

4-2019

## Teachers' Perceptions Of Professional Learning Communities

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TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Affiliated Faculty

Of the College of Graduate and Professional Studies at the University of New England

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the degree of Doctor of Education

Portland & Biddeford, Maine

May 2019

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2019

### **Abstract**

The professional learning community (PLC) is an essential organizational structure in education, intended to cultivate a collaborative culture, improve professional practices, increase student achievement, reform failing schools, and sustain high achieving schools. Because there is little in the literature which examines teachers' perceptions of the PLC concept and the work accomplished in the PLC process, the problem studied here was teachers' perceptions of their work in PLCs at a middle school in Texas. The two research questions addressed the roles of the PLC teams and their individual members in improving student learning. A grounded theory approach was used in the methodology to explore teacher's perceptions of their work and their experiences. PLC members characterized PLC practices that most directly led to student learning as collaboratively planning scope and sequence, using common formative assessments, peer observation and feedback, mentoring, strategizing to help struggling learners to be successful, and monitoring students' growth and progress. Findings from the data analysis suggest that if school leaders fail to provide teachers with the opportunity to reflect on how they applied insights gained from their PLC assemblies that influence their instructional practices and affect student learning, the successes of the learning communities will remain uncertain. PLC members are encouraged to engage in continuous study and constant reflective practices that depict an organization committed to continuous improvement. The insights gained from this research can improve the practices and the successes of the PLC concept in secondary schools in the district.

University of New England

Doctor of Education

Educational Leadership

This dissertation was presented on

April 15, 2019

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I am very thankful to God for giving me the wisdom to embark on this journey and the strength to stay the course. I'd like to acknowledge my husband Michael, my children Naomi, Ruth, and Joshua, families, and friends who encouraged me with their love, prayers, and support. I am particularly thankful to Dr. Michelle Collay, Dr. Ella Benson, Dr. Heather Wilmot, Dr. Derek McDowell and my cohorts who kept me on the road map to success and graduation.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Since the institution of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002, it has become acceptable in the educational arena to provide accountability ratings to schools and to define the value of a school by its students' academic performances on mandatory standardized tests (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2017a). Title II of the NCLB Act (2002) held schools and districts accountable for improving students' academic performances by ensuring that public educators have the appropriate professional credibility. The ultimate mission of most schools and districts is to increase students' academic achievement and to successfully prepare them for global competitiveness (USDOE, 2017).

The purpose of NCLB was to focus an important national dialogue on education improvement. NCLB drew attention to the subjects in which students were making progress and the subjects in which they needed additional support, regardless of age, socioeconomic status, background, physical or learning disabilities (USDOE, 2017). Congress' mission in enacting NCLB was clearly to support it with Title II, which suggested that refining teachers' professional practices enhanced the quality of instruction delivered to students in the classroom (USDOE, 2017b). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2017), NCLB was revised as Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015. High school graduation rates are now at all-time highs, dropout rates are at historical lows, and more students are attending college than ever before (USDOE, 2017a).

The State of Texas offers supplemental funds to school leaders to improve students' achievement through Part A of Title II of NCLB (2002) which focuses on Teacher and Principal Training and Recruitment (Texas Education Agency, 2018). The Texas Education Agency (TEA) required these funds to advance the quality of teachers and principals through recruitment, hiring, and retention strategies. The funds are expected to increase the number of highly competent teachers in the classroom and well qualified educational leaders in schools. Since schools and districts are constantly searching for innovative ways to improve student learning outcome, the use of professional learning communities in schools offers a powerful network for teachers to continually engage in constructive dialogue on how to become more effective in the classroom (Pirtle and Tobia, 2014). Mertler (2018) stated that professional learning communities offer a viable alternative tool for pursuing local-level school improvement to those efforts that have received national and international attention.

The middle school the researcher investigated is in the State of Texas and was designated by the district as a professional learning community (PLC) campus. A PLC designated campus is structured to function as a collaborative campus in its systems and processes. The integration of PLCs into the school system requires teachers to accept the notion of a collaborative school culture and on-site campus professional learning facility (Pirtle and Tobia, 2014). The PLC concept discourages teacher isolation and promotes teacher collaboration. Standard VII of the State of Texas Manual for Principals suggests that the principal is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a campus culture and instructional programs favorable to student learning and staff professional growth (Texas Education Agency, 2018). Consequently, most districts and schools in Texas are transforming

their schools to PLC campuses, but participation in the PLC process is not reserved for those designated as school leaders, rather, it is the responsibility of every member of the learning organization (DuFour, 2016). Some misconceptions exist when considering the concept of professional learning communities, such as educators believing that they are “doing” a professional learning community when they meet every Tuesday morning for an hour to discuss a certain topic of interest. Some may believe that engagement in a PLC is too demanding, time consuming, and it should not be a part of their job (Mertler, 2018). It is imperative for educators to clarify the meaning of the term PLC and the fundamental responsibilities of those who work within them for their learning organization (DuFour, 2016).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Districts and school leaders continually seek proven ways to support their teachers in enhancing their students’ learning (Pirtle and Tobia, 2014). Transforming schools to PLC campuses and applying the PLC approach is a common approach that districts and schools in the State of Texas use to advance student learning while fostering an enhanced school culture and developing teachers’ instructional expertise (Texas Education Agency, 2018). Philpott and Oates (2017) stated that many examples of PLCs are responses to concerns from central administration, school leaders, or local government. Philpott and Oates (2017) cited examples from Leclerc et al. (2012) that gave instructional leaders a significant role in developing the capacity of teachers to effectively collaborate. Nehring and Fitzsimons (2011) presented an example of a top down approach to the PLC model, which is not how they should be organized.

The instructional leader of the public middle school studied expressed how she was driven by the vision of a dynamic collaborative school culture where the staff members would

accept the concept of a PLC as “who they are and not just what they do as a school community to know every child by name and need” (K. Theodore, personal communication, October 23, 2017). Eaker (2016) affirmed that schools that operate as highly effective professional learning communities contribute to student achievement and to equitable distribution of achievement. Because there is little in the literature which examines teachers’ perceptions of the PLC and the work completed in the PLC, the problem to be studied is teachers’ perceptions of their work in PLCs at a middle school in Texas.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research study is to examine how teachers feel about the work happening in their PLCs at a Texas middle school. Educators frequently have trouble implementing professional learning communities because of some ambiguity of how the process is intended to work (McWherter, 2017). For instance, some educators might assume that the PLC is a type of program that the district or school wants to incorporate into their school culture, others might assume it is just another fancy term for department meetings, while some believe that the PLC model have a pervasive and ongoing impact on the structure and culture of a school (DuFour, 2016). Robert (2017) recognized that, for leaders to be effective, it is critical for them to develop a relationship with their followers grounded on trust and respect. Twenty-first century leaders create a culture that motivates, inspires, and empowers members at all levels of the organization (Robert, 2017). Fulton and Britton (2011) stated that, to meet the needs of today’s learners, the traditional way of teaching in a classroom would have to give way to a school culture in which teachers continuously develop their professional practices through a collaborative best practice that is embodied in their daily work activities. The nature of the

challenges facing educational institutions is creating the urgency for developing new forms of leadership and collaborative cultures (Squires, 2015). Culture provides the glue that binds individuals together to complete complex or intimidating undertakings (Marion and Gonzales, 2014). Creating effective teams who are committed to improving student learning and academic performance could be a very complex undertaking but understanding what contributes to an effective PLC could help any instructional leader make informed decisions about how their PLCs should efficiently run and produce the desired outcome of enhancing student learning (McWherter, 2017).

School leaders are needed more than ever before to ensure that all young people are provided the same opportunity for success because equity, diversity, and inclusivity are a fundamental right in any school or school system (Harris and Jones, 2017). The process of implementing effective school transformation for the greater good of all learners and future leaders resonates in an instructional leader's ability to build strong professional leadership teams within the school organization, teams that are essential to retaining and sustaining both veteran and new teachers. Community organizations come in all shapes, sizes, and varieties and every community organization holds all the intricacies and all the hopes, dreams, and visions of the people who join it (Brown, 2014).

The structures of a PLC are consistent with how a school operates its systems and processes. In schools that function as if their key focus is to ensure that students are taught, PLCs are devoted to the idea that their organization exists to ensure that all students learn the essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions (DuFour, 2016). Establishing a school culture where high levels of learning for all students are the focus and reason for why the school exists, requires a

clear and compelling vision of what professional learning communities must become to help all students learn (DuFour, 2016). In a PLC, collaboration indicates a systematic process in which teachers work together interdependently to impact their classroom practice in a way that will lead to improved results for their students, for their team, and for their school (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, and Mattos, 2016). A collective commitment clarifying what each member will do to create such an organization requires the use of result-oriented goals to mark their progress (Buffum, Mattos, and Malone, 2018). If school administrators fail to provide teachers with the opportunity to reflect on how they applied insights gained from their PLC assemblies to impact their instructional practices and effect student learning, then the successes of the learning communities will remain uncertain (Mertler, 2018).

### **Research Questions**

1. How do teachers describe the role of their PLC activities in supporting student learning?
2. How do PLC members characterize PLC practices that most directly lead to student learning?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this qualitative research is derived from Buffum, Mattos, and Malone (2018). The authors identified the three concepts that guide the work of a PLC: 1) a focus on learning, 2) a collaborative culture, and 3) a results orientation. The 3 elements that guide the work of a PLC encourage educators to renew their mindsets from merely teaching to fostering student learning through a collaborative school culture that promotes the orientation of

unified teams working together to improve student achievement because of their commitment to student learning.

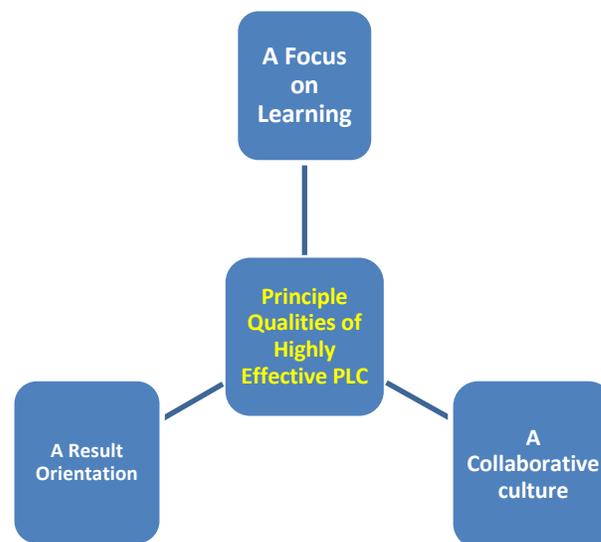
The fundamental essence of any PLC should be a focus on and a commitment to student learning (DuFour et al., 2016). A district-designated PLC campus' core mission is not just to ensure that all students are taught but to ensure that all students learn (Buffum et al., 2018). Requiring each individual teacher to describe their role in the PLC process in improving students' learning becomes an essential inquiry in determining the effectiveness of the PLC. DuFour et al. (2016) wrote that the first and the greatest of the three valuable ideas of what guides the work of a PLC is based on the principle that the fundamental purpose of the school is to promote all students' learning at high levels. Buffum, Mattos, and Malone (2018) added that the commitment to endorse students' learning unites and focuses the collaborative efforts of the staff and serves as the organization's "north star" when making decisions. Members of a professional learning community work together to clarify exactly what each student must learn, monitor each student's learning in a timely fashion, design systemic interventions that ensure students receive additional time and support for learning when they struggle, and that extension for learning is provided for students who have mastered the intended outcome of the instructional lesson (DuFour et al., 2016).

Collaborating and working together to build shared knowledge on the best way to achieve targeted goals and meet the needs of clients are what professionals in any field are expected to do for their organization. Members of a PLC are expected to work and learn together regardless of their perception of how a PLC should be structured and function. A collective inquiry into both best practices in teaching and best practices in learning empowers team members to develop new

skills that in turn lead to new experiences and awareness (DuFour, 2016). Heightened awareness evolves into fundamental shifts in attitude and beliefs that, over time, transforms the culture of a school (DuFour, 2016). Buffum et al. (2018) expressed that the second big idea is a commitment of the members of a PLC to creating a collaborative culture which permits them to assume collective responsibility for student success. Establishing a culture of an ongoing learning environment requires the dedication and commitment of all the PLC members involved. Individual teachers are not permitted to work in isolation, they are encouraged instead to work in teams based on the structure of the school (DuFour, 2016). However, collaboration does not occur by invitation or chance; instead, recurrent team time is embodied into the contractual day (DuFour et al., 2016). Teachers' collaboration in the PLC process are guided by four critical questions: 1) What knowledge, skills, or disposition should every student learn? 2) How would we know when each student has acquired it? 3) How would we respond when some students are struggling? and 4) How would we extend learning for the students who are already proficient? (DuFour et al., 2016).

PLC team members are expected to examine results from students' assessment data to identify and address any areas of student learning concerns (DuFour, 2016). The process of analyzing results allows teachers to determine strengths and weaknesses in their individual teaching practices and to learn from one another (Mohammad, 2017). DuFour et al. (2016) wrote that the second element focuses on evidence of student learning to enlighten and enhance their professional practices while responding to individual student in need of intervention and enrichment. The authors expressed that student assessment information plays a vital role in determining and providing students with effective interventions and extension opportunities

(DuFour et al., 2016). Mohammad (2017) reported that to be a successful leader in the field of education is to possess the ability to effectively promote a positive school culture driven by a leader's aptitude to innovatively formulate a shared vision with a set of goals and action plans that will meet those goals. In the current era, the instructional leader must be willing and able to cultivate a school culture that stimulates and sustains ongoing interactions with staff members to synchronize ideas, embrace challenges, make decisions, encourage risk taking, promote a system of monitoring, and adjust to a proposed action or change (Philpott and Oates, 2016).



*Figure 1.* The three principles of highly effective professional learning communities.

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are being recognized as effective in improving teacher collaboration and student achievement (Hallam, Smith, Hite, Hite, and Wilcox, 2015). To be a successful instructional leader of a school utilizing the PLC concept in the educational field is to possess the ability to cultivate and sustain the three identified principles of highly effective PLCs as shown in figure 1.

## **Rationale and Significance**

Nationally, educational accountability policies require schools to implement practices that support and develop teachers' professional work, increase student achievement, and reform failing schools (USDOE, 2017b). Schools and districts are continually searching for ways to improve student learning and PLCs offer a future for stimulating the knowledge required to close achievement gaps and increase students' academic achievements (Dimmock, 2016). The professional learning community is an essential concept in education, one that is intended to improve professional practices and increase student learning outcomes.

Qualitative research is one approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individual teachers ascribe to the term PLC (Creswell, 2014). The methodology for this study was the use online surveys through a Google Forms program to document the context or setting of the participants. Data were analyzed inductively to generate themes of teachers' perceptions of their work in PLCs. The data collected from this study show teachers' perceptions of their involvement and the impact of the PLC activities in supporting student learning in six themes: 1. school culture, 2. PLC and school improvement efforts, 3. PLC and student learning needs, 4. PLC and teacher pedagogy, 5. collaborative culture, and 6. PLC challenges.

Most districts and school administrators implore teachers to participate in their assigned professional learning community but fail to seek the perceptions or insights of the PLC members about this notion (Pirtle and Tobia, 2014). Gaining insight into teachers' perceptions of their work in PLCs can provide district and school administrators with useful information for building a collaborative school culture whose leadership teams effectively work together to produce the desired outcome of improving professional practices that enhance the quality of instruction and

improve student learning (Pirtle and Tobia, 2014). The very essence of a PLC is the commitment to the pursuit of excellence in ensuring student learning (DuFour et al., 2016). Members of a PLC embrace high levels of learning for all students which is the fundamental reason why the learning community exists (DuFour et al., 2016). The essential responsibilities of all members of a PLC team are to ensure student learning occurs and to collaboratively work together within professional learning communities. PLCs focus on student learning by supporting teachers' development of best practices to implement in their classrooms that will produce the desired outcome of meeting the identified needs of their school community (DuFour, 2016).

### **Assumptions**

This study was anchored by the assumption that the public middle school PLCs are an ongoing process where all members equally participate and work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research. The core principle for establishing the school's professional learning communities is to improve teachers' professional practices and enhance learning for all students. The PLC process is not just a departmental meeting but a purposeful meeting that is driven by students' needs. Teachers participating in this study gave their responses to the survey questions managed by the researcher. The instrument used in this investigation (13 open-ended survey questions) elicited reliable responses from the teachers participating in the study. The researcher assumes the participants fully understood the questions being asked in the survey and the data collected are the accurate reflections of the teachers' perceptions of the work they do in their assigned PLCs.

### **Limitations**

The inability to directly measure student achievement constitutes a limitation to this research. The researcher's inquiry questions might make teachers feel vulnerable, uncomfortable, or intimidated. This study is limited to one district public secondary school located in the State of Texas which limits this study to just one organization. This study is limited to grades 6-8 core academic teachers' perceptions of their work in their assigned PLCs. The 13 open-ended survey questions used in this study may not be considered adequately comprehensive and the survey was only administered to respondents who are core content teachers. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants, and the survey questions were made available. It is possible their responses were biased as the researcher is a member of their staff.

### **Scope**

The purpose of this study was designed to explore teachers' perceptions of the work that they are doing in their assigned PLCs which fits into the scope of core academic teachers or core content teachers and their assigned PLCs for the 2018–2019 school year. This study includes in its scope a small population of about forty grades 6-8 core content teachers working in one district's middle school located in the State of Texas. The researcher anticipated the scope of about twenty, grades 6-8 core academic teachers would voluntarily participate in this study. The study involved having grades 6-8 core content teachers, who are PLC members respond to 13 open-ended online survey questions, expressing their perceptions of the role that the PLC activities had in improving student learning.

### **Definition of Terms**

The purpose of this definition of terms is to clarify the meaning of essential educational terms that are valuable to this study and enlightening to other colleagues in the educational field.

The educational terms defined for this study are as follows:

*Core Academic Subjects* are well-defined by NCLB to include English, reading or language arts, math, science, foreign language, government, economics, arts, history, and geography (USDOE, 2017).

*Core Academic Teachers or Core Content Teachers* are teachers that have met the requirements to hold a bachelor's degree, acquire full state certification, and demonstrate subject matter competency in the core academic subjects taught (USDOE, 2017).

*Educational policy* is a collection of laws and principles that govern the operation and processes of schools (Lumen, 2017).

*Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)* is the law that promotes the awareness of elevating educational opportunities and improving student outcomes (USDOE, 2017)

*Ethics* are well-founded standards of right and wrong that prescribe what humans ought to do, usually in terms of rights, obligations, benefits to society, fairness, of specific virtues (Valasquez, 2018).

*Middle School* is the interim or transitional period between elementary school and high school (O'Donnell, 2017).

*No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act* is a federal education reform founded on the premise of setting high standards and measurable goals to improve individual outcomes in education (USDOE, 2017)

*Professional learning community* is an ongoing process or cycle in which educators work collaboratively to achieve better results to meet the needs of the students in their care (DuFour, 2004).

*School Principal or School Administrator* is the instructional leader of the school whose key role is to provide strategic direction in the school (Dowd, 2018). School principals develop safety protocols, emergency response procedures, and standardized curricula, as well as monitor student achievement, assess teaching methods, administer budgets, and hire and evaluate staff (Dowd, 2018).

*Teacher Certification* varies from state to state because NCLB allows each state to set its own certification requirements and policies to attract highly qualified individuals (USDOE, 2017)

*Texas Education Agency (TEA)* is a branch of the government of the State of Texas that is responsible for education (TEA, 2017).

*Transformational leadership* is a form of leadership that encourages leaders and their followers to raise one another to greater levels of standards and motivation (Burns, 1978).

### **Conclusion**

It is imperative for educators to recognize, adopt, and implement high-quality professional development training or establish a collaborative school culture such as professional learning communities (PLCs) that will promote an ongoing process of monitoring and adjusting to students' learning (Buffum et al., 2018). With the intensifying emphasis on school improvement, defining, and refining student academic performance through enhancing teachers' skills is at the very core of a collaborative school culture (Pirtle and Tobia, 2014). Enhancing

educators' skills to improve or transform schools is a joint effort of the entire learning communities (Pirtle and Tobia, 2014). PLCs should not be viewed as a program for educators to partake in, but a rooted part of the school or district's culture that defines their best practices (Mohammad, 2017).

It is quite clear that a PLC is an ongoing process in which educators and administrators work collaboratively in frequent cycles of shared inquiry and action research to obtain enhanced results for the students whom they serve (DuFour et al., 2016). The key elements of successful PLCs are determining the needs of the students and identifying possible barriers to students' learning (Mohammad, 2017). The way to overcome these barriers is by building effective PLC teams who are focused on student learning (Buffum et al., 2018). To prepare students to meet the challenges of an ever-evolving society, it is imperative that educators be experts in implementing the best practices in their field of education to meet the diverse needs of the students that they serve (Hallam et al., 2015). Educators can collaborate as a team in a PLC (a) to maximize their time on a task so that they can effectively plan the pacing of their lesson instruction, (b) to position students for academic growth by analyzing data and using the analyzed data to drive instruction, and (c) to improve the quality of students' learning outcome in their individual classrooms (Buffum et al., 2018).

Ultimately, Buffum, Mattos, and Malone (2018) agreed that improving professional practices through a collaborative culture boosts the quality of instruction, enhances learning for all students, increases students' achievement, and transforms schools. Active participation and support from all levels of the school system is critical to effectively implement and sustain the work of PLCs because the transition from a culture of teacher isolation to a culture of

collaboration can be a challenging experience for some teachers (Pirtle and Tobia, 2014). It is an essential practice to give individual teachers an opportunity to reflect on their professional practices to determine the effectiveness of their PLC involvement and its impact on student learning (Mertler, 2018).

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to review literature associated with PLCs and the potential impact of the PLC on school climate, instruction, and achievement. This chapter will investigate the literature that is relevant to understanding the development of PLCs in shifting the mindset of teachers from just teaching to ensuring that their students learn and master the content being taught. This review has been systematically organized in a clear and concise manner to allow readers to recognize the role of PLCs in school improvement efforts and the power of a collaborative team in implementing best practices to impact student learning.

An extensive literature search for articles, books, and journals related to the concept of PLCs was conducted through various databases in an online library like the University of New England (UNE) online library services. A total of approximately 27 books, 15 articles, 13 journals, and 9 peer reviewed articles within a scope of ten years were examined and analyzed. The review examines and analyzes numerous topics related to the credible impact of PLCs on school climate, teacher pedagogy, student learning, and achievement. The literature presented in this chapter offers a review of some of the academic research essential to the purpose of the study, the problem being investigated, and the survey conducted.

Prior research indicated that PLCs do have a positive impact on school improvement efforts. However, many misinterpretations exist about what a professional learning community is; its purpose, its structure, and how it effectively functions (DuFour, 2016). Most of the literature could be considered from the organizational, social, and ideological perspectives of

PLCs. Investigation of existing literature shows a significant gap in the research related to teachers' perceptions of the work that they do in PLCs. This literature provides research on effective educational leadership actions that foster purposeful interaction among members of a PLC and empower teachers to implement and sustain the PLC process.

### **Instructional leaders of PLCs**

It is imperative for instructional leaders to know how to build a powerful community organization that can effectively bring about the necessary change for their school community (Brown, 2014). The two common factors that all community organizations strive to achieve is to develop a sense of community among their members and community organizations that unify people to do what one person could not do alone (Brown, 2014). In an organization setting, no one truly acts independently; one's actions and behaviors affect and are affected by the actions and behavior of other members within the organization (Marzano, Heflebower, Hoegh, Warrick, and Grift, 2016).

A professional learning community is an organizational model, where teachers can learn from one another to increase the effectiveness of their pedagogy, and in the process, improve student achievement (DuFour et al., 2016). While the ideals and intentions of the PLC concept gained popularity, there were few specific instructions for how to attain and sustain a productive PLC (Marzano et al., 2016). This makes it somewhat difficult for administrators, teachers, and other school staff to manifest the desirable vision and direction of a PLC (Marzano et al., 2016). Consequently, instructional leaders must become familiar with research surrounding leadership characteristics that facilitate, support, and empower teachers in the PLC process.

### **Why Professional Learning Communities?**

In an era of accountability with an educational climate demanding improved student achievement for all learners regardless of any known or unknown learning disabilities, a better understanding of the structure and function of a PLC is crucial for most district and school leaders seeking to address any voids or gaps in the teaching and learning process. While the ESSA (2015) promotes the awareness of elevating educational opportunities and improving student learning outcomes, the NCLB Act (2002) supports the necessity for professional development as the major approach for increasing teachers' skills and effectiveness in the classroom (USDOE, 2017b). This aspect of the NCLB implies that schools and districts are required to provide teachers with learning opportunities that will enhance their teaching practices and improve the academic achievement outcome for all students (USDOE, 2017b). The NCLB Act Title II is directly linked to the text of the law of preparing, training, and recruiting high quality teachers and principals (USDOE, 2017b). The NCLB Act (2002) was created to advance educational outcomes for all students, to close achievement gaps, to increase equity, and to improve the quality of instruction (USDOE, 2017a).

Policy makers, researchers, and practitioners are leaning more towards the PLC concept because of its focus on teachers' collective efforts towards student learning and teachers' professional development (Zheng, Yin, Liu, and Ke, 2016). The quest to enhance the educational outcomes for all students, to close achievement gaps, to raise equity, and to boost the quality of instruction that students receive in their respective classroom or school demands clarity on how to respond effectively to the identified names and needs in that specific classroom or school community. The establishment of professional learning communities has been broadly

recognized as an effective strategy for schools wanting to improve student performance and enhance teachers' professional capacity (Zheng, Yin, Liu, and Ke, 2016). Regardless of students' prior background or academic achievement levels, PLCs focus their time, efforts, and expertise on addressing the needs of all students (DuFour, 2016). PLCs can be defined as educators committed to working collaboratively in continuing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve (DuFour et al., 2016).

Sufficient evidence has demonstrated that educators functioning as PLCs can effectively improve teaching and enhance student learning outcomes (Zheng, Yin, Liu, and Ke, 2016). PLCs have the potential to positively boost a school's climate and culture (DuFour, 2016). For teachers, school administrators, and district leaders to be highly effective in their professional practices, they must continually expand on their knowledge and skills to implement the best educational practices that truly support quality teaching and student achievement (Mizell, 2010). Research has shown that the quality of teaching and school leadership are the most significant elements in leveraging student academic achievement (Mizell, 2010). Consequently, educators must improve practice to help students learn at the highest levels (Mizell, 2010). PLCs enhance learning for educators and students (Buffum, Mattos, and Malone, 2018).

### **The purpose of PLCs**

The purpose of professional learning communities can be deduced from the meaning and merging of the words "learning" and "community" (Benjamin, 2015). "Learning" is the core mission of our educational institutions while the element of "community" in our educational endeavors offers support, information, and opportunities to improve skills that are both personal and academic (Benjamin, 2015). Merging these two terms communicates that meaning and

provides an opportunity for an educational experience that is supported and scaffolded by others (Benjamin, 2015).

Prior studies have identified the principle behind the development of PLCs as the means to foster collaborative learning among colleagues to enhance students' learning (DuFour et al., 2016). The PLC process represents all the policies and practices that lead a school to create and sustain a network of collaborative teams, whose work enhances student learning (Marzano et al., 2016). Therefore, a PLC is the network of collaborative teams, those groups of teachers working together to improve student learning. Collaboration plays an essential role in reflective practice and reflective practice is an important pathway to developing expertise in education and other disciplines (Marzano et al., 2016). One of the key features of PLCs is committed educators working together to alleviate or eradicate commonly identified barriers to students' success (Dimmock, 2016). PLCs offer a promising future for inspiring knowledge, closing achievement gaps, and empowering teachers to engage in on-site practical research study (Dimmock, 2016). PLCs are a rooted part of the school or district culture that defines their best practices (Mohammad, 2017).

### **Leadership Actions that Positively Impact PLCs.**

Leaders have been consistently recognized as crucial facilitators in developing and sustaining PLCs (Zheng et al., 2016). The current popularity of PLCs raises many questions for leaders as they develop a vision for PLCs in their schools such as what are the important elements, components, or functions in a PLC? How do we know when PLCs are working well or on the verge of failure? What is the role of the teacher and the positional leader in developing and sustaining PLCs? (Haar and Foord, 2013). Carpenter (2015) stated that, for professional

learning communities to be effective and meet the purpose described by schools, instructional leaders must ensure they provide supportive and shared leadership structures that encourage effective collaboration.

To build a successful learning community, the instructional leader must abandon the traditional position of authority and recognize that his or her role must include that of a learner who is working with teachers and other staff to examine and search for solutions that will enhance student learning (Williamson, 2009). The leadership practices that incorporated instructional and transformational leadership models have been consistently recognized as crucial facilitators in developing, implementing, and sustaining PLCs (Zheng, Yin, Liu, and Ke, 2016). Leaders can build a shared vision for a PLC, set direction, facilitate collaboration and communication among staffs, provide the structural and relational support, which could ultimately lead to school culture improvement (DuFour and Fullan, 2013).

Because leaders are working with people and managing people with different mindsets, emotions, egos, and feelings, building effective professional learning communities can constitute a major challenge (Rao, 2016). Philpott and Oates (2017) expressed that questions about educational reforms or transforming schools can be linked to questions about the focus and the extent of PLC implementation. Most educators are acquainted with the idea that authentic school transformation requires continuous professional development training for both new and veteran teachers (Mohammad, 2017). But humans have developed a world of such complexity, global interdependence, and continuous fast-moving change that leadership is beyond the scope of the individual and requires more effective collective action and the development of high-performing teams (Hawkins, 2011).

**Establishing Effective Collaborative Teams.** Thessin and Staar (2011) suggested that the most effective schools are the ones in which staff are simply taught how to collaborate. Both authors expressed that districts interested in implementing successful PLCs must involve teachers and administrators in developing and leading the PLC process; they must teach administrators and teachers how to work collaboratively and effectively in PLCs; they must show how PLCs fit in the district or school improvement process and action plans (Thessin and Staar, 2011). PLCs revolve around the idea of improving student learning through collaboration (Buffum et al., 2018). Teachers learn more about their profession, gather and use assessment data to enhance their student learning, and increase student achievement through a collaborative effort (Buffum et al., 2018). The most common drawbacks of PLCs come from inappropriate implementation on the part of the teacher or the instructional leader (DuFour, 2016).

Carpenter (2015) stated that a collaborative culture is the structured process by which teachers and instructional leaders work together, interdependently, to analyze and influence their professional practice to improve student achievement. Problems in schools today are primarily around student achievement (Carpenter, 2015). PLCs were envisioned as an ideal framework to ensure the provision of equitable opportunities for all students to access the same knowledge and skills being offered at a school regardless of his or her assigned content teacher (Carpenter, 2015). Educators who participate in PLCs must understand that they must work together for the greater good of improving student learning (Mohammad, 2017).

### **The Benefits of PLCs**

The PLC process benefits teachers, students, and school leaders (Marzano et al., 2016). A PLC is an ongoing process in which educators and administrators work collaboratively in

frequent cycles of shared inquiry and action research to obtain enhanced results for the students that they serve (DuFour et al., 2016). Simply organizing teachers into teams does not automatically guarantee a successful team, the team must have an unwavering trust that their collective power to influence student achievement is always greater than a student's ability to reject the learning process (Mohammad, 2017).

**The benefits for leaders.** In schools without PLCs, instructional leaders and administrators must work with teachers individually to enhance their actions in the classroom, which, in turn, will have a positive effect on student achievement (Marzano et al., 2016). PLCs benefit school leaders by increasing their ability to support teacher development and student achievement (Marzano et al., 2016). In a school that implements the PLC process, the principal or instructional leader can directly influence collaborative teams, collaborative teams, in turn, have direct influence on teachers' classroom practice, which then affect student achievement (Marzano, et al., 2016). PLCs allow educational leaders to effectively create a structured master schedule that promotes frequent teaming and collaborative opportunities for teachers. Marzano et al. (2016) stated that, if a PLC is to effect change, collaborative efforts must be structured and purposeful. However, setting aside time for teachers and administrators to meet does not guarantee meaningful teamwork or collaboration. Teacher resistance to change can hinder the effectiveness of a PLC and one of the major problems hindering successful PLC implementation is a lack of clarity about the concept and its essential influence on student achievement (Marzano et al., 2016).

**The benefits for teachers.** Professionally, the PLC process empowers teachers with the opportunity to initiate and influence change in the workplace by sharing their content expertise

and instructional strategies that promote student learning (Buffum, Mattos, and Malone, 2018). As in all professions, new teachers need years to improve the quality of the skills to be effective in their role (Mertler, 2018). Veteran teachers do not master their profession simply by spending years in the classroom. True experts or “master teachers” are those who continually and systematically reflect on their actions and performance as well as on the consequences of those actions (Mertler, 2018). The PLC is structured and designed to engage teachers in an ongoing collaborative professional work cycle (Marzano et al., 2016). The PLC process offers teachers the opportunity to express, explore, analyze, and reflect on their professional practices, which in turn, could lead to improved student achievement (Mohammad, 2017).

**Support social interactions and networking amongst teachers.** Teachers’ participation in PLCs encourages social interactions amongst grade level teams or colleagues and discourages teacher isolation (Mertler, 2018). Instructional leaders are required to provide collaborative planning times for PLC members each week (DuFour, 2016). Teachers are obligated to collectively use this time for the planning and pacing of instruction with their grade level or content learning teams, to identify their struggling learners to plan intervention strategies, and to identify students who have demonstrated mastery of the content to plan extension activities (Mertler, 2018). The PLC process creates a culture in which teachers feel more empowered in their work by offering a more effective means for professional learning opportunities (Marzano et al., 2016).

**Alleviate teacher isolation and professional responsibilities.** The PLC process is structured for educators to approach academic or instructional problems as a team of professionals (Mathewson, 2016). Teachers who do not participate in PLCs tend to function in

isolation and they feel solely responsible for their students (Mathewson, 2016). Mathewson (2016) stated that PLCs foster collaboration among teachers to improve student academic achievement and they get results. Teachers share their content expertise with their colleagues, and teachers are encouraged to take risks and try out new approaches to teaching a concept based on the success that other teachers had in using that strategy.

**Provide a life-long learning environment for both veteran and new teachers.** Veteran and new teachers confront great challenges each year that may require the collaboration and support of all members of the learning community such as changes to national or state educational laws, instabilities in district or school procedures, changes in content areas, implementation of new instructional materials or teaching techniques, new technology integration, changes in student demographics, and emerging student learning needs (Mizell, 2010). Professional development could occur in informal contexts during PLC gatherings; healthy discussions among colleagues and teacher learning opportunities could be derived from peer observation of a colleague's work (Mizell, 2010). If teachers engage in effective professional development focused on the skills that educators need to address students' most substantial learning challenges then student learning and achievement increases (Mizell, 2010). Professional learning communities are ineffective if they do not engage teachers in striving to improve their teaching skills and enhance student learning outcome (DuFour, 2016).

**Offer opportunities to acquire professional development credits.** Many schools require educators to access professional development credits within a certain amount of time and this requirement may vary from district to district and from state to state (Battersby and Verdi, 2015). Although it might take years to see results, the rewards of a PLC are mutually beneficial

to both teachers and students (Battersby and Verdi, 2015). PLCs contribute to the role of educators as lifelong learners and address the issues of teacher isolation, teacher professional development requirements, teacher attrition, and student achievement (Battersby and Verdi, 2015). Mizell (2010) stated that educators who do not experience effective professional development do not improve their teaching skills, which in turn could negatively affect student learning. PLCs are an effective framework for collaboration among general and elective teachers (Battersby and Verdi, 2015).

**Collective and supportive resources.** Essential ideas that facilitate the work of a PLC are teachers collaboratively working together to learn about the practices, policies, procedures, and beliefs that best guarantee student learning, educators applying and implementing what they are learning, and educators using evidence of student learning to evaluate, revise, and celebrate their collective efforts to improve student achievement (Buffum, Mattos, and Malone 2018). This information can be used to drive teachers' instruction that implements new ideas, best practices, and strategies to meet the identified needs of their students. PLCs provide opportunities for improving teachers' professional skills and offer a pathway for sharing and gathering extensive resources to improve the art of teaching and learning (Dimmock, 2016).

Despite compelling evidence signifying that working collaboratively represents best practice, teachers in many schools continue to work in isolation (Dufour et al., 2016). Elbousty and Bratt (2010) suggested that some teachers prefer working alone, viewing collaboration as a waste of time or an impairment to getting work done because they doubt that collaboration will positively impact student achievement. Mizell (2010) wrote that, on a learning team, teachers and school leaders work together to determine instructional gaps through students' learning

discrepancies; to understand what students are not learning and adjust instructional strategies that will help close those achievement gaps.

**The benefits for students.** A growing number of research studies supports the claim that PLCs lead to improved student learning outcomes (Marzano et al, 2016). Fulton and Britton (2011) analyzed six previous studies on collaborative structures and student learning in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). All six studies found positive effects on student learning outcomes (Fulton and Britton, 2011). The authors performed a research investigation on STEM teachers in professional learning communities and observed improved practice. “*STEM teachers in professional learning communities; a knowledge synthesis*”, conducted by the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (NCTAF) and WestEd, included an analysis of almost two hundred STEM educational resource articles and reports to support their findings. Fulton and Britton (2011) concluded that great teaching is like a team sport, and when teachers team up with their colleagues, they create a culture of success in schools that leads to improved teaching and student learning gains. Fulton and Britton (2011) identified six principles that contribute to an effective learning community as the following; shared values and goals, collective responsibility, authentic assessment, self-directed reflection, stable settings, and strong leadership support. According to the authors, teacher collaboration supports student learning, promotes teacher job satisfaction, and assures greater teacher retention (Fulton and Britton, 2011).

**Provision for equitable learning opportunities.** Today’s students are preparing for a future in which they will be expected to invent and reinvent their work, collaborate with their peers to solve problems, develop new knowledge, and continuously acquire new skills (Fulton

and Britton, 2011). They need teachers who know how to design schools that portray the learning organization they are required to work in for the rest of their lives (Fulton and Britton, 2011). PLCs provide equitable opportunity to assess all students with the same rigor, the same criteria, facilitate systematic and collective responses to students who are experiencing difficulties and are in need of intervention, and facilitate systematic and collective responses to students who have mastered the content and are need of enrichment activities (DuFour et al., 2016). In a PLC, teachers agree on new and powerful ways to work together to achieve the desired student learning outcome for their grade level content or team (Marzano et al., 2016).

**Provision of systematic approach to intervention and extension activities.** The PLC concept demands a systematic approach to intervention for struggling learners and extension activities for student who are proficient or demonstrate content mastery (Buffum et al., 2018). The PLC concept supports high levels of learning for all students because it encourages teachers to provide students with a guaranteed and viable curriculum for every course and grade level (DuFour, 2016). Teachers develop a variety of common formative assessments and use evidence of student learning to foster a culture of continuous school-wide improvement for teams and their members (Buffum et al., 2018).

### **A Culture of Continuous Learning.**

According to Carpenter (2015), a collaborative culture is the way instructional leaders and teachers think and act about sharing information about their practices. PLCs are advantageous for shifting the perspectives of teachers and instructional leaders from a fixed to a growth mindset. Teachers who engage in the PLC process create a culture in which they are involved in the refining and improving of their professional practices and content expertise

(Buffum, Mattos, and Malone, 2018). If a school's established culture is one of dysfunction, isolation, and lacks shared vision and beliefs, the learning environment is going to change in such a way that decreases the effectiveness of each educator (Pirtle and Tobia, 2014). The transformation of a school culture is a joint effort of the entire learning communities (Pirtle and Tobia, 2014). The culture of a PLC campus is defined by effective instructional practices and enhancing teachers' skills for the sole purpose of improving student learning. These practices are at the very core of a collaborative school culture (Mohammed, 2017).

According to Sebastian, Allensworth, and Huang (2016), there is growing awareness of distributed leadership, which is becoming more common in the educational field. School principals can play a vital role in promoting teacher leadership by delegating authority and empowering teachers in ways that allow them influence key organizational decisions and processes (Sebastian et al., 2016). Their results suggest that effective principals use teacher leadership to enhance the school learning environment while they work on professional development and school program consistency (Sebastian et al., 2016). The authors concluded that it is difficult for one individual to be the sole leader of any organization without delegating some part of his or her role to some of his or her selected members or teams (Sebastian et al., 2016). PLCs contribute to a positive school culture that promotes collaboration among staff, builds teacher capacity, improves lesson design or instruction, and delivers high quality instruction that enhances student learning (Buffum et. al, 2018).

Mindich and Lieberman (2014) combined the survey of 33 New Jersey public schools that were involved in a state sponsored PLC training program and performed a case study on two of the schools. They determined that it was imperative for school leaders to understand what

makes some teams successful as measured by increased student achievement, changed instructional practices, and the implementation of a culture of continuous improvement. They examined successful learning teams and unpacked the processes, structures, and strategies that supported their success stories. The findings of Mindich and Lieberman (2014) supported the notions of building positive staff relations, creating and maximizing meeting times, providing state and district trainings, developing norms and goal-setting procedures, analyzing data and developing a data-driven culture, and having a growth mindset among the members of the PLCs. Instructional leaders and teachers must have the patience to allow the PLC process to develop and avoid a “right now” mindset regarding results (Mindich and Lieberman, 2014).

**PLCs’ impact on school culture.** Mohammad (2018) defined the term *culture* as the beliefs, practices, behaviors, and norms of an organization. School culture holds the biggest key to unlocking the potential of public schools, but it is also an area where most school officials and reformers fear to tread. Dysfunctional school cultures can serve to sustain student achievement gaps (Muhammad, 2018). The PLC culture is grounded on two core principles: a) all students can learn at high levels and b) instructional practice and influence are the greatest determining factors in students’ success (Mohammed, 2017). Provini (2012) wrote that a PLC involves much more than a staff meeting or a professional learning event, it represents the institutionalization of a focus on continuous improvement in staff performance and student learning. However, many school districts and their administrators have modified the PLC concept to such a degree that they might no longer accomplish their intended outcome (Dufour et al., 2016).

School culture is as intricate as the people that work and learn within the building because it evolves as the organization faces new challenges and welcomes new people into the

dynamic (Bower and Parsons, 2016). School culture is continually reformed as it responds to direct stakeholders needs such as those expressed by teachers and students as they relate to the demands of greater society and like other reform approaches, teachers are crucial to the redesign model (Bower and Parsons, 2016). School culture grabs us when we walk through the halls and informs us whether we want to be there (Wright, 2014). School culture can be revitalizing when positive, suffocating when negative, and it is what encourages or discourages a teacher (Wright, 2014). The pillars upon which a successful school culture is built are communication, observation, relationships, and expectations (Zoul, 2010).

**PLCs' impact on teachers' pedagogy.** Actively engaging teachers in professional learning communities does not automatically increase their professional knowledge and improve student learning (Mohammad, 2017). The concept of a PLC rests on the premise of enhancing student learning by improving teaching practices (Mohammad, 2017). Therefore, in what ways does teacher participation in PLCs result in teaching practice changes that effect student achievement? PLCs contribute to the shift in the habits and educators' mindsets of just teaching to ensuring that all students are learning the content that is being taught (Buffum et al., 2018). When teachers seek to improve on their professional practices, they reflect on the causes of their success and develop a deeper commitment to the practices that will continue to assure success (Foord and Haar, 2013). PLCs focus on teachers' personal commitment to enhance their practices through personal and collaborative reflection on their perceptions and practices (Foord and Haar, 2013). Individual teachers working in a PLC must bear the responsibility for changing their professional practices to meet the needs of each student under their charge and care (Foord

and Haar, 2013). Learning must be rigorous, relevant, and supportive of healthy relationships among students, teachers, and other stakeholders (Foord and Haar, 2013).

The PLC process allows teachers to gain insights from other teachers about their instructional practices and develop new perspectives about the teaching and learning process that could potentially improve student learning. According to Tomlinson (2014), a highly effective teacher creates an environment that is active and engaging to student learning and development, embraces diversity, encourages students to accept responsibility for their own learning, designs lessons that allow students to be active participants, provides all students with equitable access to learning by differentiating their instruction, displays efficient classroom management, and makes meaningful connections to students' learning. The notion that professional learning is literally "embedded" within the scope and actual setting of an individual's classroom or school offers the potential for a much greater degree of professional growth (Mertler, 2018). Continuing collaborative inquiry into what works in one's classroom, school, and district, holds so much more prospective for school improvement and enriched student learning (Mertler, 2018).

Segura and Tobias (2014) suggested that students benefit from the expertise of various teachers and administrators who share a vision for student learning and avoid division. While improving student learning, the teachers also build their own personal capacity by working as a member of an ongoing collaborative and high-performing team (Segura and Tobias, 2014).

Mottero (2014) mentioned three teaching skills that researchers have found to be highly correlated to student outcomes: creating a learning environment, delivering effective instruction, and analyzing and adjusting. An unproductive teacher can affect student learning for years and having two ineffective teachers for 2 consecutive years can damage a student's entire career

(Moterro, 2014). Working as a collaborative group discourages teacher isolation and promotes shared responsibility for student learning. The principal role of a PLC is to ensure students' learning (Dufour et al., 2016).

**PLCs' impact on students' learning.** Effective student learning is sustained by ensuring that every teacher is an effective professional who actively seeks to improve their professional practice (Foord and Haar, 2013). PLCs must use data to address individual student's readiness, interest, and learning styles (Foord and Haar, 2013). Curriculum, instruction, and assessment must be differentiated and additional support systems for intervention and enrichment activities must be readily available to students (Foord and Haar, 2013). Tomlinson (2014) stated that teaching is about learning, learning is about becoming, and making a history is about taking up a career and making a life. Teachers need to take the time to know every child by name and need, regardless of their learning ability, culture, or background knowledge with which the child is identified (Tomlinson, 2014). This is one of the highest demands on teachers today in the present society, the challenge of one individual to divide his or her time and resources to serve and effectively maximize the potential talents in each class period (Tomlinson, 2014). PLCs alleviate the pressure on individual teachers to meet the needs of all his or her students by making the demands on teachers a joint effort of the team.

Effective teaching requires educators to focus on student learning rather than merely on teaching the content (McGuire, 2015). Educators who are focused on teaching rather than on students' learning are deemed to have not yet mastered the act of teaching. McGuire (2015) stated that if educators were to teach students how to learn and give them simple straightforward strategies to use, they could significantly increase their students' learning and performance.

Teachers must have strategies or tools in place to effectively teach any diverse group of students how to learn (McGuire, 2015). McGuire (2015) claimed that teachers must learn how to motivate their students intrinsically from merely performing to thriving because all of the learning strategies in the world cannot help a student who does not believe that his or her situation can be transformed. Educators must focus more on their students' learning rather than their own teaching (McGuire, 2015). Therefore, PLCs, when done right, produce consistent growth in student learning.

Eaker (2016) recognized that many students could be left behind if teachers and parents allow students to choose whether to learn or not to learn. To ensure all students succeed, adults must take active responsibility through a collaborative culture like professional learning community to provide a steady and supportive environment that pushes students to do their best (Eaker, 2016). Unmotivated students can pose a frustrating challenge for teachers. Shoem, Modey, and John (2018) wrote that teaching the whole child is important to student learning because it affirms the humanity in each individual teacher and student alike. Teaching the whole child inspires innovation and experimentation in teaching and stresses integrative pedagogy and engaged learning (Shoem et al., 2018). Giving students the power of choice plays a critical role in promoting students' intrinsic motivation and deep engagement in learning (Evans and Boucher, 2015). A critical factor in students' declining motivation may be the school environments that provide students with fewer opportunities for choice and decision making (Evans and Boucher, 2015).

**PLCs' impact on school improvement efforts.** School improvement and student achievement have been directly linked to teacher professional learning communities (Carpenter,

2015). A focus on collective inquiry serves as a catalyst for teaching and learning innovations for PLCs (Carpenter, 2015). Improving teaching and learning necessitates that teachers and instructional leaders systematically engage in an ongoing cycle of collecting data of current student performance levels, reflecting on past teaching and learning strategies, developing strategies, and using innovative practices to ensure all students achieve (Carpenter, 2015). PLCs must have shared leadership to promote collective inquiry and staff involvement in creating a shared vision, values, structures, and functions of a school (Carpenter, 2015). DuFour and Fullan (2014) referred to PLCs as a vehicle to transform a school from the philosophy of seclusion to a culture of collaboration to increase student achievement.

Elbousty and Bratt (2010) discovered the important role of PLCs in school improvement. Both authors examined a large, urban, East Coast high school to determine the team strategies for school improvement. The teachers involved in this investigation were accustomed to working in isolation and their students experienced several areas of deficits (Elbousty and Bratt, 2010). The failure of the school was related to a lack of teamwork and collaborative planning times. The teachers gained tremendous intuition from planning and collaborating through PLCs (Elbousty and Bratt, 2010). Elbousty and Bratt (2010) shared that, in addition to the benefits of collaboration, the teachers stated that they had gained tremendous insights into curriculum development, classroom management, motivation, and managing students with learning disabilities.

### **Conclusion**

Olivier and Huffman (2016) specified that most definitions of a PLC in the United States refer to engaging school administrators and teachers in developing a shared vision for

meaningful collaboration, leveraging adult learning, and increasing student achievement. Teachers and principals using the PLC processes agree upon several guiding points such as focusing the school goals and expectations for student achievement, addressing professional development needs, creating structures, and opportunities for teachers to collaborate, and managing instructional programs (Leithwood, Louis, Wahlstrom, and Anderson, 2010). A school leader must assume the role of a learner in the PLC process to effectively provide the structure that allows continuous collaboration among staff that encourages best practices to improve student learning outcomes (Carpenter, 2015). Shared leadership provides the setting for continuous improvement, shared values, and vision for a school (Carpenter, 2015). A solid constituent structure and distributive leadership is required for PLCs to transform school culture, improve teacher professional practice, build teacher capacity, and increase student achievement (DuFour et al., 2016). Effective transformational leaders provide the structure that facilitates positive school culture with a focus on continuous learning and improvement while empowering teachers to be active participants in the school improvement efforts as a function of raising student achievement. School leaders must be willing to share power and facilitate school developmental processes that connect the potential of teachers to school improvement plans (Carpenter, 2015). DuFour et al. (2016) described PLCs as an organizational model that permits successful public education reform. When teachers come together as a PLC, they impact the culture of a school through an intentional process where a school undergoes a cultural shift that involves the critical reflection on the assumptions, beliefs, values, expectations that make up the norms of a school (DuFour, 2016).

A PLC is an environment that promotes teacher empowerment and collaboration with a specific focus on student learning by rethinking teacher pedagogy while building new classroom roles for learners (DuFour, 2016). PLC members develop a common definition of a problem and negotiate solutions leading to the explanation about the cause of a problem (Muhammad, 2018). Educational leaders could define and share their vision with their PLC teams, but the teams must be involved in the shared decision-making process (Mohammad, 2017). To sustain rapid changes in schools, leadership teams must meet regularly throughout the school year to: plan for school improvement, implement key action plans, monitor the progress of the action plans, and evaluate and make necessary changes or adjustments throughout the school year (Mohammad, 2017). PLCs allow teachers to engage in meaningful dialogue to promote positive changes for themselves, their students, and their school (DuFour et al., 2016).

PLCs provide opportunities for teachers to engage in collaboration that help them to identify students' needs, adjust instruction, and achieve collective goals through a common understanding of practices (Thessin, 2015). Having continuous, job-embedded learning and a growth mind-set are the best way for educators to build an effective PLC (Mertler, 2018). To successfully prepare students to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century, educators must be experts in their profession and possess top-notch skills in implementing best practices that will effectively meet the needs of the diverse groups of students represented within the four walls (Thessin, 2015).

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research is to study how teachers feel about the work happening in their PLCs at a Texas middle school. The principal investigator for this research study uploaded 13 survey questions into a google forms program and used it as an instrument to gather data on teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities. The survey was designed to invite teachers to identify and describe the work happening in their campus' PLCs.

The middle school that was investigated serves over 971 students and approximately 40 grade 6-8 core academic teachers. Participants in this research study were core content teachers who are members of an assigned grade level or content PLC.

Since this is an exploratory study, a grounded theory research method was well suited for this study. Grounded theory is useful for investigating social processes like the PLC activities that have attracted little prior attention, or where the prior research is lacking breadth and/or depth, or where a new viewpoint on familiar topics appears promising (Milliken, 2010). There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research study. The sample population participating in this PLC are approximately 40 certified State of Texas core content teachers. The researcher sought to determine teachers' perceptions about their membership in PLCs. The grounded theory method is suitable for studies that involve examining the perceptions of participants (Creswell, 2013).

A qualitative research design was used to gain deeper understanding of the underlying opinions, motivation, challenges, and successes of the PLC members using a Google forms

online survey. The methodology for this study was to use the Google forms program to administer the survey, gather/analyze the data, document the context or setting, and seek to understand the experiences of the participants in this study.

### **Research Questions**

This study seeks to clarify the role and importance of teacher reflection in the PLC process. The focus of this investigation is to examine teachers' perceptions of their PLC team, and the work they do to effect change in their professional practices to improve the teaching and learning processes that enhance student learning. The overarching questions for this research are:

1. How do teachers describe the role of their PLC activities in supporting student learning? and
2. How do PLC members characterize PLC practices that most directly lead to student learning?

School enhancement is a painstaking process that involves examining students' data, identifying areas that need improvement, and establishing goals to meet the identified area in need of improvement (Buffum et al., 2018). Typically, the perception of most educators is that they can positively impact student learning by being highly engaged in the PLC process, and it is from this perspective that most educational leaders are implementing PLCs in schools (Olivier and Huffman, 2016).

### **Setting**

The middle school was built in the year 2010 and the facility is located on approximately one hundred and forty-seven thousand square feet piece of land in a sub-urban area. The campus features three separate classroom pods for 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students. These separate classroom pods are built around the main entrance, administrative offices, and library structures. The school facility is comprised of three science labs, a cafeteria, an auditorium, a tilt-wall

gymnasium, full-sized competition field, and a practice field for football, soccer, and track events. The campus has a lighted tennis court that serves the school and the local community. The school is structured to function as a PLC campus. The school has had only one administrative change over the past eight years. The change in administration was due to the founding principal being promoted to the Director of Principals by the district administration in 2016. The change in administration has led to a yearly increase in staff turnover rate. The district and its surrounding neighborhood are continually evolving due to constant road and building construction, like new homes, apartment buildings, shops, and offices. Families and businesses are constantly moving in and out of the surrounding neighborhood. Students come from socio-economics status that range from middle to high income earning parents. The school serves a racially diverse population of students and teachers.

### **Participants**

All schools in the district are required to actively participate in professional learning communities. All participants in this research investigation are grades 6-8 middle school teachers who are members of a PLC. Administering the online survey to grades 6-8 teachers allowed the researcher to obtain their general perception of their collaborative time and the effectiveness of the campus' PLCs. The selection of participants was based on their required involvement in a content-specific PLC. To participate voluntarily in this study, participants exhibited the following qualifications: (a) be a State of Texas certified core academic teacher and (b) be an active PLC member. The participants in this study are educated and they are able to read, comprehend, and respond to the survey questions.

## **Stakeholders**

The stakeholders of this research investigation are the teachers, students, parents, administrators, support staff, school community, and district of a middle school where the researcher is currently employed as a teacher and a science instructional coach.

## **Data Procedures**

The middle school's certified core content teachers were sent an email invitation through their secured school department emails during their non-contracted hours. The email invitation included the Consent to Participate document. Interested participants were informed that they would be required to complete a 10 to 15 minute Google forms online survey of 13 open-ended questions to determine their personal successes and challenges as members of an assigned PLC in meeting the demands of their campus improvement plans. A letter explaining the scope, purpose, and instrument of the research investigation was written to the district administrative office and the campus site principal requesting the district's permission to conduct this research study. No identifying information about the teachers participating in this study was used in the analysis or discussion of the research findings. The data collected were analyzed using the google forms online program free data analysis tool.

Members of the school's PLC were formally contacted through their school emails to participate in this research study project. Teachers were asked via email whether or not they were willing to participate in a PLC survey with the principal investigator to voice their perceptions of the challenges and successes associated with their assigned PLC. Teachers were required to sign a consent form via google forms that states (a) that their participation in this research is voluntarily, (b) that they are free at any time to decide not to participate or withdraw from the

study, (c) that no identifying information will be used in the analysis and discussion of the research findings, and (d) participation in this research study should be accomplished during non-contract hours. Participants' responses to the Google forms online survey were analyzed and thematically categorized to reflect the perceptions of participating teachers.

### **Research Design**

A qualitative research approach is appropriate for responding to the context and the participants of this study. Qualitative research involves the collection and analysis of narrative data (Mertler, 2018). A qualitative research design permitted the researcher to thematically interpret the data on teacher perceptions of PLCs and the work that they do in PLCs. A grounded theory approach is best suited for the discovery of emerging themes or patterns in the survey data to be collected in this study (Milliken, 2010). The grounded theory research enabled the researcher to explore and conceptualize the latent social patterns and structures of teachers' perceptions of their work in PLCs. Grounded theory research methods offer an approach to examine the core PLC concerns of the teacher population participating in this research.

The instrument for this research was a 13 item open-ended formatted questionnaire focused on PLCs impact on school culture, school improvement, teacher pedagogy, and meeting student learning needs. The online survey was conducted to allow participants to voice or share their personal experiences, perceptions, successes, and challenges of being a member of their specific content PLC. The survey should have taken no more than 10 to 15 minutes of the participant's non-contract hour.

## **Analysis**

The data collected for this research study was systematically organized to find common themes throughout the survey responses. The analysis of the survey data revealed and reflected the perceptions, experiences, successes, and challenges of the individual members of a specific content PLC. The collected data was analyzed inductively to generate six themes of teachers' perceptions of their work in PLCs: 1) school culture, 2) PLC and school improvement efforts, 3) PLC and student learning needs, 4) PLC and teacher pedagogy, 5) collaborative culture, and 6) PLC challenges. The data collected from this study show teachers' perceptions of their involvement and the impact that the PLC activities have in supporting student learning. The data were analyzed to examine how PLC members characterize PLC practices that most directly lead to student learning.

## **Participants' Rights**

In accordance with the Institutional Review Board (IRB), a consent form was created to inform participants of their rights. A Consent for Research Participation and Confidentiality Agreement was shared with all participants in the study so that they were aware of the researcher's abilities, scope of the study, and limitations. Participants in this research study were informed verbally and in writing that their right to participate in this research investigation is voluntary and that they will be required to read and sign the consent form that spells out these rights to them. All participants were assured of their privacy and the anonymous nature of this research. The research data were secured by ensuring that the online survey was completely anonymous, no identifiable information would be included in the survey questions, and only the

principal investigator was able to gain access to survey responses. Participants were given permission to access and view the research study at any time it was requested.

### **Benefits of this Research Design**

The main purpose of this study is to examine teachers' perceptions of the PLC process and the effectiveness of their work in professional learning communities. Qualitative studies are usually conducted at the research site but the use of google forms anonymous online survey allowed participants to gain access to this survey at any time and at any location (Creswell, 2013). The researcher used the school's official email address for each participant to secure the process of data collection. To understand teachers' beliefs or perceptions of the PLC concept and its implementation on their campus, a grounded theory approach was chosen for this research study because a new viewpoint on a familiar professional development approach like the PLC concept appears promising (Milliken, 2010). The 13 open-ended questions were used on a survey instrument by the researcher to assess teachers' perceptions of involvement, experiences, contribution, and challenges in their assigned PLC.

### **Limitations to this Research Design**

The direct stakeholders in this study, teachers, might have been uncomfortable when responding to some of the survey questions. Teachers may not have been truly transparent when identifying areas of struggle or challenges in the PLC process. The results from this research present only a sample of teachers' perceptions of the PLC process and the work that they do in their collaborative teams to improve student learning. The research design is limited to one school in one district, documenting State of Texas certified core academic teachers' perceptions.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Schools and districts are continually searching for creative ways to improve student learning through the implementation of professional learning community because it offers a fascinating future for stimulating the knowledge required to close achievement gaps and increase students' academic achievements (Dimmock, 2016). The data collected from this qualitative study provides only a sample of the perceptions of grades 6-8 core academic teachers participating in one PLC. Their experiences of the implementation of PLCs in schools and districts may inform school leaders in other settings. Qualitative data collection was conducted in the form of an anonymous online survey administered through the school-secured email to participants at the site. The data collected and analyzed from this research study allows educators to be aware of emerging findings about how the PLC processes work and how to overcome the possible challenges associated with their implementation. This research extends educators' knowledge about what current fundamental strategies can be used to support the PLC on-going process. Teachers and administrators will be encouraged to work together to alleviate or eradicate the issues or troubles they often encounter in implementing and sustaining professional learning communities (DuFour, 2016).

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

Chapter 4 presents the data collected for this study, discussed the participating teachers' responses to each survey question, and displays the results to the research questions. The process utilized to analyze and interpret data collected from the responses to the 13 open-ended formatted questions are discussed. At each level of analysis, participants shared their personal experiences, perceptions, successes, and challenges of being a member of their specific content PLC. The research questions that will be addressed through the discussion of the data analysis are as follows: 1. How do teachers describe the role of their PLC activities in supporting student learning? 2. How do PLC members characterize PLC practices that most directly lead to student learning? Chapter 4 detailed some of the quotes that supported the summary of responses to each research question. First, the results of participants' responses to each 13 questions are presented followed by the supporting evidence categorized by the teachers' response and summary of the findings to each question.

The data collected for this study were systematically organized to find common themes throughout the survey responses. Six broad themes emerged from this study of teachers' perceptions of their work in PLCs and the analysis of the data was discussed for each of the following themes: school culture, school improvement efforts, student learning needs, teacher pedagogy, collaborative culture, and challenges. The collected data from this study specified teachers' perceptions of their involvement and the impact that the PLC activities have in supporting student learning. Chapter 4 concludes with a summary of results.

### **PLCs as Action Research and Ongoing Professional Learning**

The continuous improvement of a school as an organization is dependent on the interaction of the component parts of a larger system (DuFour et al., 2016). While professional learning communities serve as the component parts of a larger school system, the PLC concept extends beyond the individual teacher because teachers are organized into teams, systematically given time to collaborate, and provide a guaranteed and viable curriculum for every grade level course (DuFour et al., 2016). Action research and ongoing learning are the norm of a PLC school and leaders at all levels are expected to take an interest in and contribute to the sole purpose of a school to help every child to accomplish their aspirations (DuFour et al., 2016). School staff must be devoted to supporting students in the learning process and every student must be expected to learn (Williamson and Blackburn, 2010). The authors stated that change in schools must be grounded on refining students' educational experience and the school culture must include a collective commitment to improvement and a corresponding commitment to supporting people who take risks and make changes. Change efforts will be meaningless if the people being asked to change do not see a need for the change (Williamson and Blackburn, 2010). Gaining insights into teachers' perception of the work that they do in PLCs will provide district and school leaders with the best practices for organizing a collaborative school culture whose leadership teams efficiently work together to produce the desired outcome of refining professional practices that enhance the quality of instruction and improve student learning (Pirtle and Tobia, 2014). Educators regularly have trouble implementing professional learning

communities because of their uncertainty of how the process is intended to work (McWherter, 2017).

### **Methodology Review**

A grounded theory research method was used for this exploratory research. Grounded theory is well suited for examining social processes like the PLC process that have captivated extra research attention, where the prior research is lacking breath and/or depth, or where a new viewpoint on acquainted topics appears promising (Milliken, 2010). A qualitative research design was used to gain deeper understanding of the underlying views, motivation, challenges, and successes of the PLC members using a Google forms online survey. The methodology for this study is to use the Google forms to complete the survey, gather, and analyze the collected data.

### **Data Analysis**

A qualitative research method was appropriate for responding to the context and the participants of this study. Qualitative research comprises of the collection and analysis of narrative data (Mertler, 2018). A qualitative research approach allowed the researcher to thematically interpret the data on teacher insights of PLCs and the work that they do in PLCs. The data collected for this study were systematically organized to find common themes throughout the survey responses. The analysis of the survey data revealed the perceptions, experiences, successes, and challenges of the individual members of a content specific PLC. Secondly, the data collected from this study was analyzed to reflect how PLC members characterize PLC practices that most directly lead to student learning. Finally, the collected data were broken down into distinct themes that disclosed teachers' perceptions of their involvement

and the impact that the PLC activities have in supporting student learning in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5.

### **Research Questions**

The two research questions for this dissertation have been answered through the survey and data analysis. Stereotypically, the perception of most educational leaders is that they can positively impact student learning by ensuring that teachers are highly engaged in the PLC process, and it is from this perspective that most educational leaders are implementing PLCs in schools (Olivier and Huffman, 2016). Below is the list of research questions that will be addressed through the discussion of the data:

1. How do teachers describe the role of their PLC activities in supporting student learning?
2. How do PLC members characterize PLC practices that most directly lead to student learning?

The data collected from this qualitative study will give a sample of grades 6-8 core academic teachers participating in one PLC school to share their experiences. This study has examined the perception of teachers on the PLC implementation; the structure and function of the PLC process, their role in the PLC activities, and the impact it has in student learning. There were 13 questions on the survey used to gather the data for this study. The first two questions were demographic in nature and the other 11 questions were focused on the PLC concept and its impact on student learning, teacher pedagogy, leadership practices, school culture, and school improvement efforts.

## **Data Collection**

Data collection for this research was done using an online Google forms web-based tool to deliver and manage the survey. The link to the Google forms was attached to the staff invitation to participate letter (Appendix D) and emailed to all the participants of this research. The survey remained open for two weeks and then was closed. A friendly reminder email was sent out to all potential teacher participants weekly to encourage them to partake in the survey during their non-contract hours if they are interested in the research before the closing date of the survey. Twenty-six respondents participated in the survey over a period of two weeks with a one hundred percent response rate. Participants' responses to the survey were collected and stored electronically using Google forms survey.

The collected data were analyzed inductively to respond to the first two background questions and the other eleven questions were analyzed to create six themes of teachers' perceptions of their work in PLCs.

### **Data Collection I: Survey Question 1**

*How many years have you been in the field of education and why did you choose this field?*

#### **Response to Survey Question 1 (Part A):**

Survey question 1 will be answered in two parts (Part A and Part B) since it was a two in one question.

Table 1 below described the range of years in educational service of the teacher participants of this research. The number of years in service of the participating teachers ranged from zero to twenty-five years, the total number of teacher participants was twenty-six, and the

actual teacher participants were numerically coded to avoid revealing any identifiable information.

Table 1

*Participants and their Range of Years in Service*

Participants and their Range of Years in Service		
Range of Years in Service	Number of Teachers	Teacher Participants
0 – 4 years	6	Teacher 1, Teacher 7, Teacher 23, Teacher 24, Teacher 25, and Teacher 26
5 - 10 years	9	Teacher 5, Teacher 6, Teacher 14, Teacher 15, Teacher 16, Teacher 17, Teacher 19, Teacher 20, and Teacher 21
11 - 15 years	5	Teacher 2, Teacher 3, Teacher 4, Teacher 12, and Teacher 18
16 – 20 years	4	Teacher 8, Teacher 10, Teacher 11, and Teacher 22
21 – 25 years	2	Teacher 9 and Teacher 13

The responses gathered from this background information question from the 26 total number teacher participants in terms of their range of years in the field of education were as follows; nine teachers were in the 5 to 10 years range of service, six teachers in the 0 to 4 years range of service, five teachers were in the 11 to 15 years category, four set of teachers were in the 16 to 20 years range of service, and only two teachers were in the 21 to 25 years range of service. There were a reasonable number of highly experienced teachers who participated in this study which suggested that most of the teacher participants' perception were based on their years of professional experiences implementing the PLC concept.

**Response to Survey Question 1 (Part B):**

The teacher participants responses to this survey question was categorized into three main themes for the sole purpose of shedding more light on the personal background information of most of the participating teachers in this study. About half of the teachers who participated in this study claimed that they entered the educational field with the intention of making a difference in the lives of students while other teachers entered the educational field because of their passion to teach, watching students learn and grow, the opportunity to work with kids, or because they had a positive influence from their former teacher or past experiences that made them decide to become an educator. There were two teachers who did not respond to this question for reasons only known to them. This suggested that most of the teachers that participated in this study were very passionate about their career choice and their profession as a teacher. This background information about the participating teachers would help us understand the level of authenticity of the perceptions or viewpoints made in this investigation.

**Enjoy Watching their Students Learn and Grow**

*“I like the personal connections I make in my classroom with my students while teaching my favorite subject. I love to see them grow and explore their creativity” (Teacher 1, 2018).*

Teacher 1 expressed how he or she derived professional satisfaction from making relevant connections with his or her students. Strong student-teacher interrelationships are crucial to meeting the needs of the whole child. This strong student-teacher interrelationship is helpful in the PLC concept because it ensures that teachers are focused on student learning, monitoring, and analyzing student data for growth.

*“I enjoy finding new ways to make materials exciting for kiddos so that they want to learn and do learn” (Teacher 4, 2018).* Teacher 4 suggested that finding new ways to increase student learning and engagement were significant in professional career as an educator which suggested that this teacher would enjoy collaborating and strategizing with other teachers to improve student learning outcome.

*“I teach because I enjoy helping children and seeing them grow” (Teacher 5, 2018).* Teacher 5 articulated how he or she derived professional fulfilment from making relevant connections with his or her students and watching them grow in knowledge. Tracking student growth provides some critical information to the PLC members on how to best serve and meet the needs of their students. Teacher 1, Teacher 4, and Teacher 5 had similar responses to this survey question because all three teachers expressed that they enjoyed monitoring their students’ growth. Monitoring students’ growth is ensuring that students’ are making remarkable progress and this would be a collective effort on the members of the PLCs.

### **Making a Difference in the Lives of Students**

*“I wanted to positively influence the next generation and build up children’s confidence in the STEM-field, especially girls” (Teacher 7, 2018).* Teacher 7 expressed how he or she took pleasure in positively impacting the next generation especially girls in the field of science, technology, engineering, and math.

*“I chose this field because I love kids and I wanted to make a difference” (Teacher 17, 2018).* Making a difference in students’ life entails building healthy relationships with the child. It is quite clear that teacher 17 has the same notion as the Teachers 7, who expressed the need for

strong student-teacher interrelationships as a motivating factor in their career choice as educators.

*“To help students develop the skills they will need to be successful” (Teacher 21, 2018).*

Helping students develop the skills they will need to be successful involves knowing or identifying every child represented in your classroom by their name and their need. This teacher would have to take the time to perform a needs assessment on students to determine the areas of deficits in each of her students. Teacher 21 has similar views as the other Teachers 7 and Teacher 17 who expressed the need for strong student-teacher interrelationships. Teacher 21 compared to Teacher 1, Teacher 4, and Teacher 5 did not mention the importance of tracking students’ growth.

### **Past Influence(s) Informed Present Career Choice**

*“I choose to teach because of the teachers I have had in the past that made an impact on me” (Teacher 15, 2018).* Teacher 15 shared how he or she was positively impacted by his or her teacher which supported the notion made by the other previously mentioned Teacher 5 and Teacher 7 that strong student-teacher interrelationships are integral to meeting the needs of the whole child. His or her experience(s) with his or her own teacher played a vital role in the decision-making process of his or her present career choice as an educator.

*“I am from a family of educators, both parents are retired teachers, and two brothers are band directors, it’s in our blood I suppose” (Teacher 24, 2018).* Teacher 24 expressed how his or her career as an educator was informed by the trend in his or her family’s past and present careers in the educational field. Most of the teacher participants’ responses to this survey question articulated the need for ongoing and consistent progress monitoring and measuring

students' growth. These similar responses suggested that this practice was informed by the PLC process and that consistent progress monitoring is an essential component in determining the effectiveness or quality of instruction and student learning progression. Thus, it is critical for PLC members to collaboratively determine and provide routines for monitoring students' growth and achievement as supportive evidence of effective instruction and student learning.

### **Data Collection II: Survey Question 2**

*How many years have you been working with the members of your assigned PLC team?*

### **Responses to Survey Question 2:**

Table 2 below describes the number of years that the teacher participants had spent collaborating with their PLC team. The number of years teacher participants had spent collaborating with their PLC team ranged from one to four years, the total number of teacher participants was twenty-six, and the actual teacher participants were numerically coded to avoid disclosing any identifiable information.

Table 2

*Participants and the Number of Years Spent Collaborating with PLC team*

Participants and the Number of Years Spent Collaborating with PLC team		
Number of Years	Number of Teachers	Teacher Participants
1 <sup>st</sup> Year	13	Teacher 5, Teacher 7, Teacher 10, Teacher 11, Teacher 12, Teacher 15, Teacher 18, Teacher 21, Teacher 22, Teacher 23, Teacher 24, Teacher 25, Teacher 26
2 <sup>nd</sup> Year	4	Teacher 3, Teacher 14, Teacher 17, Teacher 20,
3 <sup>rd</sup> Year	5	Teacher 1, Teacher 4, Teacher 8, Teacher 9, Teacher 16
4 <sup>th</sup> Year	4	Teacher 2, Teacher 6, Teacher 13, Teacher 19,

Table 2 showed that there were a higher number of teachers who had been working with their PLC team for the very first time compared to the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> year collaborative PLC teams. Most of the teacher participants in this study have been collaboratively planning lesson instruction, strategizing to improve student learning, analyzing data for results, and collectively monitoring student learning progress together for more than a year. These teacher participants could benefit more from the quality of their collaborative planning time in their respective PLCs.

### **Data Collection III: Survey Question 3**

*Based on your professional experience, how would you describe your role in your team's PLC process that supports student learning?*

#### **Responses to Survey Question 3:**

Everyone participated by responding to this survey question, sharing the ideas, and strategies that he or she uses to ensure students learning. Participants responses to this question varied and two of the teachers' responses did not really respond straightforwardly to the question. Some of the roles described in the PLC process that reinforced student learning was sharing strategies that work, differentiated instruction, collaborative lesson planning, observing and learning, and developing SMART goals. Collaborative lesson planning and sharing strategies that work was mentioned by most of the participating teachers. Some of the participating teachers' responses are displayed by their themes below:

#### **Collaborative Lesson Planning and Sharing Strategies that Work**

*"My team is constantly incorporating ways to challenge our student's creative learning process. I frequently contribute by bringing my ideas to group PLC meetings and by sharing strategies that have worked for my kids" (Teacher 1, 2018).* Teacher 1's response to this

question prompt suggested that he or she perceived that the role in his or her team's PLC that supports student learning was collaboration and sharing of relevant strategies that support the teaching and learning process. When teachers collectively work together to identify ways to challenge student learning, it improves the level of collaboration and the quality of instruction delivered in the classroom (Mertler, 2018). True experts or "master teachers" are those who frequently and systematically reflect on their actions and performance as well as the consequences of those actions (Mertler, 2018).

*"Input problem resolution by creating meaningful solutions to help students achieve individual success and organization"* (Teacher 3, 2018). Teacher 3's answer to this question was similar to that of Teacher 1 which suggested that he or she supposed that the role in his or her team's PLC process that supports student learning could also be categorized as the sharing of relevant strategies that support the teaching and learning process. Being solution-oriented informs the practices of the PLC members as a collaborative team. The principal purpose of learning for all cannot be accomplished if the members of a PLC team work in isolation.

*"Even though I am new, my colleagues have been great about including my thoughts and ideas in planning"* (Teacher 23, 2018). Teacher 23's response to this question emphasized the same notion as Teacher 1 and Teacher 3 that he or she assumed that the role in his or her team's PLC process that supports student learning could be described as sharing of relevant strategies to support the teaching and learning process because including a teacher's thoughts and ideas in the collaborative lesson planning activity is a teaching strategy for sharing best practices. Teacher 23 response to this question reveals that collaboration among teachers functions in such a way that his or her PLC team members were willing to learn from both new and veteran teachers the best

strategies for improving student learning. Thus, the most commonly mentioned role in the PLC process that supports students learning was sharing effective teaching strategies and implementing the shared strategies in their various classrooms.

### **Developing SMART Goals and Differentiated Instruction**

*“As a new team member, I would focus on adding differentiation when applicable”* (Teacher 15, 2018). Teacher 15’s response to this question supports that of Teacher 1, Teacher 3 and Teacher 23 because he or she supposed that the role in his or her team’s PLC process that supports student learning could be described as the sharing and implementation of relevant strategies to support the teaching and learning process because adding differentiation is a teaching technique that improves instruction for diverse students.

As a new member to this PLC team, Teacher 15 perceived that the best way he or she could impact his or her classroom teaching and learning practices was to focus his or her professional learning on differentiated instruction. Collaboration represents a systemic process in PLCs. Teachers use the PLC platform to identify their individual strengths and weaknesses and to learn from other members of the PLC team. Each teacher’s classroom reflects the diversity of their communities and it includes a mix of students’ cultural background, interest, learning styles, and needs. Thus, it is crucial for teachers to differentiate their lesson instruction for the benefit of their student representations.

### **Observational Learning**

*“My partner is awesome because she always adds other resources to brighten up our curriculum for the students to better help them grasp concepts”* (Teacher 4, 2018). Teacher 4’s response to this question was also similar to Teacher 1 and Teacher 3 responses which suggested

that he or she also assumed that the role in his or her team's PLC process that supports student learning could be characterized as sharing of relevant strategies to support the teaching and learning process because adding resources to brighten up the curriculum for students to better help them grasp concepts is a form of sharing relevant strategies. However, teachers cannot determine the extent to which students are learning without consistently seeking evidences of student learning through result orientation. Teacher 4 expression of how effective her partner's ideas was showed what she had observed and learned because he or she did not express how his or her own personal role contributed to the PLC process in supporting student learning but only mentioned that of his or her partner's role.

#### **Data Collection IV: Survey Question 4**

*How has your involvement and participation in the PLC process influenced your professional practices?*

#### **Survey Responses to Question 4:**

Table 3 below described the degree of involvement and participation of teacher participants that influenced their professional practices. There were three common thematic responses derived from this survey question, the total number of teacher participants was twenty-six, and the actual teacher participants were numerically coded to avert identifiable information.

Table 3

*Teachers' Involvement and Participation Influence on Professional Practices*

Teachers' Involvement and Participation Influence on Professional Practices		
Common Thematic Responses	Number of Teachers	Teacher Participants
Improved Professional Growth and Expertise	16	Teacher 1, Teacher 2, Teacher 4, Teacher 5, Teacher 6, Teacher 7, Teacher 9, Teacher 10, Teacher 14, Teacher 17, Teacher 19, Teacher 20,

		Teacher 21, Teacher 24, Teacher 25, Teacher 26
Encouraged Risk Taking	5	Teacher 3, Teacher 8, Teacher 13, Teacher 15, Teacher 18
Reduced Teacher Isolation	5	Teacher 11, Teacher 16, Teacher 22, Teacher 12, Teacher 23

Table 3 shows a visual summary to the question which suggested that most teacher participants perceived that their collaborative time as a PLC team contributed to their professional growth and expertise. The teachers' responses to this question were categorized into 3 main thematic perceptions: improved professional growth, reduced teacher isolation, and encouraged risk-taking based on the common terms used in the responses. There were sixteen teachers out of the twenty-six total participating teachers who expressed that PLC improved their professional growth, five teachers alleged that PLC reduced teacher isolation and another set of five teachers assumed that PLC encouraged risk-taking among team members. Below are some of the participants' responses to this question by their categorical themes:

### **Improved Professional Growth and Expertise**

*“Yes, I have highly grown as a teacher. It has helped me get organized and clarified misconceptions while reinforcing teaching expectations” (Teacher 1, 2018).* Teacher 1 response to this question prompt suggested that his or her involvement and participation in the PLC process influenced her professional practices by improving his or her professional growth and expertise because clarifying misconceptions while reinforcing the teaching expectations enhances a teacher's pedagogy. Being a member of his or her PLC team has empowered Teacher 1 to engage in collective inquiry into both best practices in teaching and best in student learning. Teacher 1 response suggested that the collective attempt of PLC members to arrive at a

consensus on vital learning outcomes enabled him or her to reinforce the necessary learning expectations.

*“Two heads are better than one. I love tossing ideas back and forth and making them better between the two of us than I could have ever done alone” (Teacher 4, 2018).* Teacher 4’s answer to this question prompt was similar to that of Teacher 1 who mentioned that his or her involvement and participation in the PLC process positively impacted her professional practices by refining his or her professional growth and expertise due to the elimination of teacher isolation in the PLC process. Working as a grade level PLC team encouraged Teacher 4 to perceive all his or her practices in light of their impact on student learning.

*“I have grown as a teacher because of PLC” (Teacher 6, 2018).* Teacher 6’s response to this question prompt revealed that his or her involvement and participation in the PLC process influenced her professional practices by refining his or her professional growth, which was like what Teacher 1 and Teacher 4 expressed in their responses.

*“It has raised my professional practices due to fresh ideas and the latest research and laws in my field” (Teacher 9, 2018).* Teacher 9’s answer to this question reinforced the idea that Teacher 1, Teacher 4, and Teacher 6 suggested that his or her involvement and participation in the PLC process positively influenced her professional practices by enhancing his or her professional growth and expertise because the teacher received fresh ideas and applied latest research studies in their professional practices.

### **Encouraged Risk Taking**

*“I take ideas that are shared out and practice them. If it works, I keep it, if not, it gets thrown out” (Teacher 3, 2018).* Teacher 3 response to this question ascertain how he or she

utilize the ideas that she gets from his or her collaborative planning time in his or her classroom. He or she mentioned that ideas or strategies that work effectively in his or her classroom are keepsakes and ideas that do not work, or ineffective strategies are discarded.

*“It has helped me share out and not be afraid to let my voice be heard” (Teacher 18, 2018).* Teacher 18 acknowledged how the PLC process and practices have really encouraged him or her in making informed decision about what to implement in classroom as best teaching strategies. Teacher 3 and Teacher 18 are comparable in their responses to this question.

### **Reduced Teacher Isolation**

*“The relationships that I have built have been vital in in allowing me to ask questions regarding content and best practices” (Teacher 12, 2018).* Teacher 12’s response to this question prompt pointed out that his or her involvement and participation in the PLC process influenced her professional practices by improving his or her professional growth and expertise because her PLC practices allowed him or her to work in a trustworthy environment and to be willing to seek new ideas regarding best practices in her content area. Teacher 12 response was categorized as comparable to Teacher 1, Teacher 4, and Teacher 6 responses.

*“I have benefitted from working with people who have different approach to teaching by hearing about what works for them and adapting it to my personal style” (Teacher 21, 2018).* Teacher 21’s answer to this question prompt was comparable to Teacher 1, Teacher 4, Teacher 6, and Teacher 12 who mentioned that his or her involvement and participation in the PLC process positively impacted her professional practices by refining his or her professional growth and expertise in the PLC process. The sharing of ideas and the implementation of the new ideas has permitted this teacher to take risk and grow professionally.

The responses to this survey question produced one of the themes for this research (PLCs and teacher pedagogy). Teacher responses to this question prompt encouraged the idea that improving the quality of instruction in the classroom increases student learning. This suggested that PLC practices do enhance teachers' pedagogy and improve student learning. In a culture of teacher isolation, the individual teacher is the focus of improvement. In an era of interdependent connections, relationships, and interactions, the focus is on creating a powerful system that encourages the ongoing improvement of the entire organization and not just the individual. Teachers are organized into grade level, course specific, or interdisciplinary collaborative teams in which educators are encouraged to work interdependently to achieve a common goal to improve student learning.

#### **Data Collection V: Survey Question 5**

*In your opinion, what do you think constitutes the greatest challenge in your PLC team's activities that deflected the focus from student learning?*

#### **Responses to Survey Question 5:**

Table 4 below displayed the teacher participants' perceptions of what they considered to be the greatest PLC challenge. There were four common thematic responses resulting from this survey question, the total number of teacher participants was twenty-six, and the actual teacher participants were numerically coded to avoid revealing any identifiable information.

Table 4

*PLCs' Greatest Challenge*

PLCs Greatest Challenge		
Common Thematic Responses	Number of Teachers	Teacher Participants
Insufficient Collaborative Time	10	Teacher 1, Teacher 4, Teacher 5, Teacher 6, Teacher 8, Teacher 9, Teacher 10, Teacher 14, Teacher 20, Teacher 21,
Excessively Data Driven	4	Teacher 13, Teacher 15, Teacher 24, and Teacher 25
Distractions	4	Teacher 3, Teacher 11, Teacher 12, and Teacher 16
Conflict	3	Teacher 7, Teacher 18, and Teacher 22

Table 4 provided a visual representation of the data gathered for this question. The table suggested that insufficient collaborative time was the greatest PLC challenge. The common responses inductively gathered from all 26 participants to this question in regards to PLC Challenges are as follows; ten teachers expressed that the greatest challenge of the PLC process was insufficient collaborative time structured to the daily school system, five teachers were uncertain of what they perceived as the greatest PLC challenge, four teachers claimed that the greatest challenge was setting aside unexpected distractions during collaborative time amongst team members, and four teachers alleged that the greatest challenge of the team was the excessive time and effort utilized in performing data analysis and data driven instruction, three teachers claim that the greatest PLC challenge that deflected the focus from student learning was conflicting ideas during collaborative time. Some of the participating teacher's responses are evident below:

### **Insufficient Collaborative Time**

*“In my case, it is the fact that we meet less frequently. We meet few times when school is in sessions and after school” (Teacher 1, 2018).* Teacher 1’s response to this question stated that the greatest challenge in his or her PLC team’s practices was insufficient collaborative time. PLC team members only have certain day and minutes during the school week structured into the school schedule for collaborative planning. The list of PLC team activities that need to be done each week cannot be accomplished without a sufficient time allotted during school day and some PLC teams stay behind after school hours to collaborate.

*“Not having enough time to plan together and managing all of the responsibilities of being a teacher” (Teacher 5, 2018).* Teacher 5’s explanation to this question was like Teacher 1 who suggested that the greatest challenge in his or her PLC team’s practices was also insufficient collaborative time needed to effectively plan and manage all of the other PLC team members responsibilities. If a process have been set in place by schools to ensure that members of a PLC team use their collaborative planning time to clarify the essential learnings for each grade level learning standards, unit instruction; establish consistent pacing, create common formative assessment, establish grading criteria to monitor student learning, use evidence of student learning to identify student learning needs, analyze data, create intervention and extension activities for meeting the needs of students, and all the other miscellaneous PLC activities, then Teacher 1 and Teacher 5 perceptions that there was not enough time allocated during the school day for PLC members to collaborate and collectively engage in all of these PLC activities constitute a challenge in the PLC process.

## **Distractions**

*“Basically, off topic life conversations that interrupt or take away time from content we need to discuss” (Teacher 12, 2018).* Teacher 12’s response to this question was unlike Teacher 1 and Teacher 5. Teacher 12 expressed that the greatest challenge in his or her PLC team’s practices were inevitable distractions that cause the PLC team to distraught from the student focused conversations. This suggest that relationship amongst the members in Teacher 12’s PLC team must be very strong and they must have been doing PLC together for years to be free enough to share their personal information that lead to off topic life conversations that disrupt the PLC process.

*“I think negative comments deflect the focus as well as not being solution oriented” (Teacher 16, 2018).* Teacher 16 like Teacher 12 expressed that negative comments are distracting conversations that tend to deflect the focus from student learning and being solution oriented to students’ needs during their collaborative planning time. Distracting conversations could hinder the progress of the PLC team in their collective efforts to use their limited collaborative time effectively and to be solution oriented.

## **Excessively Data Driven**

*“Focusing too much on data” (Teacher 24, 2018).* Teacher 24’s explanation to this question was not comparable to Teacher 1, Teacher 5, nor Teacher 12 because Teacher 24 indicated that the greatest challenge in his or her PLC team’s practices was the amount of time they had spent focusing on data. Analyzing data is paramount in the PLC process but data analysis itself is not effective if it’s not being used to guide the decision-making process for

planning intervention activities for struggling learners and extension activities for students who show mastery of the learning standard.

*“Data collection and its effectiveness because everyone doesn’t take it seriously or use it” (Teacher 25, 2018).* Teacher 25’s descriptive response to this question was comparable to Teacher 24 but not comparable to Teacher 1, Teacher 5, nor Teacher 12. Teacher 25 suggested that greatest the challenge in his or her PLC team’s process was his or her PLC team being excessively data driven and having no follow-through on the use of such data. It is one thing to take the time to breakdown the assessment data, plan intervention and extension activities, and another for teachers to be willing to effectively implement the suggested lesson activities in their individual classroom to meet the needs of the identified students.

Data analysis could be a very daunting task for an individual teacher and a challenging task for a PLC team because teachers must be transparent to their team about their student learning outcome. Low performing student might indirectly suggest low performing teacher. The PLC process demands systemic approach to the use of data to guide lesson instruction and student intervention plans. This survey question documented the perceptions of teachers on PLCs Challenges theme for this study.

### **Conflict**

*The greatest challenge in my PLC team that deflected the focus from student learning has been disagreements on best practices or significance of activities to be incorporated in our plans (Teacher 7, 2018).* Teacher 7 articulated that his or her PLC members sometimes have conflicting ideas that take away from the team’s focus on student learning. The process of trying to reach a consensus on best practices could constitute a challenge for some PLC teams.

*“The challenge is when there are conflicts, or a member not contributing to the team. It's really hard to be a "community" when only a couple people are doing the work” (Teacher 22, 2018).* Teacher 22’s response to this question suggested that conflict could be caused by any factor such as a member refusal to contribute or participate in the PLC process and only a set of members are participating and contributing to the PLC process. The PLC process is supposed to be a collective effort of all the members of a collaborative team. It could become a daunting task when only the same set of members are contributing or participating in the PLC process.

#### **Data Collection VI: Survey Question 6**

*From your perspective, what leadership practice(s) do you think encourages a collaborative culture and discourages teacher isolation within the school environment?*

#### **Responses to Survey Question 6:**

Table 5 below described the collaborative culture leadership practices that the teacher participants indicated to be beneficial to the PLC process. There were five common thematic responses derived from this survey question, the total number of teacher participants was twenty-six, and the actual teacher participants were numerically coded to prevent identifiable information.

Table 5

#### *Collaborative Culture Leadership Practices*

Collaborative Culture Leadership Practices		
<b>Common Teachers’ Responses</b>	<b>Number of Teachers</b>	<b>Teacher Participants</b>
Providing Structured Collaborative Time	12	Teacher 6, Teacher 7, Teacher 10, Teacher 13, Teacher 15, Teacher 18, Teacher 19, Teacher 20, Teacher 21, Teacher 22, Teacher 23, Teacher 24

Providing Clear Vision and Open Communication	9	Teacher 1, Teacher 3, Teacher 4, Teacher 8, Teacher 12, Teacher 14, Teacher 16, Teacher 25, Teacher 26
Shared Decision-making, Respect, and Trust	5	Teacher 2, Teacher 5, Teacher 9, Teacher 11, Teacher 17

Table 5 collectively suggested that providing structured collaborative time for PLC members was the most effective leadership practice that encouraged a collaborative culture, a clear vision and open communication was the second vital leadership practices that discouraged teacher isolation and shared decision-making, trust, and respect for PLC members do boost a collaborative culture to some extent. Twelve teachers out of 26 total teacher participants claimed that providing structured collaborative time is a leadership practice that promote a collaborative culture, nine teachers believed that providing a clear vision and open communication to PLC teams are the best leadership practices that encourage collaborative culture, five teachers expressed that providing shared decision-making, respect, and trust are the leadership practices that commonly encourage a collaborative culture. Below are some the original responses of the teacher participants by their themes;

### **Providing Structured Collaborative Time**

*“Meeting frequently on a regular basis with other school members” (Teacher 1, 2018).*

Teacher 1’s response to this question suggested that the leadership practice(s) that encouraged a collaborative culture and discouraged teacher isolation within the school environment was providing structured collaborative time during the school day for the PLC members to meet. It is

imperative for school leaders to structure their school daily schedule in such way that the PLC process functions efficiently.

*“Structured or assigned work with clear deadlines. If we are not made to work together, we will still get our work done but we will only have one perspective or lenses to look from”* (Teacher 3, 2018). Teacher 3’s response to this question proposed that the leadership practice(s) that encouraged a collaborative culture and discouraged teacher isolation within the school environment was also providing structured collaborative time during the school day for the PLC members to effectively collaborate. Teacher 3 and Teacher 1 responses were comparable.

*“Providing time within the school day to collaborate”* (Teacher 6, 2018). Teacher 6’s response to this question prompt was comparable to that of Teacher 1 and Teacher 3. Teacher 6 response disclosed that the leadership practice(s) that encouraged a collaborative culture and discouraged teacher isolation within the school environment was ensuring that teachers were provided a structured collaborative time during the school day for the PLC members to effectively collaborate.

*“Having a shared collaborative time and a document to complete common lesson plans”* (Teacher 21, 2018). Teacher 21’s reasoning and response to this question was comparable to Teacher 1 and Teacher 3 but not compatible with Teacher 4, Teacher 5, nor Teacher 6 perceptions. Teacher 21 response expressed that the leadership practice(s) that encouraged a collaborative culture and discouraged teacher isolation within the school environment was ensuring that teachers were provided structured collaborative time during the school day for the PLC members to effectively collaborate. Most of the participating teachers mentioned structured collaborative time as an effective leadership practice that encouraged a collaborative culture and

discouraged teacher isolation. Thus, PLC meetings are intentional structured scheduled times and they do not occur impulsively.

### **Providing Clear Vision and Open Communication**

*“I do think some teachers need to be reminded of what PLC means. My partner did not support change. It caused a rift between us and made the year extra hard and beyond what it should have been. Had she been willing to work together it would have been so much easier”* (Teacher 4, 2018). Teacher 4’s answer to this question showed that the leadership practice(s) that encouraged a collaborative culture and discouraged teacher isolation within the school environment was ensuring that there was a clear vision and open communication amongst the members of the PLC team to effectively work together. Teacher 4 response to this question was not comparable to Teacher 1 and Teacher 3 responses. A commitment to high levels of learning and the provision of viable curriculum for every course requires clear and open communication within the school leadership teams and among the members of the PLC team.

*“Purposefully checking in with each individual member at the PLC meetings, seeking input from all parties on important topics, being goal and solution oriented, being willing to help, and following an agenda to maximize use of time”* (Teacher 7, 2018). Teacher 7’s response to this question was compatible to that of Teacher 4 but not comparable to that of Teacher 1 and Teacher 3. Teacher 7 clearly indicated that the leadership practice(s) that encouraged a collaborative culture and discouraged teacher isolation within the school environment was also ensuring that there was a clear vision and open communication amongst the members of the PLC team to effectively work together.

### **Shared Decision-making, Respect, and Trust**

*“I think that in order to be collaborative it is important to have a focused agenda, be organized, and for everyone to have a clear idea of what their role is and how they can best contribute. I think that people isolate themselves when they feel overruled or don't agree with what the group chooses to do” (Teacher 5, 2018).* Teacher 5 response to this survey question expressed different leadership practices such as having a focused agenda for the collaborative team, being organized, and giving all the PLC team members shared-leadership in the decision-making process. The leadership practice of allowing team members to contribute to the decision made by the PLC team assures the members trust and shows respect for others’ opinions.

*“Trying to have discussions that can lead to generating ideas where all stakeholders have input” (Teacher 10, 2018).* Teacher 10’s response and explanation to this question was not compatible with Teacher 1, Teacher 3, Teacher 4, nor Teacher 6 in which he or she disclosed that the leadership practice(s) that encouraged a collaborative culture and discouraged teacher isolation within the school environment was ensuring that teachers were provided opportunities for shared decision-making. Shared decision-making involves trust and respect amongst team members. Hence, the PLC process requires ownership that comes from the opportunities provided to the PLC team members to participate in defining change and the flexibility to adapt to the proposed change.

### **Data Collection VII: Survey Question 7**

*Based on your professional experience, do think a successful PLC can account for enhanced professional practices? Please explain your response.*

**Responses to Survey Question 7:**

All 26 participants responded with a “yes” to this survey question on school culture, 100% of the participating teachers strongly agreed to the notion that a successful PLC can account for improved professional practices that do leverage student learning. Most of the teacher participants expressed that PLC process has improved their professional practices with new teaching strategies and very few teachers shared that the PLC process enhanced their problem-solving skills. Below are some of the participating teachers’ responses and their corresponding explanation to the question:

**Improved Professional Practices with New Teaching Strategies**

*“Yes, meeting with your PLC team can help one grow professionally. It can bring new ideas to your teaching strategies, solve particular challenges that one might be facing with a particular teaching concept of lesson” (Teacher 1, 2018).* Teacher 1’s response and detailed explanation to this question suggested that a successful PLC can certainly account for improved professional practices because these enhanced practices are evident in the teaching strategies that the PLC members derived from their assemblies as a collaborative team.

*“Yes, a successful PLC or any team of people working together with the same vision is purpose will leak into enhanced professional practices” (Teacher 2, 2018).* Teacher 2’s response was comparable to Teacher 1. Teacher 2 justification to this question expressed that a successful PLC can certainly account for improved professional practices if there are high expectations put in place for purposeful meeting and collaborative times.

*“Yes, it’s an opportunity to share and learn through experiences” (Teacher 3, 2018).* Teacher 3’s response and detailed account to this question was comparable to Teacher 1 and

Teacher 2 which inferred that a successful PLC can certainly account for improved professional practices because this structured collaborative times promote opportunities for the PLC team members to share and learn the best teaching strategies that maximize their student learning.

*“Yes, I do. I feel like working with my partner has been awesome. I am such a better teacher because of her and her wisdom to share with me so that we can be sure we hit all learning styles for all our kiddos” (Teacher 4, 2018).* Teacher 4’s answer and thorough explanation to this question was like Teacher 1, Teacher 2, and Teacher 3 responses which expressed that a successful PLC can undoubtedly account for improved professional practices because this structured collaborative times support teacher teamwork for professional learning and improvement of teaching practices. PLCs provide its members with an on-site professional learning environment that allow teachers to improve their professional practices for the sole purpose of increasing student learning.

*“I do think a good PLC will enhance professional practice” (Teacher 5, 2018).* Teacher 5’s response to this question was comparable to Teacher 1, Teacher 2, Teacher 3, and Teacher 4. Teacher 5 gave his or her opinion that a successful PLC can account for improved professional practices.

*“Absolutely, the PLC helped me to become a better teacher” (Teacher 6, 2018).* Teacher 6’s response to this question was quite comparable to Teacher 1, Teacher 2, Teacher 3, Teacher 4, and Teacher 5 responses. Teacher 6 confirmed that a successful PLC can most definitely account for his or her improved professional practices

*“Definitely, I am working into a subject I know only the surface level and being able to collaborate with others who have higher knowledge and have fine-tuned their practices has*

*helped me accelerate my proficiency” (Teacher 12, 2018).* Teacher 12’s answer and thorough explanation to this question prompt supported Teacher 1, Teacher 2, Teacher 3, Teacher 4, Teacher 5, and Teacher 6 responses. Teacher 12 expressed that a successful PLC can undeniably account for improved professional practices because structured collaborative times supported Teacher 12 in her professional learning and improvement from her surface level teaching practices.

### **Enhanced Solution Oriented Practices**

*“Yes, I think a successful PLC will stray away from negativity and towards positivity and solution- oriented staff members” (Teacher 16, 2018).* Teacher 16 expressed that staff members enhanced their professional practices during their collaborative times by being solution orientated.

*“Yes, it helps a great deal to talk about what works and what doesn’t” (Teacher 19, 2018).* Teacher 19 response suggested that a successful PLC can account for improved professional practices because it provides its members with an avenue for reflecting on bad and best teaching practices which could lead to increase student learning outcome if frankly done.

### **Data Collection VIII: Survey Question 8**

*Based on your professional experience, do you think a successful PLC can account for increased student learning? Please explain your response.*

### **Responses to Survey Question 8:**

The responses obtained from this question revealed that 24 participating teachers strongly agree to the notion that a successful PLC can account for increased student learning while 2 participating teachers partially agree about the same notion. Most of the participating teachers

expressed that successful PLC increased student learning by providing a channel for sharing ideas while few claimed that it provided an opportunity for collective responsibility to the team.

Below are some the supporting responses of the teacher participants;

### **A Channel for Sharing Ideas**

*“Yes, as new ideas are put to work, student can benefit from approach which might have worked for other students” (Teacher 1, 2018).* Teacher 1’s response and explanation to this question suggested that a successful PLC can account for increased student learning because students could positively benefit from new ideas or teaching approaches that were deemed beneficial to other students within the PLC team members.

*“Most certainly, sharing ideas back and forth and breaking things together makes for fantastic curriculum that others in the district have actually been requesting from us to use” (Teacher 4, 2018).* Teacher 4’s answer and explanation to this question was like that of teacher 1 which showed that a successful PLC can account for increased student learning because students could positively benefit from new ideas or teaching approaches that were deemed beneficial to other students within the PLC team members.

*“I think that PLCs can increase student learning. I think that people sharing good ideas are always helpful” (Teacher 5, 2018).* Teacher 5’s response and explanation to this question was comparable to Teacher 1 and Teacher 4. Teacher 5 explained that a successful PLC can account for increased student learning because students could positively benefit from the new ideas or teaching approaches that were deemed beneficial to other students within the PLC members.

## Collective Responsibility

*“Yes, if teachers believe all kids in the building are their kids, they will work collectively for student success” (Teacher 15, 2018).* Teacher 15’s response and explanation to this question suggested that a successful PLC can account for increased student learning if educators recognized each student in the school community as theirs and collectively work together to increase student learning.

*“Yes, because if students are missing a concept across the department, we can implement different tactics in order to fill the gaps whether in their current grade level or by vertically aligning curriculum” (Teacher 20, 2018).* Teacher 20’s response and explanation to this question revealed that a successful PLC can account for increased student learning because students could positively benefit from new teaching tactics that were deemed beneficial to student learning. Teacher 20 response was comparable to Teacher 1, Teacher 4, Teacher 5, and Teacher 15 responses. Thus, a collaborative culture refines the PLC members instructional practices through the sharing of strategic ideas proven to enhance the quality of instruction.

*“By meeting with our PLCs, we are able to determine the needs of all our students. We come together and scaffold our lessons. We also find that we have common areas that need improvement” (Teacher 23, 2018).* Teacher 23’s response and reasoning to this question suggested that a successful PLC can account for increased student learning because students could positively benefit from the needs assessment data analysis performed by the PLC members and the new teaching procedures that were deemed beneficial to student learning.

### Data Collection IX: Survey Question 9

*In your opinion, what PLC team activities effectively enhance student academic achievements?*

#### Responses to Survey Question 9:

Table 6 below was intended to display the perceptions of teachers on the PLC activities that positively impact student achievement. There were four common thematic responses derived from this survey question, the total number of teacher participants was twenty-six, and the actual teacher participants were numerically coded to prevent identifiable information.

Table 6

#### *PLC Activities Positive Impact on Student Academic Achievement*

PLC Activities Positive Impact on Student Academic Achievement		
Common Teachers' Responses	Number of Teachers	Teacher Participants
Collaboratively Planning Scope, Sequence, and Assessment	9	Teacher 2, Teacher 5, Teacher 6, Teacher 7, Teacher 12, Teacher 13, Teacher 15, Teacher 16, Teacher 18
Peer Observation, Feedback, and Mentoring	6	Teacher 3, Teacher 11, Teacher 19, Teacher 21, Teacher 22, Teacher 23
Strategizing to Help Struggling Learners to be Successful	4	Teacher 8, Teacher 10, Teacher 17, Teacher 24
Collectively Analyzing Data	3	Teacher 9, Teacher 20, Teacher 25
Monitoring Students' Growth and Progress	3	Teacher 1, Teacher 14, Teacher 26

Table 6 described the common perceptions of teacher participants in response to this question. Nine teachers expressed that collaboratively planning scope, sequence, and

assessments were the most effective PLC team activities that enhanced student learning, six teachers suggested peer observation, feedback, mentoring were very efficient PLC team activities that enhanced student learning, three teachers stated that collectively analyzing data were highly effective PLC team activities, another set of three teachers perceived that monitoring students' growth and progress were substantial PLC team activities that resulted in enhanced student learning, and one teacher claimed that he or she was uncertain on how to respond to this question. Below are some of the supporting evidences of participants responses to this question:

### **Collaboratively Planning Scope, Sequence, and Assessments**

*“I think creating activities together is helpful. I think it is good for student achievement to norm grading and do backward planning so that everything is focused” (Teacher 5, 2018).*

Teacher 5's answer to this question expressed that a successful PLC can account for enhanced student achievement because students could positively benefit from the collective norms for grading and from the plans that PLC members use to design their lessons. The process of creating activities together is the collaborative piece of the PLC process. Norming grading system and backward planning are also necessary for improving the quality of instruction and collectively enhancing student achievement. Creating activities together and norming grades would enable teachers to easily detect any form of student achievement gaps.

*“Collaborating to plan the scope and sequence and assessments” (Teacher 7, 2018).*

Teacher 7's response to this question inferred that a successful PLC can account for enhanced student achievement because PLC functions to provide collaborative teams with the opportunity to effectively plan their scope and sequence equitably for all their students. Teacher 7 response was comparable to Teacher 5 response. Collaborating to plan the scope, sequence, and

assessment are key elements in the PLC process that promote equitable and viable curriculum or learning standard for all students.

### **Strategizing to Help Struggling Learners to become Successful**

*“Collaborating on strategies to help struggling students be successful” (Teacher 8, 2018).* Teacher 8’s response to this question was comparable to Teacher 5 and Teacher 7 responses. Teacher 8 suggested that a successful PLC can account for enhanced student achievement because struggling learners could positively benefit from the process of sharing effective and non-effective teaching strategies by PLC members.

*“Better awareness of student issues that colleagues may be dealing with” (Teacher 11, 2018).* Teacher 11’s response to this question prompt was very similar to that Teacher 8 which showed that a successful PLC can account for enhanced student achievement because struggling learners would be identified and student issues would enable teachers to collectively make informed decisions on how to assist struggling learners and student could positively benefit from the process of sharing effective and non-effective teaching strategies by PLC members.

### **Peer Observation, Feedback, and Mentoring**

*“I think teachers using strong classroom ideas from other teachers benefit students and not being afraid to use what other teachers do if it is effective” (Teacher16, 2018).* Teacher 16 reinforced the importance observing other teachers and implementing their effective strategies in the classroom. Peer observation is a great way for PLC members to gain valuable insights into their professional practices and teacher mentoring could be very beneficial for new teachers who need to strengthen or improve their professional practices. It is essential for veteran teachers to assure new teachers by mentoring and modeling their best practices. Teachers who perform

observations learn new strategies and they are encouraged by other teacher's professional practices to do better.

*"The opportunity to watch each other teach is very impactful. It is one thing to talk about what you are doing differently, but it is easier to reflect on your own practices when you see another teacher go through the same content as you"* (Teacher 21, 2019). Teacher 21 suggested that student learning outcome could be increased by improving the quality of instruction through observation and feedback. Through peer observations, feedback, and mentoring teachers identify their individual professional areas of strengths and weaknesses and they would be more likely to take active steps towards improving their teaching practices.

### **Collectively Analyzing Data**

*"Discussions of how lessons worked and time frame"* (Teacher 19, 2018). Teacher 19's answer to this question was comparable to that of Teacher 7 which indicated that a successful PLC can account for enhanced student achievement because PLC functions to provide collaborative teams with the opportunity to effectively plan their scope and sequence equitably for all their students.

*"Data collection among teachers who share the same classes so that there is comparison of what teaching practices are effective for which lessons"* (Teacher 25, 2018). Teacher 25's response to this question was similar that of Teacher 1 which indicated that a successful PLC can account for enhanced student achievement because students could positively benefit from the process of teachers using data to drive their instruction by tracking student progress and comparing results from their data analysis.

## **Monitoring Students' Growth and Progress**

*“Tracking students' progress and comparing students' growth” (Teacher 1, 2018).*

Teacher 1's response to this question suggested that a successful PLC can account for enhanced student achievement because students could positively benefit from the process of teachers using data to drive their instruction by tracking student progress and comparing results from their data analysis.

*“Looking at the whole group data is most beneficial for me to see where my students are lacking and how to focus my lessons” (Teacher 9, 2018).* Teacher 9 emphasized the need for PLC teams to collectively looking at the whole data group, identify achievement gaps, and how to strategize for Enhanced student learning and engagement. Data analysis could indirectly lead to monitoring student growth and progress.

The responses to this question revealed the perceptions of teachers on PLC team activities that effectively enhanced student learning; nine teachers perceived that collaboratively planning scope, sequence, and assessments are the most effective PLC team activities, six teachers claimed that peer observation, feedback, and mentoring were very critical PLC team activities, four teachers mentioned the need for PLC teams to partake in strategizing to help struggling learners to be successful, three teachers mentioned that monitoring students' growth and progress were crucial PLC team activities, three teachers believed that collaboratively analyzing data was an effective activity while one teacher was uncertain on how to respond to this guiding question.

**Data Collection X: Survey Question 10**

*How would you evaluate the effectiveness of your PLC team in meeting the needs of your campus improvement plans?*

**Responses to Survey Question 10:**

The analyzed responses to this question showed that nine teachers out of the 26 total participating teachers claimed that their PLC was highly effective in meeting the needs of their campus improvement plans, four teachers suggested that their PLC was effective, ten teachers were uncertain about how to respond to this question, and zero teachers perceived that their PLC is not effective in meeting the needs of their campus improvement plans. Below are some of the responses of the teacher participants to this survey question categorized into two themes:

**Effective**

*“Good” (Teacher 1, 2018).* Teacher 1’s response to this question suggested that the effectiveness of his or her PLC team in meeting the needs of his or her campus improvement plans can be possibly evaluated as effective.

*“Effective” (Teacher 18, 2018).* Teacher 18’s response to this question was comparable to Teacher 1’s answer which stated that the effectiveness of his or her PLC team in meeting the needs of his or her campus improvement plans can be evaluated as effective.

**Highly Effective**

*“8/10” (Teacher 3, 2018).* Teacher 3’s answer to this question was somewhat comparable to Teacher 1 response who stated that the effectiveness of his or her PLC team in meeting the needs of his or her campus improvement plans can be possibly evaluated as significantly effective.

*“I think we do great”* (Teacher 4, 2018). Teacher 4’s response to this question prompt was like Teacher 3 response which expressed that the effectiveness of his or her PLC team in meeting the needs of his or her campus improvement plans can be evaluated as highly effective.

*“Very effective”* (Teacher 6, 2018). Teacher 6’s answer to this question prompt was like Teacher 3 and Teacher 4 responses which documented that the effectiveness of his or her PLC team in meeting his or her campus improvement plans can be evaluated as highly effective.

*“Extremely”* (Teacher 20, 2018). Teacher 20’s answer to this question prompt was compatible with that of Teacher 3 and Teacher 4 responses. Teacher 20 suggested that the effectiveness of his or her PLC team in meeting the needs of his or her campus improvement plans can be evaluated as highly effective.

#### **Data Collection XI: Survey Question 11**

*In your opinion, what PLC team activities effectively support high quality professional development (PD) trainings?*

#### **Responses to Survey Question 11:**

Table 7 below was intended to display the perceptions of teachers on the PLC team activities that positively supports high quality professional development (PD) training. There were two common thematic responses derived from this survey question, the total number of teacher participants was twenty-six, and the actual teacher participants were numerically coded to prevent identifiable information.

Table 7

*PLC Team Activities that Supports High Quality PD Training*

PLC Team Activities that Supports High Quality PD Training		
<b>Common Teachers' Responses</b>	<b>Number of Teachers</b>	<b>Teacher Participants</b>
Collaboration / Curriculum Alignment	11	Teacher 1, Teacher 3, Teacher 5, Teacher 8, Teacher 11, Teacher 12 , Teacher 15, Teacher 20, Teacher 21, Teacher 24, Teacher 25
Sharing Best Practices	6	Teacher 4, Teacher 7, Teacher 9, Teacher 14, Teacher 19, Teacher 22,

Teachers' responses to this question varied. There were eleven teachers who expressed that collaboration and curriculum alignment were the PLC team activities that effectively supported high quality professional development (PD) trainings, seven teachers were uncertain about how to respond to this question, six teachers mentioned that sharing best practices and teaching strategies were effective ways to promote high quality PD trainings, and two teachers recommended that PD created by teachers were PLC team activities that could be utilized in the development of high quality PD trainings.

All these different responses could be classified into two main categories; collaboration / curriculum alignment and sharing best practices. Below are some of the authentic teacher responses to this question:

**Collaboration / Curriculum Alignment**

*"Meeting to discuss students' needs and crafting lessons accordingly"* (Teacher 24, 2018). Teacher 24's answer to this question was equivalent to that of Teacher 21 who

documented that the PLC team activities that effectively support high quality professional development trainings could be derived from teachers taking the time to identify their students' needs and using the data to appropriately respond to the learning needs of their students.

*“Letting us plan. Maybe teach us a neat new skill or app or something but then let us use it immediately before we get swamped and forget to even try it” (Teacher 4, 2018).* Teacher 4's answer to this question recognized that the PLC team activities that effectively support high quality professional development trainings could be derived from teachers applying the teaching strategies they have learned during their collaborative time in the classroom and evaluating its usefulness first before learning another new thing.

*“Professional development that was created by teachers” (Teacher 6, 2018).* Teacher 6's response to this question documented that the PLC team activities that effectively support high quality professional development trainings were professional learning presented by other teachers or their colleagues. This is probably because it is easier to receive instruction, learn, and apply one's learning from another educator who has and/or could be dealing with similar conditions in the classroom as the other members of the PLC team.

*“The greatest benefit is collaboration and sharing of best practices. Also having aligned goals and the same general material” (Teacher 7, 2018).* Teacher 7's response to this question was equivalent to Teacher 4 who expressed that the PLC team activities that effectively support high quality professional development trainings could be derived from sharing and applying the teaching strategies they have learned during their collaborative time in the classroom.

## Sharing Best Practices

*“When we exchange lesson ideas and share teaching strategies. When we analyze student data and track student growth” (Teacher 1, 2018).* Teacher 1’s response to this question suggested that the PLC team activities that effectively support high quality professional development trainings could be derived from teachers exchanging instructional plans or ideas, sharing effective teaching strategies, and collectively analyzing assessment data to determine student growth.

*“Training with research to back it is most highly effective” (Teacher 9, 2018).* Teacher 9’s answer to this question unlike the previous teachers recognized that the PLC team activities that effectively support high quality professional development trainings could result from using research studies support professional trainings.

*“Reflecting on CFA data providing an appropriate response” (Teacher 21, 2018).* Teacher 21’s response to this question documented that the PLC team activities that effectively supported high quality professional development trainings could be derived from teachers actually taking the time to reflect on their student’s common formative assessment data to determine how to appropriately respond to the learning needs of their students.

## Data Collection XII: Survey Question 12

*In your opinion, what PLC team activities effectively improve teaching strategies?*

### Responses to Survey Question 12:

Table 8 below was projected to display the perceptions of teachers on the PLC team activities that effectively improve teaching strategies. There were three common thematic responses derived from this survey question, the total number of teacher participants was twenty-

six, and the actual teacher participants were numerically coded to prevent identifiable information.

Table 8

*PLC Team Activities that Effectively Improve Teaching Strategies*

PLC Team Activities that Effectively Improve Teaching Strategies		
Common Teachers' Responses	Number of Teachers	Teacher Participants
Collaboratively Planning Scope, Sequence, and Assessments	8	Teacher 1, Teacher 3, Teacher 5, Teacher 7, Teacher 10, Teacher 11, Teacher 15, Teacher 20,
Sharing Effective Teaching Strategies	11	Teacher 2, Teacher 8, Teacher 9, Teacher 12, Teacher 14, Teacher 17, Teacher 21, Teacher 22, Teacher 23, Teacher 24, Teacher 25
Performing Observation and Walkthroughs	2	Teacher 6, Teacher 16,

The response to this survey can be categorized into three key viewpoints; collaboratively planning scope, sequence, and assessments, sharing effective teaching strategies, and performing observations and walkthroughs. The participating teachers' responses to this question were very extensive. Eleven set of teachers expressed that having sharing effective teaching strategies were very helpful, eight teachers shared that collaborative lesson plans, common formative assessment, taking the time to analyze and effectively use data to drive instruction were effective PLC team activities that improved teaching strategies, two teachers mentioned being able to observe and perform learning walkthroughs on other teachers were effective PLC team activities that enhanced teaching strategies, and five teachers were unsure on how to respond to this

question. Below are some of the consistent teachers' responses that supported this qualitative data analysis:

### **Collaboratively Planning Scope, Sequence, and Assessments**

*"Lesson building comparing growth data from assessments, and curriculum alignment"* (Teacher 1, 2018). Teacher 1's answer to this question suggested that the PLC team activities that effectively improved teaching strategies could be derived teachers collectively creating lesson plans from analyzing assessment data and using that data analysis to align the curriculum to fit the learning needs of their students. Curriculum alignment is necessary to ensure that there are no gaps that may hinder student academic progress. Monitoring student growth data from assessment provides the PLC team with supporting evidences for quality instruction, best practices, and student learning.

*"Having shared lesson plans, common formative assessments, and time to review"* (Teacher 7, 2018). Teacher 7's response to this question inferred that the PLC team activities that effectively improved teaching strategies could be determined from shared lesson plans, common formative assessments, and reflecting on professional practices.

*"Discussion about the nuts and bolts of the lesson"* (Teacher 11, 2018). Teacher 11's answer to this question suggested that the PLC team activities that effectively improved teaching strategies could be derived effective collaboration amongst PLC team members. Discussion about the nuts and bolts of the lesson refers collaboratively planning scope, sequence, and assessments for all students.

### **Sharing Effective Teaching Strategies**

*“Planning out and talking about specific students helps with strategies” (Teacher 17, 2018).* Teacher 17’s answer to this question expressed that the PLC team activities that effectively improved teaching strategies could be derived teachers collectively developing lesson plans and discussing specific strategies to improve student learning. Planning out is a key part of collaboration while talking about specific students helps with strategies reinforces the use of essential strategies that work best for students.

*“Discussing the impact of different methods on student achievement” (Teacher 21, 2018).* Teacher 21’s response to this question was comparable to Teacher 1 and Teacher 17 responses which suggested that the PLC team activities that positively impacted effective teaching strategies could be derived from teachers collectively evaluating their teaching practices for its effectiveness.

*“Sharing data, attending training sessions, for new differentiation strategies in the classroom and discussing with your department how to incorporate those new strategies into the existing lesson plans” (Teacher 25, 2018).* Teacher 11 showed that the PLC team activities that effectively improved teaching strategies could be derived effective collaboration amongst PLC team members on analyzing data to determine effective teaching strategies.

### **Observation and Perform Walkthroughs**

*“Observing one another” (Teacher 6, 2018).* Teacher 6 expressed that performing classroom observation on one another is a PLC team activity that has been very helpful in improving teaching strategies. Continuous professional growth requires some reflection time on

the part of teachers and performing observation on other teachers provide educators with the opportunity to self-evaluate their practices in comparison to others.

*“Observing other teachers and their best practices” (Teacher 16. 2018).* Teacher 16 like teacher 6 mentioned the importance of being able to perform observation and walkthroughs on other teachers because it allows the teachers share and show their best practices. Walkthroughs help educators collect evidences of teaching and learning which in turn could help teachers grow professionally.

### **Data Collection XIII: Survey Question 13**

*Do you support the notion that reflecting on one’s personal and team’s professional practices progressively improves the performance of the PLC team? Please explain your response.*

### **Responses to Survey Question 13:**

Teachers’ responses to this question were resounding “yes” with extensive explanations to support their answer. Many teachers mentioned how creating the time to truly reflect on their practices as a professional and as a PLC team was paramount to enhancing their teaching strategies to improve student achievement and their overall performance as a collaborative team. Some teachers stated how true reflection with a growth mindset could be effective in innovating personal and professional practices. A few teachers pointed out the importance of reflection in redirecting the teacher and team back to their original goal and in determining what drives student achievement. Others cited the importance of being receptive to constructive feedbacks and being willing to reflect and improve teaching practices that are ineffective. One teacher expressed that the value of teaching is dependent on our ability as educators to truly take the time

to reflect and refine our best practices. The responses to this question could be classified into two major categories; improved professional practices and encourages teachers to process information better. Below are some of the supporting viewpoints to this question prompt from the teachers' responses:

### **Improves Professional Practice(s)**

*"Yes, it improves opportunity for constructive growth" (Teacher 1, 2018).* Teacher 1's response to this question suggested that reflecting on one's personal and team's professional practices progressively improves the performance of the PLC team and establish constructive professional growth.

*"Yes, reflection helps us to know the good/bad/ugly and tie a purpose to it (Student Learning Objective)" (Teacher 3, 2018).* Teacher 3's answer to this question recommended that reflecting on one's personal and team's professional practices progressively improves the performance of the PLC team and re-evaluate the purpose of the team collaborative time and teamwork. Teacher 3 response to this question prompt was comparable to Teacher 1 response.

*"Yes, I do. I know some teams really struggle because they don't reflect on their personal and professional practices (Teacher 4, 2018).* Teacher 4's response was compatible with Teacher 1 and Teacher 3 responses to this question prompt which emphasized that reflecting on one's personal and team's professional practices progressively improves the performance of the PLC team and it an essential tool to use to guide against any type struggle that teams commonly experience.

*"I think that reflection is good as long as it is used and not done as busywork" (Teacher 5, 2018).* Teacher 5's response to this question suggested that reflecting on one's personal and

team's professional practices progressively improves the performance of the PLC team if it is honestly performed by the PLC team members.

*"Yes, because it gives you an opportunity to innovate your practices in order to improve what is working"* (Teacher 20, 2018). Teacher 20's response to this question showed that reflecting on one's personal and team's professional practices progressively improves the performance of the PLC team and that these reflective practices allow educators to improve their professional practice.

### **Encourages Teachers to Process Information Better**

*"Yes, reflection is a great way to process information"* (Teacher 6, 2018). Teacher 6's answer to this question proposed that reflecting on one's personal and team's professional practices progressively improves the performance of the PLC team which emphasized the notion that reflection is great way for educators to process information.

*"Most definitely; reflection and self-awareness are key to improvement and growth for both individuals and the PLC"* (Teacher 7, 2018). Teacher 7's response to this question projected that reflecting on one's personal and team's professional practices progressively improves the performance of the PLC team and that reflection is an immeasurable way to use as a tool to create awareness.

*"Yes, we should all have the growth mindset"* (Teacher 8, 2018). Teacher 8's response to this question proposed that reflecting on one's personal and team's professional practices progressively improves the performance of the PLC team and supported the notion that a growth mindset is needed to cultivate this culture of reflection.

*“Yes, you can’t grow, if you can’t reflect” (Teacher 10, 2018).* Teacher 10’s response to this question was comparable to Teacher 1 and Teacher 8 which highlighted the notion that reflecting on one’s personal and team’s professional practices progressively improves the performance of the PLC team and maintained the notion that a growth mindset is needed to nurture this culture of reflection.

*“Yes, the opportunity to reflect is needed for growth.” (Teacher 14, 2018).* Teacher 14’s answer to this question was comparable to Teacher 1, Teacher 8, and Teacher 10 which showed that reflecting on one’s personal and team’s professional practices progressively improves the performance of the PLC team and upheld the view that a growth mindset is needed to nurture this culture of reflection.

*“Yes, we must always be reflective and after reflection, be willing to learn” (Teacher 16, 2018).* Teacher 16’s response to this question was also similar to Teacher 1, Teacher 8, Teacher 10, and Teacher 14 which suggested that reflecting on one’s personal and team’s professional practices progressively improves the performance of the PLC team and maintained the notion that a growth mindset is needed to nurture a culture of reflection and teacher have to be willing to learn from their time of reflection.

*“Yes, you have to reflect on your own practice to know what is driving student achievement” (Teacher 21, 2018).* Teacher 21’s answer to this question was very comparable to that of Teacher 3 response which showed that reflecting on one’s personal and team’s professional practices progressively improves the performance of the PLC team and that this practice provide teachers with the opportunity to effectively drive instruction and improve student learning.

## Results

Through the analysis of the data collected from the online Google forms survey six common themes emerged. Those themes were: 1) PLCs and school culture, 2) PLCs and school improvement efforts, 3) PLCs and student learning needs, 4) PLCs and teacher pedagogy, 5) PLCs and collaborative culture, and 6) PLCs challenges.

### **Data Collection I, II, and III: PLCs and School Culture**

Teachers' responses to survey questions 1, 2, and 3 provided some information about the members of the PLC teams and their school culture. Teachers' perceptions on these first three questions gave rise to the first theme for this study - PLCs and School Culture. Teacher responses to question 1 (Part A) revealed that there were explicitly twenty-one highly experienced teachers within the 5 to 25 years range of service that participated in this research and only five teachers with little or no experience within the 0 to 4 years range of service while question 1 (Part B) suggested that most of the teachers that participated in this study were very passionate about their career choice and their profession as a teacher. Question 2 showed that there were a higher number of teachers who have been working with their PLC team for the very first time compared to the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> year collaborative PLC teams. Teachers responses to question 3 described some of the roles in the PLC process that supported student learning as follows; sharing strategies that works, differentiated instruction, collaborative lesson planning, technology integration, data analysis, observational learning, and developing SMART goals. If culture functions as a social glue that connects an organization together or conveys a sense of identity for members of an organization, then through the interpretation of the teachers' responses to questions 1, 2, and 3, it was evident that transparency, clear communication, the

level of professional experiences, and collaboration play a vital role in the establishment of a safe and trustworthy school culture focused on student learning.

### **Data Collection I-XIII: PLCs and School Improvement Efforts**

The main purpose of establishing PLCs is focused on student learning and improving academic achievement. The purpose of a school is to ensure that equal opportunities are provided for all students to reach their greatest potential of academic achievement. Almost all the questions on the survey are directed towards how PLCs are enabling schools in their improvement efforts. Teachers described the role of their PLC activities in supporting student learning as follows: given enough time to collaboratively plan scope and sequence, assessment, and strategizing for intervention and enrichment plans enhances teacher professional growth which directly leads to improved student learning as displayed in Table 7. Providing structured collaborative time is a leadership practice that effectively improves the collaborative culture of a school and successful PLCs can account for increased student learning. Peer observation, feedback, and mentoring are different characteristics of PLC activities that support teacher pedagogy and ultimately enhance student learning. Teachers' perceptions on all these thirteen survey questions gave emergence to the second theme for this study - PLCs and School Improvement Efforts.

### **Data Collection VIII and IX: PLCs and Student Learning Needs**

Teachers' responses to survey questions 8 and 9 offered some indicators on how PLCs impact student learning. Teachers' perceptions on these two questions gave rise to the third theme for this study - PLCs and Student Learning Needs. Teachers' responses to question 8 affirmed that 24 participating teachers strongly agree to the notion that a successful PLC can

account for increased student learning while 2 participating teachers partially agree about the same notion. The responses to question 9 revealed the perceptions of teachers on PLC team activities that effectively enhanced student learning needs; nine teachers perceived that collaboratively planning scope, sequence, and assessments are the most effective PLC team activities, six teachers claim that peer observation, feedback, and mentoring were very vital PLC team activities, four teachers emphasized the need for PLC team to partake in strategizing to help struggling learners to be successful, three teachers mentioned that monitoring students' growth and progress were crucial PLC team activities, and another set of three teachers believed that collaboratively analyzing data was an effective PLC activity that supported meeting the demands of student learning needs.

#### **Data Collection VII, XI, XII, and XIII: PLCs and Teacher Pedagogy**

Teachers answers to survey questions 7, 11, 12, and 13 presented some explicit pointers on how PLCs effect teacher pedagogy. Improving the quality of instruction in the classroom ultimately accounts for enhanced student learning and academic achievement. Teachers' viewpoints on these four questions gave rise to the fourth theme for this study - PLCs and Teacher Pedagogy. All participating teachers supported the notion that a successful PLC can help teachers grow professionally and improve teaching practices as a response to question 7. Teachers' responses to question 11 showed that eleven teachers recommended that collaboration and curriculum alignment were the PLC team activities that effectively supported high quality professional development (PD) trainings, six teachers mentioned that sharing best practices and teaching strategies were effective ways to promote high quality PD trainings, and two teachers

endorsed that PD created by teachers were PLC team activities that could be utilized in the development of high quality PD trainings.

The data analysis and interpretation for question 12 detailed that eleven set of teachers articulated that sharing effective teaching strategies were very helpful, eight teachers shared that collaborative lesson plans, common formative assessment, taking the time to analyze and effectively use data to drive instruction were effective PLC team activities that improved teaching strategies, two teachers mentioned being able to observe and perform learning walkthroughs on other teachers were effective PLC team activities that enhanced teaching strategies.

The data analysis and interpretation to question 13 indicated that several teachers professed how creating the time to truly reflect on their practices as a professional and as a PLC team was paramount to improving their teaching strategies, impact student achievement, and their overall performance as a collaborative team. Some teachers expressed how true reflection with a growth mindset could be very effective in innovating personal and professional practices. A few teachers pointed out the value of reflection in redirecting the teacher and PLC team back to their original goal and in determining what drives student achievement. Other teachers reinforced the importance of being receptive to constructive feedbacks and their willingness to reflect and improve their teaching practices that are ineffective. One teacher articulated that the value of teaching is contingent upon our ability as educators to truly take the time to reflect and refine our best practices.

**Data Collection VI: PLCs and Collaborative Culture**

The data analysis and interpretation of teachers' responses to question 6 provided a clear and concise leadership practices that encourages a collaborative culture within a school and discourages teacher isolation. Teachers' insights on this question provided the fifth theme for this study - PLCs and Collaborative Culture. Twelve teachers out of 26 total teacher participants claimed that providing structured collaborative time is a leadership practice that promote a collaborative culture, nine teachers believed that providing a clear vision and open communication to PLC teams are the best leadership practices that encourage collaborative culture, five teachers expressed that providing shared decision-making, respect, and trust are the leadership practices that commonly encourage a collaborative culture.

**Data Collection V: PLCs Challenges**

Teachers' answers to question 5 displayed some key indicators that could constitute a challenge in the implementation of PLCs as follows: the common responses inductively gathered from all 26 participants to this question in regards to PLC Challenges are as follows; ten teachers expressed that the greatest challenge of the PLC process was insufficient collaborative time structured to the daily school system, five teachers were uncertain of what they perceived as the greatest PLC challenge, four teachers claimed that the greatest challenge was setting aside unexpected distractions during collaborative time amongst team members, and four teachers alleged that the greatest challenge of the team was the excessive time and effort utilized in performing data analysis and data driven instruction, three teachers claim that the greatest PLC challenge that deflected the focus from student learning was conflicting ideas during collaborative time. Teachers' perceptions on this question gave rise to the sixth theme for this

study – PLCs Challenges. Insufficient collaborative time was considered the leading challenge of a PLC team that deflected the focus from student learning. Educational leaders must provide collaborative teams with a clear vision and open communication to reduce the level of uncertainty that teachers feel about their role and work in their respective PLCs in meeting the demands of their campus improvement plans.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

PLCs function under the assumption that the key to improved learning for all students is continuous job-embedded learning for all educators. Districts and schools that are structured to function as PLCs are composed of collaborative teams that have a shared and collective responsibility to ensure student learning and improved academic achievement. When educators come together as a PLC, they impact the collaborative culture of the school through an intentional process where a school undergoes a cultural shift that involves the critical reflection of the assumptions, beliefs, values, expectations that make up the norms of a school (DuFour, 2016). A PLC environment encourages teacher empowerment and collaboration with a specific focus on student learning by rethinking teacher pedagogy while building new classroom roles for learners (DuFour, 2016). PLC members develop a shared meaning to a problem and convey solutions leading to the explanation about the cause of an issue (Muhammad, 2018). Educational leaders could define and share their vision with their PLC teams, but the teams must be involved in the shared decision-making process (Mohammad, 2017). To sustain rapid changes in schools, leadership teams must meet regularly throughout the school year to ensure; planning for school improvement, implement key action plans, monitor the progress of the action plans, and evaluate and make necessary changes or adjustments throughout the school year (Mohammad, 2017). PLCs allow teachers to participate in meaningful dialogues that promote positive changes for themselves, their students, and their school (DuFour et al., 2016).

The purpose of this study was to conduct a survey that examined how teachers feel about the work happening in their PLCs at a Texas middle school. McWherter (2017) stated that educators often encounter trouble applying the concept of professional learning communities because of their imprecision of how the process is intended to work. For example, some educators might assume that the PLC is simply a type of program that the district or school integrated into their school culture, others might assume it is just another elaborate term for department meetings while some believe that the PLC model have a prevalent and continuing influence on the structure and culture of a school (DuFour, 2016). According to Robert (2017), twenty-first century leaders are encouraged to strategically structure their school's daily systems and processes to create a culture that motivates, inspires, and empowers all levels of the organization. School leaders are required more than ever before to ensure that all young people are provided the same opportunity for success because equity, diversity, and inclusivity are a basic right in any school system (Harris and Jones, 2017). To meet the needs of today's learners, the traditional way of teaching in a classroom would have to give way to a school culture in which teachers continuously develop their professional practices through a collaborative best practice that is embodied in their daily work activities (Fulton and Britton, 2011).

Marion and Gonzales (2014) emphasized that culture provides the glue that binds individuals together to complete complex or intimidating undertakings. Establishing effective teams who are devoted to improving student learning and academic performance could be a very complex undertaking. But understanding what contributes to an effective PLC could empower instructional leaders to make informed decisions about how their PLCs should proficiently run and achieve the desired outcome of improving student learning (McWherter, 2017). If

instructional leaders fail to offer teachers the opportunity to reflect on how they applied insights gained from their PLC meetings to influence their instructional practices and effect student learning, then the successes of the professional learning communities will remain unknown.

### **Summary of Findings**

The survey on teacher perceptions of professional learning communities was conducted by the principal investigator. The survey has been shared, organized by themes, and quantified using Google forms program. The purpose of the online Google forms survey was to provide formative data regarding the background information about the participants and their perceptions of their work in their PLCs. The survey respondents were twenty-six teachers at middle school that volunteered to complete this survey during their non-contract hours. It included a representative population of veteran and non-veteran male and female teachers. The survey data was collected anonymously with no identifying information on participants. Teachers were offered a week's window to respond to the survey questions. The survey was completed by all participating teachers in October 2018. Once the survey was collected, analyzed, and coded, themes regarding the guiding research emerged to answer the two main research questions; 1) how do teachers describe the role of their PLC activities in supporting student learning? 2) how do PLC members characterize PLC practices that most directly lead to student learning?

The six common themes that emerged from the analysis of the thirteen questions on the survey were 1) school culture, 2) school improvement efforts, 3) student learning needs, 4) teacher pedagogy, 5) collaborative culture, and 6) PLCs challenges. To successfully prepare students to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century, educators must be experts in their profession and possess top-notch skills in implementing best practices that will effectively

meet the needs of the diverse groups of student representations in their school (Thessin, 2015). PLCs provide opportunities for teachers to engage in a collaboration culture that help them to identify students' needs, improve the quality of their instruction, adjust instruction, and achieve collective goals through a common understanding of best practices (Thessin, 2015).

Reflecting on personal and team professional practices creates opportunities for a continuous job-embedded learning and having a growth mind-set are the best way for educators to implement and sustain an effective PLC that positively impact student learning (Mertler, 2018). The PLC process necessitate educators to work collaboratively to accomplish the three core principles of a PLC: 1) *A Focus on Learning* which PLC members to learn together about the practices, policies, procedures, and beliefs that best ensure student learning; 2) *A Collaborative Culture* which encourages the collaborative team to collectively apply what they are learning in classroom with their students to determine its effectiveness in enhancing student learning; and 3) *A result Orientation* which endorsed the PLC team to use evidence of student learning to evaluate, revise, and celebrate their collective efforts to improve student learning and achievement (Buffum, Mattos, and Malone, 2018). Most of the teachers that participated in this study professed the importance of these three core principles in the PLC process and the positive impact that they have in improving student learning and achievement.

The research questions will be listed below, along with the findings and themes generated that support the question discussed. After each question has been thoroughly discussed, with the related evidence included, a summary of conclusions will be addressed. The final section will review the contribution this research will apply to the notion of professional learning communities. The data collected covers different perspectives and ideas regarding professional

learning communities. From the data, results will be used to evaluate how it contributes to answering the dissertation's research questions.

### **Review of Research Questions and Summary of Responses**

This research was centered around two guiding questions. The question dealt with the 1. Teachers' perceptions on the role of their PLC activities, 2. PLC members' activities that most directly support student learning outcome and increase student learning, 3. teachers' viewpoints on PLC practices that most directly lead to student learning, 4. PLC challenges, and 5. teachers' perceptions on leadership practices that support successful PLCs. The research questions are listed below.

1. How do teachers describe the role of their PLC activities in supporting student learning?

2. How do PLC members characterize PLC practices that most directly lead to student learning?

Through the analysis of data collected from the online Google forms survey six common themes emerged which discussed the impact of PLCs. Those themes are: 1. school culture, 2. school improvement efforts, 3. student learning needs, 4. teacher pedagogy, 5. collaborative culture, and 6. challenges.

#### **School Culture**

School culture is as complex as the people that work and learn within the building because it evolves as the organization faces new challenges and welcomes new people into the dynamic (Bower and Parsons, 2016). A collaborative culture is the way instructional leaders and teachers think and act about sharing information about their practices (Carpenter, 2015). PLCs

are beneficial for shifting the perspectives of teachers and instructional leaders from a fixed to a growth mindset. Teachers who engage in the PLC process create a culture in which they are involved in the refining and improving of their professional practices and content expertise (Buffum, Mattos, and Malone, 2018). If culture functions as a social glue that connects an organization together or conveys a sense of identity for members of an organization, then through the interpretation of the teachers' responses to questions 1, 2, and 3, it was evident that transparency, clear communication, the level of professional experiences, and collaboration played a dynamic role in the creation of a safe and trustworthy school culture focused on student learning.

### **School Improvement Efforts**

School improvement and student achievement have been directly linked to teacher professional learning communities (Carpenter, 2015). Refining teaching and learning requires teachers and instructional leaders to systematically engage in an ongoing cycle of collecting data of current student performance levels, reflecting on past teaching and learning strategies, developing strategies, and innovative practice to ensure all students achieve (Carpenter, 2015). PLCs must have shared leadership to promote collective inquiry and staff involvement in creating a shared vision, values, structures, and functions of a school (Carpenter, 2015). The principal purpose of launching PLCs is focused on student learning and improving academic achievement. Almost all the questions on the survey were directed towards how PLCs are enabling schools in their improvement efforts.

### **Student Learning Needs**

Effective teaching incorporates educators to focus on student learning rather than merely on teaching the content (McGuire, 2015). Educators who are focused on teaching rather than on students' learning are considered to have not yet mastered the act of teaching. McGuire (2015) stated that if educators were to teach students how to learn and give them simple straightforward strategies to use, they could significantly increase their students' learning and performance. Teachers must have strategies or tools in place to teach effectively any diverse group of students how to learn (McGuire, 2015). Teachers' responses to question 9 revealed the perceptions of teachers on PLC team activities that effectively enhanced student learning needs.

### **Teacher Pedagogy**

The concept of a PLC resides on the premise of improving student learning by improving teaching practices (Mohammad, 2017). PLCs contribute to the shift in the habits and educators' mindset of just teaching to ensuring that all students are learning the content that is being taught (Buffum et al., 2018). When teachers seek to improve on their professional practices, they reflect on the causes of their success, and develop a deeper commitment to the practices that will continue to assure that success (Foord and Haar, 2013). The data analysis and interpretation for question 12 addressed this notion.

### **Collaborative Culture**

Mohammad (2018) defined the term culture as simply the beliefs, practices, behaviors, and norms of our organization. Dysfunctional school cultures can serve to sustain student achievement gaps (Muhammad, 2018). Provini (2012) expressed that PLC involves much more than a staff meeting or a professional learning, it signifies the institutionalization of a focus on

continuous improvement in staff performance and student learning. The PLC culture is grounded on two essential principles: a) all students can learn at high levels and b) our practice and influence are the greatest determining factors in students' success (Mohammed, 2017). The data analysis and interpretation of teachers' responses to question 6 provided a clear and concise leadership practices that encourages a collaborative culture within a school and discourages teacher isolation.

### **Challenges**

PLCs allow educational leaders to effectively create a structured master schedule that promote frequent teaming and collaborative opportunities for teachers. If a PLC is to effect change, then collaborative efforts must be structured and purposeful (Marzano et al., 2016). Teachers' responses to question 5 displayed some key indicators that could constitute a challenge in the implementation of PLCs. Educational leaders must offer collaborative teams with a clear vision and open communication to reduce the level of uncertainty that teachers feel about their role and work in their respective PLCs in meeting the demands of their campus improvement plans.

### **Interpretation and Alignment**

As noted in the Methodology, a limitation of this research is that all the data was collected from one middle school in the State of Texas. The findings have been carefully coded to reflect the perceptions of the participating teachers and substantiated with literature. Findings from this research indicate that much of the insight teachers had regarding the notion of PLC and its impact on school improvement plans, school culture, student learning needs, teacher pedagogy, and challenges associated with the PLC structure and function. The result of this study

is consistent with the three core principles of PLCs as described by Buffum, Mattos, and Malone, 2018. In alignment with the research questions, findings, and supporting literature are analyzed and discussed below.

### **Research Question 1: Teachers' Role that Support Students Learning**

Teaching is about learning, learning is about becoming, and making a history is about taking up a career and making a life (Tomlinson, 2014). PLCs alleviate the tension on individual teachers to meet the needs of all his or her students by making the demands on teachers a joint effort of the team. Effective student learning is sustained by ensuring that every teacher is a highly competent professional who actively seek to advance their professional practice (Foord and Haar, 2013). PLC members must use data to address individual student's readiness, interest, and learning styles (Foord and Haar, 2013). To focus on learning, curriculum, instruction, and assessment must be differentiated and additional support system for intervention and enrichment activities must be readily available to students (Foord and Haar, 2013).

The culture of a PLC campus is well-defined by their best practices and refining teachers' skills for the sole purpose of improving student learning is at the very core of a collaborative school culture (Mohammed, 2017). A collaborative school culture discourages autonomy and supports interdependence among educators. The level of trust, transparency, and reliability increases among staff when collaboration is a part of the school culture. The school's instructional leader's role is to ensure that the systems and processes are structured in ways that encourage teachers to collaborate and find meaningful ways to effectively work together to advance their instructional practices and improve student learning.

The formation of a collaborative culture does not guarantee a culture that supports student learning. As described by participants of this research, school administrators must identify leadership practices that encourages a collaborative culture within a school and discourages teacher isolation. Results from the staff survey identified the following leadership practices that promote a collaborative culture; providing structured collaborative time, providing a clear vision and open communication to PLC teams, celebrating milestone achievement goals, providing shared decision-making, respect, and trust.

### **Research Question 2: PLC Practices that Directly Impact Student Learning**

A result orientation requires PLC team members to examine results from students' assessment data to identify and address any areas of student learning concerns (DuFour, 2016). The process of analyzing results allow teachers to determine strengths and weaknesses in their individual teaching practices and to learn from one another (Mohammad, 2017). DuFour et. al (2016) shared that the third principle focuses on evidence of student learning to enlighten and enhance their professional practices while responding to individual student in need of intervention and enrichment. The authors articulated that student assessment information is crucial in determining and providing students with effective intervention and extension opportunities (DuFour et al., 2016).

The responses to question 9 prompt revealed the perceptions of teachers on PLC team activities that effectively enhanced student learning; nine teachers perceived that collaboratively planning scope, sequence, and assessments are the most effective PLC team activities, six teachers claim that peer observation, feedback, and mentoring were very vital PLC team activities, four teachers emphasized the need for PLC team to partake in strategizing to help

struggling learners to be successful, three teachers mentioned that monitoring students' growth and progress were crucial PLC team activities, and another set of three teachers believed that collaboratively analyzing data was an effective PLC activity that supported meeting the demands of student learning needs.

### **Implications**

School leaders must be willing to share power and connect the potential of teachers to the school improvement plans (Carpenter, 2015). School administrators and teachers implementing the PLC process must agree upon several guiding points such as focusing the school goals and expectations for student learning and achievement, addressing professional development needs, creating intentional systems/processes, and opportunities for teachers to collaborate and manage instructional programs (Leithwood, Louis, Wahlstrom, and Anderson, 2010). A school leader should have a growth mind-set and assume the role of a learner in the PLC process to effectively provide the structure that allows continuous collaboration among staff that encourages best practices to improve student learning outcome (Carpenter, 2015). Shared leadership offers the setting for shared values, collaboration, and an atmosphere for continuous growth and improvement. To sustain rapid changes in schools, leadership teams must meet regularly throughout the school year to ensure; planning for school improvement, implement key action plans, monitor the progress of the action plans, and evaluate and make necessary changes or adjustments throughout the school year (Mohammad, 2017). Every teacher's contribution to the PLC process should be valued in the school improvement efforts.

Participating teachers in this study described the role of their PLC activities such as a focus on learning, curriculum, lesson instruction, assessments, and data analysis as having active

roles in student learning. PLC members characterize PLC practices that most directly lead to student learning as collaboratively planning scope and sequence, balanced assessments, peer observation and feedback, mentoring, strategizing to help struggling learners to be successful, and monitoring students' growth and progress. When teachers come together as a PLC, they impact the culture of a school through an intentional process where a school undergoes a cultural shift that involves the critical reflection of the assumptions, beliefs, values, expectations that make up the norms of a school (DuFour, 2016). A PLC is an environment that supports teacher empowerment and collaboration with a specific focus on student learning by rethinking teacher pedagogy while building new classroom roles for learners (DuFour, 2016). PLC members develop a common definition to a problem and negotiate solutions leading to the explanation about the cause of an issue (Muhammad, 2018). Determining the cause of an issue requires teamwork, collaboration, and a focus on student learning. PLCs allow teachers to engage in meaningful dialogue to promote positive changes for themselves, their students, and their school (DuFour et al., 2016). PLCs provide opportunities for teachers to engage in collaboration that help them to identify students' needs, adjust instruction, and achieve collective goals through a common understanding of best practices (Thessin, 2015). If the culture of a school is negative, and does not embrace the PLC notion of having a growth mindset, then students learning will be negatively impacted.

### **Recommendations for Action**

School leaders should strive to improve the implementation of PLCs on their campuses by taking the time to reflect on their leadership practices that support a collaborative culture. Evidence-based strategies such as creating the time to reflect on their personal and professional

practice, PLC team practices, and their school collaborative culture could empower them in this change process. The positive impact that PLCs have on student learning are very evident in the viewpoints of teachers. If school leaders fail to intentionally structure a schedule that allows teachers to effectively function as a PLC team and create the time for teachers to reflect on how they applied insights gained from their PLC meetings to impact their instructional practices, and effect student learning, then the successes of the learning communities will remain ambiguous. Teachers must create the time to reflect on what works and what doesn't work for their students in their respective PLCs to improve student learning.

The core mission of a school that is designated a PLC campus is not just to ensure that all students are taught but to ensure that all students learn (Buffum et al., 2018). If the fundamental purpose of a school is to promote all students learning at high levels, then the basic essence of any PLC should be a focus on and a commitment to student learning (DuFour et al., 2016). Requiring each member of a PLC team to describe their role in the PLC process in improving students' learning becomes a vital inquiry in determining the efficacy of the PLC team. A collaborative school culture supports the orientation of unified teams working together to raise student learning and academic achievement. Educator's commitment to ensure students learning unites and focuses the collaborative efforts of the staff and serves as the organization's "north star" when making decisions. PLC members are expected to work together to clarify exactly what each student must learn, monitor each student learning in a timely fashion, design systemic interventions that ensure students receive additional time and support for learning when they struggle, and that extension for learning are provided for students who have mastered the intended outcome of the instructional lesson (DuFour et al., 2016).

PLC teams are expected to work and learn together regardless of their perception of how a PLC should be structured and function. A collective inquiry into both best practices in teaching and best practices in learning empowers team members to develop new skills that in turn lead to new experiences and awareness (DuFour, 2016). Individual teachers are not permitted to work independently or in isolation, they are encouraged instead to work in teams based on the structure of the school (DuFour, 2016). However, collaboration does not occur by invitation or chance instead, recurring team collaborative time should be structured into the contractual day (DuFour et al., 2016). Teachers' collaboration in the PLC process are guided by four essential questions: 1) what knowledge, skills, or disposition should every student learn? 2) How would we know when each student has acquired it? 3) how would we respond when some students are struggling? and 4) how would we extend learning for the students who are already proficient? (DuFour et al., 2016).

PLC team members are encouraged to analyze the results from students' assessment data to identify and address any areas of student learning concerns (DuFour, 2016). The process of analyzing results allow teachers to determine strengths and weaknesses in their individual teaching practices, to learn from one another, and to determine how to best meet the needs of their students (Mohammad, 2017). In the current era, the school leader must be willing and able to cultivate a school culture that stimulates and sustains an ongoing interaction with staff members to synchronize ideas, embrace challenges, make decisions, encourage risk taking, promote a system of monitoring, and adjusting to a proposed action or change (Philpott and Oates, 2016).

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

This research covered various aspects of the PLC concept; student learning, teacher pedagogy, school improvement, leadership practices, and collaborative culture. This information is expected to be valuable for school administrators and teachers in the implementation process of a PLC in the State of Texas and throughout the nation. Establishing a culture of ongoing learning environment require the dedication and commitment of all the PLC members involved. Having continuous, job-embedded learning, and a growth mind-set are the best way for educators to build an effective PLC (Mertler, 2018). To successfully prepare students to meet the challenges of the future, educators must be experts in their profession, and possess top-notch skills in implementing best practices that will effectively meet the needs of the diverse groups of students represented in their school (Thessin, 2015). Consideration for further studies would be to study teachers' perceptions of PLCs by looking at different middle schools within the district and across the State of Texas. Further research might confirm the perceptions of teachers or object their viewpoints depending on their school culture and the applied leadership practices of the school administrators.

Further study regarding best strategies to share the information about PLCs impact on student learning and the PLCs characteristics that best supports student learning would be very beneficial to educators. Research should be done about leadership practices that best supports PLCs and impact student learning and academic achievement. Social media could be used to share evidence-based strategies that support student learning. The social media post could focus on best teaching strategies, leadership practices, and collaborative culture. There are many

attributes noted in this research regarding leadership practices, collaborative culture, PLC challenges that could be considered for additional investigation.

### **Conclusion**

One district's middle school in the State of Texas was used for the site study which implied that this research is not all encompassing. This research has examined the perception of teachers on the PLC concepts, their role in the PLC activities, and the impact it has in student learning. The data collected from this qualitative study provided only a sample of grades 6-8 core academic teachers participating in one PLC school a voice in the implementation of future PLCs in other schools and districts. The information should be considered for any district, school, or educational leader interested in the PLC concept and its ongoing process. The results from this research will benefit most educators who work in a PLC designated campus. The focus of the research was about teachers' professional views of their role and work in their assigned PLCs. The insights gained from this research would advance the practices and the successes of the PLC concept in secondary schools in the district. It is important to gather data that accurately revealed the perceptions of the PLC members who are being asked to participate in the PLC process.

PLCs bring together educators that are committed to working collaboratively in a continuous process of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for their students. PLCs offer its members a comprehensive, sustained, and intentional approach to build capacity of all involved for the ultimate purpose of improving student learning and raising student achievement. The systemic approach must be ongoing, aligned, embedded in the workplace, collaborative, data-driven, clearly defined, and assessed for effectiveness through

personal and team reflections. A solid constituent structure and distributive leadership is essential for PLCs to transform school culture, improve teacher professional practice, build teacher capacity, and increase student achievement (DuFour et al., 2016). Effective transformational leaders foster the structure that facilitate positive school culture with a focus on continuous learning and improvement while empowering teachers to be active participants in the school improvement efforts as a function of student learning and achievement (Carpenter, 2015). Members of a PLC are encouraged to engage in the ongoing study and constant reflective practice that characterize an organization committed to continuous improvement.

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## Appendix A

## District Administrator's Consent to Conducting Research Proposal Letter

**DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR'S PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH****RE: A written proposal as to the purpose and scope of the research study**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership Program with the University of New England (UNE) and I am writing to request the district's consent to conduct a research study at \_\_\_\_\_ middle school. My research study is entitled, *Teachers' Perceptions of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)*. The main purpose of this study is to examine teachers' perceptions of the PLC process and the effectiveness of their work in professional learning communities. I will be answering all the questions you have requested my response to in a question and answer format as follows:

**A copy of the University's Institution Review Board (IRB) approval letter (if applicable).**

*A copy of the UNE IRB approval letter cannot be provided at this time to your district because it is part of the next step process for the UNE program requirement. The provision of the site consent letter to conduct the research is a document that is required for UNE IRB*

*application process. A copy of the UNE IRB application form has been attached to this email as a supporting evidence for not being able to provide a copy of this document at this time.*

**Identify the subjects and number of subjects being requested to participate in the study: students, parent, staff, administration, or combination.**

*The subjects for this research study are the interested core academic teachers of - \_\_\_\_\_ Middle School, who are also participating members of a PLC team. I hope I can motivate a minimum of 15 participants from the list of approximately 40 core content teachers represented in the school.*

**State the process that will be used to identify and select participants. How will the participants be requested to participate (e.g., phone calls, e-mails, etc...) and how will parental permission be obtained, if including students?**

*The ONLY participants to be requested to partake in this study are core content teachers. Teachers will be contacted via their school official email to solicit their participation in this research study during their non-contract hours.*

**Once participants are selected, how will they be allowed to opt-out of the study?**

*Once participants are selected, they have the right to opt out at any time and may choose to decline answering any questions in the survey during the one week's window of the online survey administration. Participants will not have the option to change information from their survey once the principal investigator has analyzed and pooled the data in the research study.*

**Provide a detailed description of the research plan (e.g., Type of data collected?)**

*The research questions will address the roles of PLC members in improving student learning. A grounded theory approach will be used in the methodology of this qualitative*

*research to explore teacher's perceptions of the work that they do and their experiences. To understand teachers' perceptions of the PLC concept and its implementation on their campus, a grounded theory was chosen for this research study because a new viewpoint on familiar topics like the PLC concept appears promising with a grounded theory. A qualitative research study will be conducted using google forms program to administer an anonymous 13 open-ended online survey questions to the participants. The survey can be administered online at any time during the non-contracted hours for teachers. Teachers will be given about a week's window to complete the online survey.*

**How would the data be collected?**

*All responses to the survey will be automatically assembled into a google docs spreadsheet format via google forms online program. Google docs forms provide a free tool to collecting data.*

**What would be required from participants, in terms of duration and frequency of research participation? What are the approximate start and end dates for data collection?). How much time will be required from the research participant in order to participate in the study.**

*The duration for this online survey should take about 10-15 minutes of the non-contracted hours of each participating teacher's time. Teachers will be given a week's window to complete the online survey. Participants can access this online survey at any time outside their work contracted hours and at any location.*

**Would district personnel be required to participate during their contract hours?**

*District personnel will **NOT** be required to participate in this research study during their contract hours.*

**Would students be required to participate during their instructional time?**

*Students are **NOT** required to participate in this research study*

**Provide any additional information that will provide insight to the impact on research participants.**

*The professional learning community (PLC) is an essential concept in education, one that is intended to improve professional practices, increase student achievement, reform failing schools, and sustain high achieving schools. Consequently, if school leaders fail to provide teachers with the opportunity to reflect on how they applied insights gained from their PLC assemblies to impact their instructional practices and effect student learning, then the successes of the learning communities will remain uncertain. This research study provides a conduit for teachers to reflect on their PLC activities and its impact on teacher's, team's, and students' performance.*

**Describe how the data will be used. How will the identity of the participant(s)/district be kept confidential?**

*In accordance with the Institutional Review Board (IRB), a consent form will be created to inform participants of their rights. A Consent for Research Participation and Confidentiality Agreement will be used and shared with all participants in the study so that they are aware of the researcher's abilities, scope of the study, and limitations.*

*Participants in this research study will be informed verbally and in writing that their right to participate in this research investigation is voluntary and that they will be required to*

*read and sign the consent form that spells out these rights to them. All participants will be assured of their privacy and the anonymous nature of this research. The participants of this study will have the following listed rights below: a) participation in this study is completely voluntary, b) participants have the right to opt out at any time, c) participants may choose to decline answering any questions in the survey, and d) participants will not have the option to change information from their survey once it is completed in the research study.*

*The research data will be secured by ensuring that the online survey is completely anonymous, **no** identifiable information would be included in the survey questions, and only the principal investigator will be able to gain access to collect the data from the survey responses. Participants will be given permission to access and view the research study at any time it is requested. A copy of the consent form participation document has been attached to this email for your review.*

**Provide a copy of the survey questions and/or survey instrument(s). The survey instrument must be reviewed and approved by \_\_\_\_\_ personnel prior to the commencement of the study.**

*The research questions have been attached to this email as requested.*

**Outline any potential risks to the participants and identify how these risks will be communicated to participants.**

*There is **no** known risk involved in this research study and this information will be communicated in the Consent for Research Participation and Confidentiality Agreement document given to participating teachers.*

**Will the research results be shared with \_\_\_\_\_ ISD?**

*Upon request, the analyzed and pooled research result can be shared with \_\_\_\_\_  
ISD.*

**How would this study provide benefit to \_\_\_\_\_ ISD?**

*Transforming schools to PLC campuses and applying the PLC notion is a common approach that districts and schools in the State of Texas are involved in to advance student learning while fostering an enhanced school culture and developing teachers' instructional expertise. Educators frequently have trouble implementing professional learning communities because of their ambiguity of how the process is intended to work. Since most of the schools in \_\_\_\_\_ ISD are engaged in the PLC process, this research study seeks to examine how teachers in a specific \_\_\_\_\_ middle school feel about the PLC concept and the work happening in their PLCs.*

*The data collected from this study will give teachers participating in PLC schools a voice in the implementation of future PLCs in schools and districts. Teachers and administrators could use this data to effectively work together to alleviate or eradicate the trouble they often encounter implementing professional learning communities. Educators will be aware of how the PLC process truly works and how to overcome the challenges associated with the process.*

*The data collected for this research study will be systematically organized to find common themes throughout the survey responses. The analysis of the survey data will be used to reveal and reflect the perceptions, experiences, successes, and challenges of the individual members of a PLC team. The analyzed data will reflect how PLC members characterize PLC practices that most directly lead to student learning. The collected data will be analyzed inductively to generate six themes of teachers' perceptions of their work in PLCs: 1) school*

*culture, 2) PLC and school improvement efforts, 3) PLC and student learning needs, 4) PLC and teacher pedagogy, 5) collaborative culture, and 6) PLC challenges. The collected data from this study will show teachers' perceptions of their involvement and the impact that the PLC activities have in supporting student learning. Upon request, the analyzed and pooled anonymous online survey responses can be shared with the district at any time.*

**A Criminal Background check must be obtained if the researcher will be on a \_\_\_\_\_ ISD campus and/or using students as participants. \_\_\_\_\_ ISD's Human Resources department can assist you with this requirement.**

*As a current employee, the \_\_\_\_\_ ISD Human Resources department have a copy of my criminal background check.*

I hope these responses to the questions for the written proposal as to the purpose and scope of the research study are clear and precise. Please contact me at any time with any concerns or clarifying questions. My email address \_\_\_\_\_ and my cellular number is \_\_\_\_\_.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Violet Eyanagho

## Appendix B

## Consent for Participation

## UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND

## CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

**Project Title:** Teachers' Perceptions of Professional Learning Communities.

**Principal Investigator(s):**

Violet Eyanagho, Doctoral Student, University of New England, phone: (940) 597-7632,  
email: [veyanagho@une.edu](mailto:veyanagho@une.edu)

Dr. Ella Benson, University of New England, Adjunct Faculty and Lead Research  
Advisor, phone: (757) 450-3628, email: [bensone@une.edu](mailto:bensone@une.edu)

*Please read this form, you may also request that the form is read to you. The purpose of this form is to provide you with information about this research study, and if you choose to participate, document your decision.*

*You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about this study, now, during or after the project is complete. You can take as much time as you need to decide whether or not you want to participate. Your participation is voluntary.*

**Project Title:** Teachers' Perceptions of Professional Learning Communities

**Why is this study being done?**

This study is being done by Violet Eyanagho's dissertation research for her doctorate.

Schools and districts are continually searching for creative ways to improve student learning through the implementation of professional learning community because it offers a fascinating future for stimulating the knowledge required to close achievement gaps and increase students' academic achievements. The purpose of this study is to examine teachers' perceptions of their work in professional learning communities (PLCs).

There is no consultative or financial interest relating to this study.

### **Who will be in this study?**

You have been identified as a potential participant in this study because you are State of Texas certified core academic teacher who works with other teachers in a PLC designated campus and you are over age 20.

The approximate number of adult staff members participating in this study is 40.

### **What will I be asked to do?**

This research is being conducted to reflect teachers' perceptions of PLCs and the effectiveness of their work in professional learning communities. Participation in this research includes completing an online survey about your perceptions of your experiences and challenges during your professional collaborative time in your school.

The survey will take approximately 10 to 15 minutes of your time. The survey will be provided to you through your secure school email. The anonymous responses from the survey will be analyzed inductively to generate six themes of teachers' perceptions of their work in PLCs: 1) school culture, 2) PLC and School Improvement Efforts, 3) PLC and Student Learning Needs, 4) PLC and Teacher Pedagogy, 5) Collaborative Culture, and 6) PLC Challenges.

### **What are the possible risks of taking part in this study?**

There are no known or foreseeable risks associated with this research study.

Participation in this study is totally voluntary and anonymous

You may terminate your participation from this study at any time if you experience any form of discomfort.

Nothing that you disclose while participating in the study may be used in a negative way against you as all results and participants will remain anonymous.

### **What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?**

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study. There may be a benefit to others and the organization

The data collected from this study will give teachers participating in PLC schools a voice in the implementation of future PLCs in schools and districts.

Teachers and administrators will work together to alleviate or eradicate the trouble they often encounter implementing professional learning communities.

Educators will be aware of how the PLC process truly works and how to overcome the challenges associated with the process.

### **What will it cost me?**

There are no costs associated with this study.

### **How will my privacy be protected?**

The survey will be filled out and completed anonymously.

Your privacy and anonymity will be protected.

The result of this survey will be included in the written dissertation of Violet Eyanagho through the University of New England.

**How will my data be kept confidential?**

This study is designed to be anonymous, this means that no one can link the data results from the survey responses you provided to you.

Research records will be kept in a locked file in the locked office of the Principal Investigator;

Online survey will be done through a Google forms program and there will be no identifiable questions included in this survey design.

**What are my rights as a research participant?**

Your participation is voluntary. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relations with the University or the principal investigator.

You may skip or refuse to answer any question for any reason.

If you choose not to participate there is no penalty to you

You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time, for any reason.

**What other options do I have?**

You may choose not to participate.

**Whom may I contact with questions?**

The researcher conducting this study is Violet Eyanagho, the Principal Investigator. For questions or more information concerning this research, you may contact her at (940) 597-7632 or [veyanagho@une.edu](mailto:veyanagho@une.edu) and/or Dr. Ella Benson at (757) 450-3628 or [bensone@une.edu](mailto:bensone@une.edu), Lead Advisor.

*The faculty advisor will be taking an active role in the research activities and will provide supervision throughout the duration of this research study. The faculty advisor is legally responsible for all research activities.*

If you elect to participate in this research study and believe you may have suffered a research related injury, please contact Ella Benson, Ed.D. at (757) 450-3628 or [bensone@une.edu](mailto:bensone@une.edu).

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may call Olgun Guvench, M.D. Ph.D., Chair of the UNE Institutional Review Board at (207) 221-4171 or [irb@une.edu](mailto:irb@une.edu).

**Will I receive a copy of this consent form?**

You will be given a copy of this consent form.

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**Participant's Statement**

**I understand the above description of this research and the risks and benefits associated with my participation as a research subject. I agree to take part in the research and do so voluntarily during my non-contract hours.**

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Participant's signature or

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Date

Legally authorized representative

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Printed name

**Researcher's Statement**

**The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature

Date

\_\_\_\_\_ Printed name

## Appendix C

**Confidentiality Agreement**

Research Title: **Teachers' Perceptions of Professional Learning Communities.**

**CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT**

**Principal Investigator: Violet Eyanagho, Ed.D. student**

**University of New England Faculty Advisor: Ella Benson, Ed.D.**

As the principal investigator of this research, I understand that I may have access to confidential information about the site study and participants. By signing this statement, I am indicating my understanding of my responsibilities to maintain confidentiality and agree to the following:

I understand that names and any other identifying information about the study site and participants are completely confidential.

I agree not to make known to unauthorized persons or to the public any information obtained in the duration of this research investigation that could identify the persons who participated in this study.

I understand that all information about the site study or the participants or accessed by me in the duration of my work will be confidential. I agree not to disclose to unauthorized people any of this information, unless specifically authorized to do so by applicable law or court order or public health or clinical need.

I understand that I am not read information about the voluntary participants, or any other confidential documents. I will not ask questions of participants for any personal gain but only for this research project.

I agree to notify Ella Benson, Ed.D., faculty advisor, immediately should I become aware of an actual breach of confidentiality or a situation which could potentially result in a breach, whether this be on my part or on the part of another person.

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Signature of local principal investigator

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Date

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Printed name

## Appendix D

## Staff Invitation to Participate in Research Study Script

**Staff Invitation to Participate in Research Study****RE: Research Participation Invitation**

Dear (School) Community,

I am a doctoral student in the Transformational Leadership (Ed.D.) program at the University of New England. I am conducting research on how teachers feel about the work happening in their respective professional learning communities (PLCs). I am extending an invite to you, requesting your valuable time and participation in this study because you work in a district school that I am using as my study site, and your campus administrators encourage teachers to partake in the PLC process. Participation in this research includes taking anonymous online survey that reflects your views, personal experiences and challenges about your campus' PLC process. The online survey will take approximately 10 to 15 minutes of your non-contract hours.

If you wish to participate in this research, please click on the link below:

[https://docs.google.com/forms/d/15vb-r2vo8QtTcZob5gkUyWv54\\_5SiUvIhb-pPsWxZgo/edit](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/15vb-r2vo8QtTcZob5gkUyWv54_5SiUvIhb-pPsWxZgo/edit)

Thank you in advance for your consideration and time.

Sincerely,

Violet Eyanagho

## Appendix E

## Survey Questions

**Online Open-ended Survey Questions on****Teachers' Perceptions of Professional Learning Communities**

- 1) *How many years have you been in the field of education and why did you choose this field?*
- 2) *How many years have you been working with the members of your assigned PLC team?*
- 3) *Based on your professional experience, how would you describe your role in your team's PLC process that supports student learning?*
- 4) *How has your involvement and participation in the PLC process influenced your professional practices?*
- 5) *In your opinion, what do you think constitute the greatest challenge in your PLC team's activities that deflected the focus from student learning?*
- 6) *From your perspective, what leadership practice(s) do you think encourages a collaborative culture and discourages teacher isolation within the school environment?*
- 7) *Based on your professional experience, do you think a successful PLC can account for enhanced professional practices? Please explain your response.*
- 8) *Based on your professional experience, do you think a successful PLC can account for increased student learning? Please explain your response.*

9) *How would you evaluate the effectiveness of your PLC team in meeting the needs of your campus improvement plans?*

10) *In your opinion, what PLC team activities effectively support high quality professional development trainings?*

11) *In your opinion, what PLC team activities effectively improve teaching strategies?*

12) *In your opinion, what PLC team activities effectively enhance student academic achievement?*

13) *Do you support the notion that reflecting on one's personal and team's professional practices progressively improves the performance of the PLC team? Please explain your response.*