolation. That isolation complicates everything, from creating curriculum, to complying with the mandates the bureau of education hands down. "You are on your own to do everything," she says, "and you have got to figure it out on your own as often as not." That challenge is compounded, Trish argues, because, like Nina, she is a "Jack of All Trades." In the run of a day, she covers all manner of roles auxiliary employees would fill in other larger schools: she is the transportation director; the curriculum coordinator; a substitute kitchen staffer; the day custodian; the guidance counselor; the detention monitor; the lunch duty monitor--let alone any of the myriad responsibilities of the principalship.

That juggling of tasks makes involvement in the PLC even more important. She needs the perspectives of the other principals of the region to help her to navigate the challenges of her position. "We all are in the same situation here in rural [northern New England], so we all have similar things that happen to us in our schools, and similar difficulties and worries. I think that the book club really does build that trusting relationship where you have got a group of people that you can sit down and talk about those things. I don't think anything now of emailing one of the principals or calling them and saying, 'Hey I am having a problem with this. How are you figuring it out?'" Additionally, her participation in the PLC helps her to focus on those areas in which she wants for growth, and gives her the affirmation she needs to be confident in her decision making. The collaboration and reflexive practice of the PLC has made her a more effective leader by helping her to better meet the challenges unique to the rural setting.
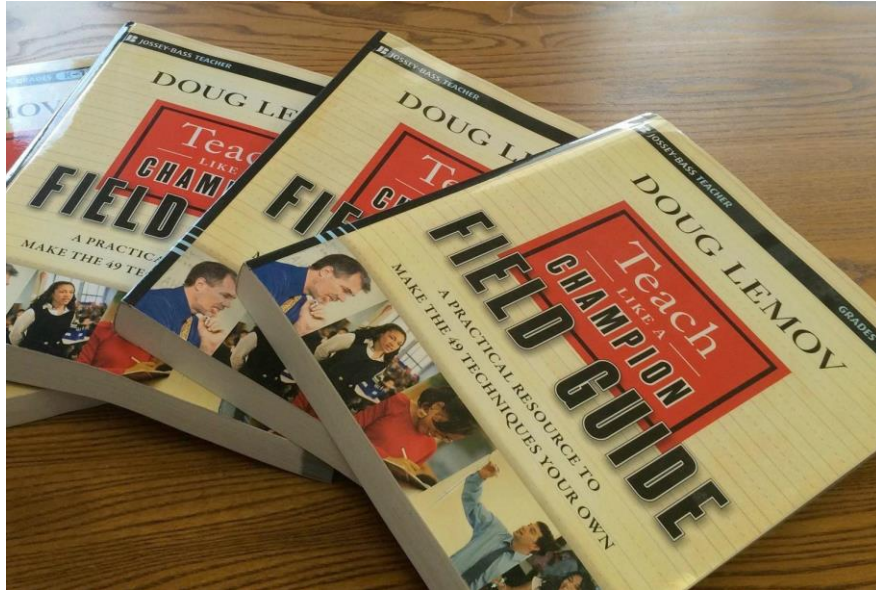
Trish Joyner calls *Teach Like a Champion* her staff's bible. Like Dwight and Nina, after having studied the text for a year in her own PLC, Trish carried *Teach Like a Champion* back to her staff and engages them in book study surrounding the techniques illustrated in the text. Every teacher joining the staff of her school receives a copy they are expected to read from cover to cover in their first few months of employment. Her staff's individual goal-setting must incorporate at least one goal associated with a technique from the text--something she follows up with them on when it is time to evaluate their individual progress.

Like Nina, Trish feels the pressures of acting as a "Jack of All Trades," and she knows that her staff feel those pressures as well. Collaboration, she says, "is a kind of coping." By engaging together in shared study and applying that learning in their unique setting, they partner together as problem-solvers. Reflexive practice, Trish says, keeps both she and her staff current and striving.

Two themes emerged from Trish Joyner's interview and artifact. The first is that unique challenges stem from rurality and poverty--particularly the challenge of serving as a "Jack of All Trades"--and that the real power of a PLC lies in applying learning and collegial conversation in the context of solving those challenges. The second is that a trusted ear and safe space to share are invaluable to the profession of a rural principal. The PLC's support network and the sense that everyone is "in this together" are important to her because, despite a close school community, the position she holds can be an incredibly isolating one.

Carrie-Beth Halberd

As with other participants, Carrie-Beth struggles with that burden to be "Jack of All Trades"--a challenge she says participation in the PLC helps to ameliorate. She points out that many of the region's principals are teaching principals, so they are in the classroom, and then in the office; or they are in the classroom all day, and handle their office responsibilities on their own time. There is nobody to connect with at an administrative level in schools, though sometimes, she notes, support exists within a district.

Carrie-Beth finds a number of aspects of the rural principalship to be particularly taxing. "A lot of times I refer to our school as an urban school in a rural setting," Carrie says, "because a lot of the characteristics are very common to economically deprived, rural areas that are also in inner-city schools. They're just not as well noted and known as they are in the urban settings." As she faces these challenges, the PLC has been, for her, a source of affirmation, guidance, and a means of "survival."

Administration is lonely in itself, she argues. But geography plays a considerable role in compounding the challenges of her position. The collegiality and safe, confidential learning

environment of the PLC afford her the confidentiality she needs to troubleshoot serious issues. At the same time, membership in the PLC reminds her that she is not alone--that she is not the only person facing the unique challenges of a principalship in this rural county, which she describes as close and accepting.

As education continues its rapid evolution, Carrie-Beth cautions that principals must keep an eye toward their own continuous professional improvement. Carrie-Beth argues that principals left to their own offices and lacking professional and personal support will never gain the skills and knowledge necessary to "keep up to speed," providing students and staff with all they need to find success. "I really value being able to stay on top of things," Carrie-Beth says. "Education is a constantly moving bullseye, and we need development in order to stay ahead of the game. For that reason, I really value the networking [of the PLC]."

Name: _____   Date: _____

Delivery of Instruction

	4 Highly Effective	3 Effective	2 Improvement Necessary	1 Does Not Meet Standards
Engagement	Exudes high expectations, urgency, and determination that all students will master the material.	Conveys to students: This is important, you can do it, and I'm not going to give up on you.	Tells students that the subject matter is important and they need to work hard.	Gives up on some students as hopeless.

Delivery of Instruction Plan for my Classroom:

Concrete Ideas from Breakout Session	How will this look in my classroom?	How does this support my mission statement?

Reflexive practice is at the heart of the artifact Carrie-Beth shared. Utilized for teacher self-reflection upon techniques featured in the text *Teach Like a Champion,* this rubric is one that

she and her staff use for rating their own efficacy. As the other principals have, Carrie-Beth has

instituted text study with her staff, centered upon the texts that she has engaged with in her own

regional PLC. She hopes that text study aids her staff in the constant pursuit of current best

practice.

Carrie-Beth sees shared text study as a way in which her staff can troubleshoot the

challenges rural education poses. Their common, time-bound curriculum, and the application of

that curriculum in the context of their school community, helps them to function more cohesively

as a team, as well as to find creative solutions for their problems. Ultimately, Carrie-Beth sees

the book study as a way of building relationships. A sense of belonging in a safe learning

environment responsive to her unique needs, for Carrie-Beth, is the paramount benefit of the

principals' PLC--a benefit she is happy to pass along to her staff by instituting for them a shared

text study.

Carrie-Beth's interview and artifact presented two themes. The first centers on the

isolation of her position. Administration is lonely in itself, she says, and her remote geography

compounds that loneliness, which is ameliorated because of her participation in the principals'

PLC. The second is that membership in that PLC reminds her that she is not alone, particularly

important as she faces the challenges unique to serving so rurally--most specifically that

challenge of acting as a "Jack of All Trades."

Cross Case Analysis

Table 1, below, serves as a graphic organizer to summarize the text that follows. In the

first column, the participants are listed in the order in which they were interviewed. Subsequent

columns detail the key individual themes represented in individual data sets. In sum, the table

represents the themes of each of the five cases presented.

Table 1

Individual Themes: Entrance Interviews and Artifacts

Participant	Individual Themes	
	Entrance Interviews	*Artifacts*
Mick Cyr	*misery likes company *PLC as empowerment *supported in the school and region, despite disconnect in the profession	*the safe space of PLC is a special kind of empowerment for troubleshooting real-world, context-specific challenges
Dwight Owens	*closeness of the community *terrible isolation of the profession *PLC as the primary avenue of professional community and learning	*the safe space in which to share, and the trusting relationships forged in a PLC, help to customize professional development
Nina Rockwell	*uncommon connectedness of community *PLC as the conduit of the "piece they can't teach" in preparation courses *rural principals overburdened	*the trust and privacy of a PLC are essential to troubleshooting real-world challenges *PLC imparts the "piece preparation courses can't teach"

Trish Joyner	*isolation intensifies challenges and overburden *PLC customizes learning to the challenges of a unique setting *PLC unifies rural principals in an otherwise isolating setting and profession	*importance of the trusted ear *the safe space of PLC is a platform for solving the unique challenges of rurality
Carrie-Beth Halberd	*administration is lonely; geography compounds the loneliness *membership in the PLC reminds her that she's "not alone" *PLC tailors development to the unique and intensified challenges of rural principalship	*membership in the PLC provides a sense of unity and support *PLC helps to address the unique challenges of rurality

Cross-case analysis of the entrance interviews and artifacts provided thematic concepts by which to organize notes collected during my observations. From the entrance interviews and artifacts, a number of common ideas emerged--the overarching theme of which is the PLC as a safe learning environment.

The Safe Learning Environment

That safe learning environment, these principals argue, is keenly--and uniquely--important to them because of their rural setting. All participants mentioned the value of the trusted ear and

confidentiality. In a region that functions largely as a single community where everyone is interconnected, that confidentiality is crucial. Dwight stated in his interview that principals have no teacher's room. The PLC fills that function. Coming together in the PLC allows these principals to candidly and confidentially discuss the specific challenges they face. This, they report, is every bit as important--and perhaps more important--as their shared learning from text.

Social Community

As a subtheme, each of the principals reported a strong sense of social community, contrasted by a feeling of profound isolation in the profession--an isolation that the PLC ameliorates. Each participant reported the belief that community is essential to professional learning, and the feeling that without the regional PLC they formed, they would be without the support necessary to function effectively in the profession. All participants reported that professional development does not come to them in the region--that they must go to it. They also reported a sense that the state's bureau of education neither understands nor appreciates the additional complications they face in carrying out mandates due to poverty and rurality. Trish characterized that feeling as being "on your own to do everything." Membership in the PLC reminds her that she is not. The other participants agree. Mick says misery likes company, and that the company he keeps in the PLC empowers him. Dwight says that but for the PLC he doesn't know where he'd turn for support and resources. Nina and Carrie-Beth both say that membership in the PLC reminds them that they are not alone.

Support to Troubleshoot Problems

Another subtheme is the need to troubleshoot the unique challenges inherent to rural principalship. Each of the principals reported learning from their peers the "unteachable" aspects

of the position--the competencies that come only through experience. This is particularly important, all note, because the rural principalship is characterized by a number of unique challenges, as well as challenges intensified in their impact by that rurality. All spoke of overburden. Nina, Trish, and Carrie-Beth called this "wearing many hats" and cited the pressure to assume the role of "Jack of All Trades." Mick and Dwight spoke specifically of the financial burdens that accompany rurality and the complication of that, with Mick pointing out the fallacy of the "rural is rural" mentality, arguing that this region is more rural than most, and Dwight noting that poverty and rurality creates more complicated obstacles for students and their families than their less isolated and impoverished peers must face.

These interrelated themes are present in the artifacts each participant shared. Every principal interviewed offered an artifact related to either a PLC and/or a whole-staff text study group they have created in their school sites. The purpose of the professional learning structures they have implemented--all centered on texts they first studied and applied in their own PLC--is to provide for their staffs the very things they say they deeply need and value: professional support, and peer learning to help them to overcome the challenges unique to rural education. The principals are purposeful about creating community within community because they have experienced that disparity between how connected they feel within the school community, and how disconnected they would feel in the wider profession if not for the support of their own PLC. That they create the structures for deep, personalized, context-specific learning for their staff testifies both to the need for such development in this rural setting, and to the power they attribute to that mode of professional learning.

Observation Notes

The participating principals of the region (and myself at their invitation) come together to convene the PLC once monthly. In the years since the PLC's inception, they have met in the same small conference room of a local restaurant, to share dinner, "war stories," and professional reading and learning. Though each participant shares the responsibility of reading the text each month, they take turns in facilitating the discussions about the learning contained in each chapter. The Observation Notes collected as part of this dissertation were collected at the April and May meetings of the PLC. The agenda of the monthly meetings follows the same structure each time: sharing a meal and catching up through collegial conversation; troubleshooting the real-time challenges they are facing; sharing the month's assigned reading and the resultant learning; and applying that learning to their unique challenges.

The observation notes were collected after I had conducted interviews and gathered artifacts and condensed them to themes. Those themes served as categories for structuring my observation notes. I sought to record whatever details were manifest of the safe learning environment each participant had described, as well as evidence of the personal support and the customized, professional learning each participant related was the result of their interaction each month.

At both the March and April meetings, the principals faced an unexpected occurrence. The group, which was forced to move its regular meeting to another area restaurant due to unforeseen circumstances, was not afforded its usual private meeting space. At the March meeting, the group was seated at a large table at the center of one of the main dining rooms. Though the area was cordoned off, patrons coming and going to the restrooms or carrying

payments to the cashier easily could have heard the PLC's conversation. At the April meeting, despite a request to be accommodated in a more private space, the group was surprised to find the area reserved for it to be a booth in the corner of the main dining room--not set apart from the other patrons whatsoever.

At both meetings, the group interacted warmly as they caught up with each other about their personal lives. They know each other intimately enough to converse about deaths in the family, about children's engagements and future college plans, about vacations, and about favorite pastimes. There was an unmistakable camaraderie amongst them. They wove easily in and out of conversations together. The smiles, the sympathetic nods, and the body language on display all spelled belonging and unity.

After suppers were shared, they attempted to transition to their typical troubleshooting of issues--something which proved to be problematic because of the public nature of the meeting space. At the March meeting, Nina began to relate a situation regarding a chronic absentee whom she had begun to pick up on her way to school each morning. As she unfolded the details that would have taken the group to the heart of the issue--a child whose parents don't put him on the bus in the morning, who may be experiencing neglect--it became obvious that she and the other members of the group would not be able to comfortably nor candidly discuss the issue together. The rest of the attempted troubleshooting that evening was the same. Though the principals broached the topic of their specific challenges, the group could only dance at the edges of those issues at best. When the group shared the text at the center of the evening's study, salient ideas were exchanged, but the application of those ideas to the context of the specific

needs of their schools, staffs, and students proved to be something they could not explore in the public setting of the restaurant.

At the April meeting, the challenge of the surprise public setting was heightened. In the corner of the packed dining room, the principals once more shared their personal lives with each other and enjoyed reconnecting on a that level, they made no attempt to talk in any depth about the details of the professional challenges they were facing. As typical, the group explored text together, but at this meeting, they did not discuss the application of that text to unique situations in their own school settings. On each of those evenings, glances around to see who might be listening, hesitation in their voices, and careful phrasing characterized the meetings in a way I had never seen before. Because of my long participation with these principals as an associate member of their PLC, I knew this phenomenon to be significant. The marked difference between the content of the conversations of these two meetings--as well as the participants' comfortability with that sharing--and all prior meetings of which I have been part cannot be captured adequately in the observation notes presented here. Because this important participant-observation is not particularly evident from the observation notes, I conducted exit interviews with the participants, to inquire into the effects of meeting publicly. Findings about professional safety and its compromise, then, are condensed from the coding of both the observation notes and, to a greater degree, the exit interviews.

Exit Interviews

In its typical operation, the principals reported, the PLC affords them a safe learning environment to share and troubleshoot the uncommon challenges of their setting, and to take from their interaction that "unteachable" piece they say that preparation programs cannot impart.

The public nature of their meetings those two months, however, denied them that benefit. In exit interviews, each of the principals reported feeling that something essential was lost in having been forced to meet more publicly in March and April. Though they enjoyed personal reconnection at the monthly meetings, all of the participants in turn reported that meeting publicly meant not "getting what they came for" professionally.

For Mick, the public nature of the PLC meetings robbed the sessions of their fundamental value to him as a leader. In our exit interview, he underscored the importance of their privacy-- the benefit of sharing concerns and interests and challenges without worry about who might overhear or misconstrue their conversation. He reported feeling that he couldn't talk the way he would have liked to about the issues pressing him, for fear that something shared in the confidentiality of the group would be misinterpreted or made public. "No question, it was a barrier for me," Mick said. "I feel like I couldn't talk the way I would like to talk." That loss of privacy, Mick shared, means "you can't talk about particular issues. That comfort level is gone. You need that privacy factor that so that you can talk about things that you are concerned about."

Dwight agreed. "You are only going to have a certain type of conversation in that [public] environment," he said, adding that for leaders trained in the realm of confidentiality, "you're not going to feel comfortable talking about certain things in that public setting; therefore, you've lost your ability to really get into the nuts and bolts and the depths of an issue because you can't talk about the issues so much when people are around you--not even in a general sense in a small community like ours. People put two and two together pretty quick to make four. So that just stifles the conversation."

Trish echoed the position that a lack of privacy was a real detriment to their conversation and collaborative learning. It holds people back from being truly open and honest about what's going on for them. "When we meet, we talk a lot about what our philosophies are," she said, "and what we really, really believe in. Sometimes they're not necessarily what the public believes in as a philosophy."

Carrie-Beth saw the public nature of those PLC meetings as an impediment to openness as well. "It's usually a group that I feel very safe having very free conversations with," she said, "and instead I felt very cautious. It definitely changed the way I approached things. I still tried to have the conversations because it's the one opportunity that you have in a month to touch base with people that are in the same situation. But it definitely made you stop and think very carefully about what was actually said. It restricted the depth."

Nina agreed wholeheartedly with her peers that the public meetings denied them the opportunity to connect deeply and meaningfully apply their learning and their professional mentoring to their unique situations. "Privacy is crucial," Nina said, "if you're going to put your needs out on the table." But unlike her peers, she did identify a positive aspect of their unexpectedly public experience. "I think on a positive side that, though they [the restaurant patrons] may not know it, it's nice for people to see that we are a group of principals out on our own time, buying our own meal, and sharing that time together. I think that piece is nice."

The themes of the exit interviews--and to a lesser degree, the observation notes--align with the themes of the interviews and the artifacts. The participants spoke extensively of their need for privacy and safety in order to troubleshoot their real-world challenges and customize their professional learning to situations in their rural sites. That safety--something the

participants say they count on and typically enjoy--was absent from the March and April meetings, and because they were denied that safety, they felt uncomfortable and exposed. That public exposure, they report, restricted the scope of their conversations and learning and left them feeling cautious, they said. They held back. The conversation was stifled. In sum, they could not address the issues they convene specifically to discuss.

My own observations confirm their reports. The cautious looks around; the surface conversation; the careful phrasing; the omission of details; and the hesitant voices I noted reinforce the notion that the public nature of the meeting left them exposed and unsafe. Though they engaged in warm, personal small-talk, and professional discussion, the personal and professional realms never intersected in the March and April meetings for the participants to apply their professional learning meaningfully to their unique challenges. In short, at the March and April meetings, the participants were unable to bridge theory to the specific context and compounded challenges of their practice as rural school principals.

Table 2, below, represents the individual themes that surfaced in observation notes and the subsequent exit interviews spurred by those observations.

Table 2

Individual Themes: Observation Notes and Exit Interviews

Participant	Individual Themes
	Observation Notes / Exit Interviews
Mick Cyr	*importance of the trusted ear *importance of safety and privacy to the work of the PLC *administrators of all levels of experience benefit from the mentoring of the PLC *need for troubleshooting challenges unique to rurality
Dwight Owens	*need to troubleshoot challenges of rurality by sharing their experiences *importance of the trusted ear *the PLC's need for safety and privacy
Nina Rockwell	*need to troubleshoot challenges of rurality--particularly the pressure to be "Jack of All Trades" *the importance of the trusted ear *the importance of safety and privacy *the value of the community seeing the principals working together publicly, and collaboratively

Trish Joyner	*the need to troubleshoot the uncommon challenges of rural principalship *the need for the trusted ear *the PLC's need for professional safety and privacy
Carrie-Beth Halberd	*the importance of mentoring to administrators of all levels of experience *the personal connection is as important as the professional learning *the value of the trusted ear *the PLC's need for safety and privacy

Analysis

Table 3 serves as an advance organizer for the analysis section. Represented below are the themes that carry across the five cases in each of the individual data sets.

Table 3

Synthesis of Themes

Synthesis of Themes Across the Five Cases		
Entrance Interviews	*Artifacts*	*Observation Notes / Exit Interviews*
*stark disparity between the deep connection they enjoy in their schools and community and the profound disconnect they experience in the profession *need for a safe zone to engage together in learning and sharing *PLC as empowerment, particularly for troubleshooting unique challenges of rurality, as well as for imparting the "piece preparation courses can't teach"	*creating community within community and a safe place to learn *PLC helps to troubleshoot the uncommon challenges of rurality	*importance of the trusted ear *importance of privacy *need to troubleshoot uncommon challenges of rurality both by sharing new learning and sharing their experiences

Triangulating the three data sets--entrance interviews, artifacts, and observation notes with exit interviews--allows a check for consistent findings among data gathered. This triangulation serves both to elucidate the complementary aspects of the data gathered through various sources, as well as to examine the consistency of the findings. Finally, triangulation ensures a robust and comprehensive account of the experiences of the participants. Here, the goal of triangulation, as Creswell (2012) writes, is not necessarily to "validate" findings, but rather to identify and understand the critical elements of the data, as well as to glean plausible interpretations from them. The research questions outlined in Chapter One frame the analysis.

In the analysis that follows, I explore each through the lens of the three separate data sets, expanding fully on each in the interpretation of findings in Chapter Five.

- What needs or interests compel these area principals to participate in this professional learning community?

- What are the benefits of their participation in the professional learning community?

- How would these principals characterize their professional growth associated with participation in this PLC?

Needs/Interests

The participants are of one accord about the needs that compel their participation in the PLC. Each of them, whether citing the challenges specific to rurality and poverty, as Mick and Dwight did, or citing the many hats principals must wear, as Nina, Trish, and Carrie-Beth shared, agree that their roles are complicated because of their rurality. That rurality also adds to the isolation they feel in the profession--one that they say is insular enough without the added challenge of rurality. Despite the connectedness within their schools and communities, the participants report a disconnect within the field. They principals report that, but for their participation in their PLC, they would be professionally isolated and left without the resources necessary to function effectively in their roles.

Benefits

The principals say that the primary benefit of their participation is professional networking for problem solving. Learning together and from each other, they say, imparts to them the "unteachable" aspects of their profession--the skills that come with experience--as they share reading and wisdom. By tackling the text together, and by applying that text to their

unique situations, they are able to customize their learning and personalize it in a way that no other professional development allows. The combination of their peer learning and their pooled wisdom, for them, is a powerful kind of professional development. Observation notes and artifacts support that assertion. Each participant has introduced the principles of PLC and/or shared text study in their school settings specifically so that their staffs can benefit from shared learning applied specifically to rural practice. Interestingly, the unexpectedly public meeting space of the March and April meetings attest to the power of the participants' PLC as it more typically functions. Without the ability to talk freely and apply their learning to their specific rural challenges, the participants did not "get what they came for"--as evidenced through the more stilted nature of the meeting, as well as in exit interview.

Another important benefit of the PLC is that it lessens their aforementioned sense of isolation. Their participation in the PLC reminds them that they are "not alone," that their "misery has company," and that they don't have to "do everything by themselves." In their interviews, the participants talked at length about what a relief it is to be able to meet monthly, and to reach out to each other by phone and email between meetings. Nina described their interactions as a "lifeline." Dwight shared that, without the support of the PLC, he isn't sure where his resources would come from. All agreed that there is no teacher's room for principals and that they need the trusted ear and the assurances that the PLC provides every bit as much as they need the professional development. Every participant agreed that the personal connection and the professional learning are equally important aspects of the PLC. The observation notes and the artifacts confirm their belief that a PLC ameliorates isolation. Each artifact represents the principals' individual attempts to build that kind of "community within community" for their

staffs. My observations in the setting of the PLC--particularly the balance these principals strike between professional learning and personal support--attests to the sense of connection that comes from participation in the PLC.

Professional Growth

The PLC, these principals report, has been integral to their professional growth. In addition to enabling them to rise to the challenges of the rural principalship--and in turn equipping their staffs--the PLC makes them more reflective leaders. Mick, Dwight, and Trish called the PLC their sounding board. Nina and Carrie-Beth termed the PLC their mirror. In either case, all report that the PLC makes them more purposeful about reflexive practice. The observation notes attest to their deep desire and need to talk problems through--to hear about and learn from the experiences of their peers. Robbed of the ability to comfortably share at the March and April meetings, they said, the depth of that group processing was limited. Their value of reflexive practice is evident in the learning communities and book studies they have implemented in their schools, and in the reflection and goal setting they encourage in their staffs. The PLC equips them to in turn equip faculty.

Each of these ideas is united under a common theme: the need for a safe zone in which educational professionals can engage together in sharing and learning. This need is perhaps keener in rural setting than in any other. Physical isolation, professional isolation, and an "everybody knows everybody" status quo make that safe learning environment particularly essential. In the safe zone of the PLC they have created for themselves, the participating principals say, they feel heard, they feel supported, they feel equipped, they feel connected, and they feel empowered.

Summary

In Chapter Four, I presented five individual cases and a cross-case analysis of five participants. The common theme uniting my conversations with them was that of the importance of a safe and confidential environment for peer learning and support. Each underscored the value of the trusted ear for dealing with the unique challenges facing them, including the disparity between their sense of deep connection in their school and community, contrasted with a sense of profound disconnect within the profession. That same trusted ear, the participants reported, is invaluable for troubleshooting the unique challenges of rural principalship.

That theme is the prevalent in the artifacts the participants provided as well. Each artifact evidenced the principals' commitment to building community within community for their staffs. By providing their faculty the same safe learning environment for peer learning and personal and professional support that they so prize, these principals seek to help their staff to overcome the challenges and obstacles unique to rural education. Additionally, they hope to create for their teachers the conditions for the reflexive practice they themselves so value. The artifacts underscore the need for personalized, context-specific learning communities.

When inviting participants to provide artifacts, I requested merely that they share artifacts relevant to the PLC that portrayed their professional growth. Interestingly, each participant shared an artifact meant to represent how the PLC "grows" them to in turn grow others--a significant, salient observation. Together in the setting of their PLC, in which the participants report to enjoy trusting relationships for personalizing their professional learning to the specific context of the challenges of serving in a rural area, these principals engage together in professional reading and powerful reflexive practice. Because of the general lack of professional

development in the region, particularly that lack of professional development customized to the needs of rural administrators and educators, convening this PLC for professional learning and sharing--and modeling those practices back in variations of learning communities in their sites--is, for these participants and their staffs, the safe learning environment they require, conducive to a powerful kind of self-help.

The observation notes collected--and to an even greater degree, the subsequent complement of the exit interviews--also attest to the importance of that safe learning environment. Meeting publicly in March and April limited the deep conversations and applied learning that the principals count on to equip them for service in the region. Outside of the circle of privacy and confidentiality they typically enjoy in their PLC meetings, the principals report, they felt exposed, and unable to engage in the kind of sharing, specific application of the learning, and the troubleshooting of real-time issues on which they each have come to rely, and through which they report great professional growth.

This key finding--the overarching theme of the need for professional safety that encircles and unites each of the three data sets--is explored further in Chapter Five.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

The research of Matthews and Crow (2010) indicates that too little is known about the professional needs of principals, a finding that Preston, Jakubiec and Kooymans (2013) corroborate and expand upon. They write that even significantly less is known about the professional needs of *rural* principals--particularly in regard to effective models for rural principals' professional development. This dearth of research to recommend and inform models within rural contexts warranted further exploration, thus I conducted a qualitative inquiry into one professional development model for rural principals.

Starr and White (2008) posit that for rural principals, the peer mentoring partnership of the PLC could represent a powerful kind of self-help. Joining with local principals in such a professional learning community in this corner of Northern New England, where more than half of all students are educated in rural schools, allowed exploration of the nature of these principals' service in a rural place--both the benefits and the challenges--their reasons for membership in the professional learning community, as well as any benefits attributed to their participation.

Interpretation of Findings

Seeking to understand the world in which a group of rural principals lives and works, I endeavored to follow Creswell's (2013) urging to invite a complexity of views by posing a series of broad, general, open-ended questions, focusing on the specific context in which these principals engage together. Through inviting that "complexity of views," I sought to better understand how one group of rural school principals who are actively involved in a professional

learning community would describe their experiences. Specifically, I explored the following questions, each of which is subsequently answered in detail in the section that follows:

- What needs or interests compel these area principals to participate in this professional learning community?

- What are the benefits and challenges of their participation in the professional learning community?

- How would these principals characterize their professional growth associated with participation in this PLC?

- What recommendations would these principals offer to other rural principals interested in convening a professional learning community?

Needs/Interests

Each of the principals participating in the study expressed the need to connect regularly with other administrators, specifically for the reasons described in the themes that emerged: because the PLC promised them peer mentors--specifically to support their learning so that they could in turn support the learning of others, and because of the need for a trusted ear; because the PLC could help to lessen their sense of isolation; and because of the need to find solutions to the unique challenges of the rural principalship.

Browne-Ferrigno (2007) writes that the cohort model is an effective vehicle for development for principals at every level of experience. Even the most veteran administrators reported needing affirmation, needing reassurance, needing the sounding board, and needing others to share learning with in order to stay fresh and current. That veteran administrators confess to relying on their peers for continued growth aligns with Mitgang and Maeroff's (2008)

assertion that leadership training remains equally essential throughout an administrator's career, whether that leader is a novice or a relative veteran, a position with which Mutchler (2000) concurs. Mitgang and Maeroff (2008) as well as Boerema (2011) argue that supportive peer interactions are among the most powerful vehicles for principals' professional growth. Robbins' (1991) foundational work on the topic of the PLC and peer mentoring supports their conclusions. Peer mentoring, Robbins writes, is a model through which leaders can reflect; expand; refine; build skills; share ideas; teach each other; engage together in research; and solve problems--all of which the participants reported valuing highly about the PLC.

The professional and geographic isolation these principals feel is another supremely compelling motivator for these principals' participation in the PLC. Each of the participants, in our interviews and in the setting of the PLC, voiced the insular nature of serving in this county. But more than just feeling the isolation that comes with the territory of the principal, these administrators report that they feel largely neglected by their state's bureau of education. The stance they voice is supported in the available literature. Starr and White (2008) write that many rural principals report feeling unsupported by state and federal agencies, which results in principals serving in a silo. Despite feeling unseen and unheard by the system, the authors found, rural principals report feeling empowered within a local context, particularly unraveling the complexities of contemporary principalships of which Browne-Ferrigno and Allen (2006) write.

Help in "unraveling the complexities" is an important aspect of the PLC. These principals report the pressure to "grow exponentially each year," as Dwight compellingly put it--particularly in the face of unfunded mandates. As far back as 1992, Lewis described the burdens of such

unfunded mandates, and about how those burdens fall harder on rural school districts. Those

unfunded mandates, Lewis argues, are costlier for rural districts than non-rural ones. More

recently, Starr and White (2008) wrote of those same challenges, adding that all districts must

comply within the same letter of such mandates, no matter what the school or district size, or

what the location. For rural districts, this poses a challenge significantly intensified in impact.

Even with the financial burdens aside, Mitgang and Maeroff (2008) write that a "chronic

mismatch" exists between principals' daily realities and the training they receive. That mismatch

between their problems and their preparation is what led these principals to form the PLC, and it

is what keeps that same core of principals coming back year after year. In other words, the

PLC--their shared learning in their local context--empowers them, just as Starr and White (2008)

argue. It is absolutely, the participants agree, a powerful kind of self-help--both for them and for

the teachers they support as they, in turn, create learning communities at their school sites.

Benefits

The benefits of participation in the PLC, largely, are the same hoped-for outcomes that

spur these principals to engage in this professional learning community. Unanimously, the

participants report "getting what they came for." Among the findings that resonated loudest are

the principals' need to be heard and reaffirmed, rather than to be "fixed"; their need to share new

learning with others in a position to help them to apply it to their unique challenges; and their

need for collegial support in an isolated profession, complicated by their isolated geographic

position. But the greatest of the benefits--the key finding of this research, subsuming all others

under one broad category----is the need for a safe learning environment in which to engage in

learning and sharing.

Cox (2012) writes of the centrality of trust and confidentiality to the success of any peer mentoring partnership--something which the participants say they enjoy to a considerable degree as part of this professional learning community. Robbins (1991) writes of peer mentoring as a confidential process of reflecting, expanding, refining, building new skills, sharing ideas and teaching each other. This confidential process provides these leaders with the trusted ear they need in order to feel truly comfortable sharing concerns and engaging in the reflexive practice they say they so value. Trust and confidentiality, as the interviews, observation notes, and artifacts all showed, was resoundingly the paramount benefit across all five cases, and across all three data sets. The safe space for learning is the bedrock for the effective function of the PLC. When privacy is compromised, their ability to share freely and apply their new learning to their unique challenges is also compromised.

For all of the participants, their "safe zone" for professional development leverages authentic relationships and authentic application of learning to effect authentic solutions to their unique problems. Datnow's (2011) research supports that finding, drawing a contrast between true collaboration and contrived collegiality. Sustainable improvement efforts, Datnow notes, come from authentic collaboration--something these principals report enjoying a wealth of. Coupled with that "true collaboration," the context of their learning is significant and relevant. Dana (2010) points to the importance of context, writing that job-embedded development, in which work is re-normed around revisiting critical problems, is the only approach to take if schools wish to sustain improvement. Certainly, this collaborative re-visitation of critical problems is this group of principals' favored approach to collaborative learning. Peer learning, Robbins (1991) notes, is a generative partnership; it is not remediation meant to "fix" other

educators. Rather, Robbins propounds, coaching is a mutual, collaborative quest. Each of the participants report viewing their membership in the PLC as just such a collaborative quest, co-constructing new knowledge and applying it cooperatively to the context of their rural setting.

New knowledge is important. Salazar (2007) writes that principals need to be supported with the latest knowledge of best practice, and that they need continuous opportunity to upgrade skills. To that same end, Showers and Joyce (1996), authors of many foundational works on the topic of the PLC, argue that educators who engage in peer mentoring are better able to expand their professional repertoires than those who do not. DuFour (2007) concurs that PLC's are a powerful means by which to collaborate for continuous improvement, and the participants in this study do just that. Each voiced the importance of collaboration to the redress of their unique challenges; the importance of applying their text study to the unique context of their region; the value of learning from each other's real-world successes and struggles.

Professional Growth

The participating principals have enjoyed considerable growth as members of this professional learning community. The PLC, they said, helps them "stay out in front of" the learning needs of their staff. The PLC helps them comply with changing mandates in their increasingly complex role as educational leaders. The PLC imparts to them the "piece that preparation programs can't teach." And, finally, the PLC helps them to be more reflective leaders.

These findings align with the available research. Duncan and Stock (2010) write that principals' needs as learners must first be met before they can effectively function to lead other' learning. Salazar writes that principals need support in what works, as well as continuous

opportunity to upgrade skill. The foundational works of Robbins (1991) and Showers and Joyce (1996) indicate that educators who engage in peer mentoring and PLC with other educators are better able than their non-participant peers to expand their repertoires. The creation of learning communities in their own school sites provides teachers with the peer mentorship necessary to acquiring that "piece that cannot be taught"--the struggles of which the participating principals spoke. The PLC as the vehicle for teaching that "piece that cannot be taught" is one example of to the "chronic mismatch" Mitgang and Maeroff (2008) write of, arguing that training principals receive in preparatory programs little prepares them for the real-world challenges they will face. The PLC helps these principals to fill the gaps between their needs and their preparedness.

Finally, the deepening of their reflexive practice was another dimension in which these principals all reported enjoying significant growth. Through reflexive practice, they are able to identify what skills are lacking and, thus, what skills they need to cultivate. We shouldn't confuse this practice with a need for a "fix" or "remediation," Robbins (1991) writes, but as a proactive approach for growing to meet the challenges they see unfolding ahead. By utilizing the safe space of the PLC and its peer-mentoring model to reflect, refine, and expand, these principals are able to stay at the forefront of solving their own school's problems.

Recommendations

The participants were clear in their recommendations for other principals looking to convene a PLC. They urge others seeking professional support to prioritize the four P's:

- Privacy
- Protecting the time to meet
- Professional learning balanced with peer support

- Protocol

Privacy--the safe space for learning and sharing--the participants agree, is the foundation for an effective professional learning community. The point is one of resounding agreement for all of the participants. Mick shared that professionals need "the privacy factors to talk about concerns." Without privacy, Dwight says, conversation is stifled, and the specific application of learning to unique challenges--what he calls the "nuts and bolts and depths of an issue"--is impossible. Carrie-Beth echoes that concept of restricted depth. A lack of privacy, she says, makes what should be safe conversations cautious ones instead. Such caution was a subject for Trish as well. Without privacy, Trish argues, people hold back about from being truly open and honest about what's going on for them, which negates the opportunity to learn deeply with and from professionals in similar situations. Nina sums their sentiments perfectly, stating, "Privacy is crucial if you're going to put your needs on the table." The imperative of privacy maps onto the findings of Cox (2012), who underscores safety and trust as the key to the long-term success of a peer mentoring partnership. Confidentiality--feeling safe enough to make oneself vulnerable--Cox writes, is essential.

Protecting the time to meet speaks to what Routman (2012) termed a "commitment to a culture of collaboration." If collaboration is a true priority, the participating principals agree, the members of the PLC will commit to coming to the table each month. Each of the principals participating has always taken pains to do so, and for the coming year they have proposed setting the calendar for the year, rather than finding a mutually-agreeable day to meet as each month comes. They have pledged to look at their calendars to identify the dates during which other top-

priority meetings occur--board meetings for example--and for designating a day each month (e.g. the second Tuesday of the month) for the meetings of their PLC.

The balance of professional learning and peer support was echoed and reechoed throughout the interviews and in the field. Each of them reported that the personal support they have come to rely on in their PLC is as important as--if not more important than--the professional learning in which they engage together. The principals urge others looking to convene a PLC to be protective of that personal piece and to build in time for sharing--for serving as each other's sounding board. Being heard is as important as anything. Again and again the participants came back to the value of the trusted ear. Cox (2012) and Duncan and Stock (2010) write extensively on this topic of trust, Cox writing that mutual trust is the key to long-term mentoring partnerships, and Duncan and Stock writing that the support network is vital for growing and retaining leaders. Much of the value of any support network, Duncan and Stock (2010) argue, lies in participant's knowledge that they are not alone.

Finally, the principals urge protocol--an adopted agenda and clear expectations for all participants--an important consideration. DuFour (2007), cautions that many groups that call themselves professional learning communities in fact do none of the things PLC's do. Though they agree that the working of their group absolutely fits the Browne-Ferrigno (2007) definition of a PLC--a question I was careful to pose in their interviews--they agree that in some years the PLC has functioned more effectively than in others. In the year of this study, the principals report having chosen a slightly different format, focused on the study of research articles. When they chose the approach, they thought it was the right thing, favoring a breadth of topics over deep study of a single text, acknowledging the myriad challenges of the principalship and their

unique situations. As it turned out, though, that approach, they agree, didn't work as well as their text-based studies have in years past. Though the principals have shared those articles with their staff in order to promote their growth, the approach lacked in comparison to in-depth text study. Previously, the principals have come together to discuss and apply concepts from a single shared text, and in turn inspired their staff to take that text and do the same. The power of the single text was evident in the artifacts these principals shared as illustrations of the professional learning they attribute to participation in the PLC. They plan to return to the single-text approach when they convene for the next school year.

The principals' recommendations are sound. Dwight's recommendation was particularly apt: if you're not part of a PLC, do it. In his own words, "It's good for professional growth; it's good to self-assess, and it's good for reflection when you listen to and hear other people talk about their experiences. We grow from that. It's all a lesson." He added, "The leader has to grow exponentially--every year they have to because things change. All the variables change so much." Being a visible leader of leaders, he says, means working hard to "stay fresh."

This commitment to "staying fresh," to my thinking, is another term for lifelong learning. Browne-Ferrigno (2007) and Mitgang and Maeroff (2008) write that the PLC as a cohort model for lifelong learning helps principals better face the unique challenges with which they are met. Daresh (2004) and Browne-Ferrigno and Muth (2004) write that the feedback, the role clarification, and the individualized professional development responsive to needs are among the most valuable benefits of a PLC--things to be prized in the face of what these rural principals term the "moving target" of education. So, I would echo Dwight's sentiment that membership in a PLC is essential to any leader dedicated to growing in the profession.

The participants reported valuing "choice and voice" among benefits of participating in the PLC, and I recommend that any PLC embrace those as essential ingredients. Principals need the individualized professional development referenced above. They also require what Zepeda, Parylo, and Bengtson (2014) term the 'autonomy' for directing their professional development. A highly functioning PLC is responsible for setting its own goals and driving its own agenda. Cho and Shim (2013) write of the correlation between leaders' goal-setting and their efficacy. The most successful leaders, they write, are the ones for whom the locus for growth-setting is internal. Choosing a text that is applicable to their challenging position in their particularly challenging context is important to the participants, as is being heard. Choice and voice, as the research shows, are key factors at play in every successful PLC.

Finally, a word about collaboration--the all-important aspect of the PLC: Routman (2012) writes that change cannot happen without shared commitment to the culture of collaboration, and that the strongest PLC's have a foundation of mutual trust. This culture of collaboration is not innate in PLC's, however. As Thessin and Starr (2011) propound, the most successful professionals are those who are taught explicitly how to collaborate. PLC's that hope to remain effective in the long-term need to focus time and resources on growing in the domain of collaboration. Datnow (2011) describes the difference between true collaboration and contrived collegiality. Only true collaboration can move the needle on the hoped-for outcomes of any PLC. These participants--through their commitment to shared learning in the PLC, and their constant support of each other in the interim between meetings--have developed the type of collaboration necessary to effecting change. Any newly forming PLC will have to make that same commitment in order to achieve its objectives.

Implications

This research grew from the desire to add new knowledge to what little is known of effective professional development models for rural principals. Through this study, I was able to spotlight the perspectives of a group of rural principals, coming to better understand their unique needs--and to understand the ways in which they leverage a self-convened professional learning community to meet their challenges, utilizing a peer model to engage in reflexive practice to grow as leaders. By collaborating together in precisely the ways Browne-Ferrigno (2007) describes--working together on the same curriculum in the same time span, building trusting relationships, creating a safe learning environment, expanding collegial networks, and developing high-performing teams--these principals report that they are able to grow professional capacity in a region where professional supports otherwise are painfully few.

All of the participants--whatever their level of experience in the field--reported feeling more supported and more prepared to lead in their own schools because of their involvement in the PLC, corroborating Browne-Ferrigno's (2007) assertion that a cohort model for peer learning and mentoring is powerful for professionals at all levels of experience, as well as Mitgang and Maeroff's (2008) assertion that principal training should be continuous. Duncan and Stock (2010) note that such support is vital to the growth and retention of all leaders, and Boerema (2011) concurs, writing that supportive peer interactions are a principal source for growth. The participants' experiences testify to that research. They report, unanimously, that they look to each other as their trusted source of feedback, their sounding board, and their critical friends in applying new knowledge to their unique challenges.

Starr and White (2008) write of rural principals' intensified challenges, as well as the harms of service in a silo--of rural principals' sense of isolation and remoteness from the hubs where decisions are made. Mitgang and Maeroff (2008) write of the "chronic mismatch" between principals' realities and the training they typically receive. Each of these serious challenges, the participants report, are ameliorated, at least in part, for them through their participation in the PLC. Browne-Ferrigno and Allen (2006) argue that having mentors in the field helps rural principals to unravel the complex contemporary principalship. That indeed holds true for this group of rural principals who report that their self-convened PLC supports them in numerous profound and positive ways, giving them both the professional learning and the peer support they require in order to be effective leaders among leaders.

Starr and White (2008) write that despite feeling marginalized by the system, rural principals report feeling empowered within the local context. Report of just such empowerment--the sense that these principals come away feeling stronger because of their supportive peer interactions in the PLC--was a sentiment that was echoed throughout the interviews, and one that is apparent in the field. Because of their peer mentoring partnerships, the principals reported feeling a sense of connectedness, unity, and collective ability they would not enjoy but for PLC they created in response to their needs.

In embarking on this study, I hypothesized that professional learning communities for principals in rural areas could represent a powerful self-help for school administrators looking to collaborate for professional improvement. Through inquiry, I endeavored to explore whether a group of rural school principals feel a reduced sense of marginalization and a greater sense of

efficacy because of their committed membership in a PLC, and indeed both were reported in every case, by veterans and novices alike.

Through this instrumental case, as described in Stake (1995), this research sought to capture a potentially-effective model for rural principals' professional development, illustrated by one bounded case--here a self-convened professional learning community. Though the case may or may not be typical of other cases, this study can inform rural principals in other settings seeking to create professional learning communities. While more study is needed about the professional development of rural principals--as well as about effective models for rural principals' learning--as Matthews and Crow (2010) and Preston, Jakubiec and Kooymans (2013) propound, the participants in this case study avow that the safe learning environment of their PLC is a personalized, effective, and valuable learning resource for them all. Perhaps such a model can indeed serve others who find themselves in similar rural contexts, facing similar challenges due to their rurality.

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APPENDIX

Research Questions

- What needs or interests compel these area principals to participate in this professional learning community?

- What are the benefits and challenges of their participation in the professional learning community?

- How would these principals characterize their professional growth associated with participation in this PLC?

- What recommendations would these principals offer to other rural principals interested in convening a professional learning community?