THE PERCEIVED EFFECTIVENESS AND IMPLEMENTATION OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES IN A MIDDLE TENNESSEE SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Dominique M. Boykins-Watts
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Student Name: Dominique M. Boykins-Watts

Dissertation Title:

THE PERCEIVED EFFECTIVENESS AND IMPLEMENTATION OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES IN A MIDDLE TENNESSEE SCHOOL DISTRICT

Dissertation Committee:

Signatures: (Print and Sign)

Mark Gonzales, Ed.D.  Dissertation Chair

P. Mark Taylor, Ph.D.
Methodologist Member

Terrance Haynes, Ed. D. Content Member

Approved by the Dissertation Committee  Date: __5/16/2018______

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Dominique M. Boykins-Watts, May 16th, 2018  ABSTRACT

The purpose of this grounded qualitative study was to examine the effectiveness and implementation of professional learning communities in a Middle Tennessee school district. The
data were gathered from semi-structured interviews with seven teachers, two academic coaches and two administrators. Observations were conducted in the school’s conference rooms. The district is very diverse and is located in one of the fastest growing cities in the nation. Analysis of data identified five themes that were collected from teachers, academic coaches and administrators. The five themes were continuous tasks, data-driven, unpacking standards, check assessments, and collaboration from team. These five themes are in line with the theoretical framework of the Constructivist Theory which states that humans learn from others and real-life experiences.
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Dedication

I dedicate this study to my grandparents, Clarence Jr. and MaryEtta Allen. As a child, I can remember both telling me I could be anything I wanted to be and anything worth having is worth working for. It’s amazing how those statements still reign true. God blessed me when he allowed me to experience life with each of them. My grandmother used to remind me all the time to get an education, it’s the one thing no one can take from me. I can still hear her saying those words to me today and I tell my daughter that very same thing. My grandparents believed in me and saw perseverance in me before I could see it in myself. Words cannot express how much I miss them, but I hope this is one milestone in my life that has made them proud.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

History of Education Reform

The history of education in America deems to be full of trials and attempts to ensure the American child receives the highest degree of an adequate education and is competitive with other countries regarding education. After Russia launched the Sputnik satellite in 1957, concerns about national security spawned intense rhetoric about the quality of education in American schools (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, et. al, 2018). The nation feared that it had fallen behind Russia in technological development. Americans fretted that high school and college graduates lacked mathematical and scientific skills that would help their country compete technologically. This fear prompted the United States government to set aside federal resources and funds towards constructing more rigorous curricula and focusing on gifted students who would assist America in competing technologically and scientifically with the rest of world. In April 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education formed by then-U.S. Secretary of Education Terrel H. Bell released the report A Nation at Risk. The most famous line of the widely publicized report declared that "the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people" (“A Nation at Risk”, 1983).

The report assessed K – 12 public schools and deemed them to be inadequate. The commission stated, “The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity; the risk of this threatens the ability of the country to function in the ‘information age’ and all children would not be afforded a sufficient education.” “A Nation at Risk” spawned a media frenzy and prompted political and public interest in education. It was seen as a call of action throughout the country (Iorio, 2011). Many states subsequently passed laws
requiring higher standards and expectations for students, regardless of grade level. For example, more high school graduates were required to study four years of English. Graduation requirements intensified, and teacher accountability became more rigorous.

**Standards-Based Reform and Elementary and Secondary Education Act**

Standards-Based Reform (SBR) refers to the academic expectations for students and the alignment of key elements of the educational system. SBR also promotes the attainment of academic expectations for students; these expectations will be what students should know and be able to do (Hamilton, Stecher & Yuan, 2008). SBR was designed to address the areas of need in American education. In the SBR model, assessments were used for student achievement and to monitor performance. Many of the SBR systems have been adopted in response to the requirements of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESEA) and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) their origins reinstated and federal initiatives from the 1980s and 1990s and activities conducted by professional organizations, such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (Hamilton, Stecher & Yuan, 2008).

The SBR gained momentum during the Reagan presidency and continued through numerous administrations and legislative reforms, such NCLB, Race to the Top, waivers, Common Core and ESSA. ESEA was enacted in 1965. This law was initially presented by President Lyndon Johnson as a part of his Great Society Program. President Johnson, being a teacher, believed that education was the cure for both ignorance and poverty, and was an essential component of the “American Dream,” especially for racial and ethnic minorities (Iorio, 2011). The ESEA focused on issues such as education of low-income families, school libraries, textbooks, instructional materials, educational research and teacher training, improvement of educational programs, strengthening of state departments of education, help for disabled children, bilingual education, equal access to education, reduction of achievement gaps, and
promotion of parental involvement. Although Americans did not want the government to interfere with education, many people accepted the ESEA because the bill allowed federal funding in public schools for the first time. ESEA also forbade the formation of a national curriculum.

**Title I Funding under ESEA**

Title I funding was an entity under ESEA. This is a government grant program that provides financial assistance to local education agencies (LEA) and schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low–income families. The funds are allocated to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards. Funds are based upon four statutory formulas that are primarily based on census poverty estimates and the cost of education in each state (“ESEA Reauthorization”, 2018).

In 1994, the Clinton administration reauthorized ESEA (Shepard, Hannaway & Baker, 2009). The revised ESEA law required that states establish challenging and rigorous content standards for all students and develop assessments aligned with the standards, to measure student progress (Shepard, Hannaway & Baker, 2009). The basis or idea behind this reauthorization was that by holding schools accountable for meeting the standards, teachers and other staff, such as coaches, would readdress their efforts and teaching strategies to improve student achievement and student growth.

The ESEA not only challenged states to raise the bar, it also recognized the incentive theory. It assumed that with sufficient motivation, teachers and other relevant personnel would find the means to improve instruction (Shepard, Hannaway & Baker, 2009). Although this seemed like a feasible idea, many schools lacked the knowledge to carry out such changes that were needed, as well as the aptitude to make them happen. This issue led to the Bush administration implementing The No Child Left Behind Act.
No Child Left Behind Act

The United States Congress authorized NCLB in 2000. President George W. Bush signed NCLB into law in January 2002. According to (Klein, 2015), this act was a continuation of the standard–based reform model and the ESEA. NCLB is based on the concern that the American education system was no longer internationally competitive, which significantly increased the federal role in holding schools responsible for the academic progress of all students (Klein, 2015). The NCLB Act emphasized special focus on ensuring that states and schools boost the performance of certain groups of students, such as English – language learners, special education students, and low income and minority children. If states did not comply with the new federal regulations, they risked losing Title I funding; this funding is a portion of the ESEA that provides financial assistance to local education agencies. It is based on high percentages of children from low – income families. These funds are to ensure children meet the high expectations and standards of their state.

Under the NCLB law, students, teachers and schools in the United States must meet certain criterion States will test students in grades 3–8 and once in high school. Each public school must report results of their student population as a whole and in distinct subgroups, such as racial minorities, low – income and poverty stricken, special education, and English language learners. According to Klein (2015), every state was required to bring all students to the “proficient level” on state tests by the 2013 – 2014 school year, although each state was allowed to decide, on an individual basis what “proficiency” should look like and which tests to use. As of 2015, no school had met the goal of 100 % of its students being proficient (Klein, 2015).

The law also made the phrase “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) a common term in homes and schools. AYP is a measurement that determines how all public schools and school
districts in the United States are performing academically according to results on standardized tests; this measurement is how states are held accountable for student performance under NCLB (“Adequate Yearly Progress,” 2011). If a school misses its state’s annual achievement targets for two years or more, either for all students or for a particular subgroup, it is identified as falling to reach AYP standards, and is subject to a cascade of increasingly serious sanctions, such as:

- A school that misses AYP two years in a row has to allow students to transfer to a betterperforming public school in the same district.
- If a school misses AYP for three years in a row, it must offer free tutoring.
- Schools that continue to miss achievement targets could face state intervention. States can choose to shut these schools down, turn them into charter schools, take them over, or use another, significant turnaround strategy.
- Schools that fail to make AYP have to set aside a portion of their federal Title I dollars for tutoring and school choice. Schools at the point of having to offer school choice must hold back 10% of their Title I money.

NCLB law addressed teachers’ qualifications. Teachers must be “highly qualified,” which requires a bachelor’s degree in their areas of instruction, as well as the appropriate state certification. Highly qualified educators must also be evenly distributed among schools. Paraprofessionals also were required complete at least two years of college, obtain an associate degree or higher, or pass an evaluation to demonstrate knowledge and teaching ability (Klein, 2015).

NCLB was heavily criticized by American educators. Many believed the government caused states to rely heavily on data and achievement while minimizing the importance of
growth. Teachers believed 100% proficiency was not obtainable with the exception of Science and Social Studies. Cursive writing would be obsolete due to the focus on reading and math. Furthermore, teachers were not evenly distributed between poor and wealthier schools (Klein, 2015). The government heard cries throughout the country and President Bush’s Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings, allowed states to apply to participate in pilot projects to experiment with changes to the law, including a growth – model pilot that allowed states to consider student progress in rating schools instead of comparing different cohorts of students to one another (Klein, 2015).

In 2010, the United States Department of Education realized that majority of schools were not going to meet the NCLB achievement targets. As of that year, 38% of schools were failing to make AYP, up from 29% in 2006 (Klein, 2015). These alarming numbers called for Congress to act, although a bill was never initiated. The Obama administration offered states a reprieve from many of the law’s mandates through a series of waivers.

**Every Student Succeeds Act**

As President Obama took office, his approach to education reform modeled his predecessors. He expressed belief in statewide standards and supported the Common Core Standards. Like President Bush, President Obama wanted schools to “disaggregate” their performance data, meaning they cannot only report schoolwide results but by distinct populations (“Adequate Yearly Progress”, 2011). President Obama also introduced “Race to the Top” grants to help states achieve academic growth and achievement and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Unlike NCLB, ESSA shifted many of the educational decisions to the state, the shift is not absolute but it allows the states to take a more assertive role in decision making. The act also allows state flexibility of goals, interventions and even the disbursement of
federal funds. Finally teacher evaluation systems are strictly under state control. States can choose to continue or refine their current teacher evaluation system.

As President Trump took office, he indicated a desire to reform education by creating a school voucher incentive in the United States. This proposal will allocate $250 million to create a school voucher program. It will also cut 9.2 billion dollars from the Department of Education and will eliminate or reduce more than 30 programs supported with states, local, or private funds.

**Background of Study**

**Professional Learning Communities**

PLCs are designed to “begin with the end in mind.” PLCs allow teachers to converse about students’ strengths, needs, and progression of learning. PLCs are defined as educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. PLCs are defined as educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many, 2006). There are numerous other definitions of PLCs. PLCs are difficult to define because they cannot be designated as prescriptions, new programs, models, or innovations to be implemented (Hord, 1997). Rather, a PLC is an infrastructure or a way of working together that results in continuous school improvement. In the past, educators have assigned students multiple tasks after teaching long and difficult lessons with the expectations for these students to test well. PLCs purpose to use data to drive test scores, improve morale, and foster a conducive environment for students, faculty, and staff.
Changes were necessary to ensure compliance with the high demands of education reform, which prompted the emergence of PLCs. American education has evolved due to several factors, including technology, civil rights, and the practice of holding states accountable for student achievement and growth. Accountability is forced upon teachers at an enhanced rate. PLCs foster teacher accountability by allowing teachers to meet and converse about students’ strengths, weaknesses, needs, and progression of learning. Initiatives such as NCLB and Race to the Top call for reformation of schools and accountability. Transparency is essential for schools demonstrate academic gains and promote accountability for enhancing student success. PLCs have served as the driving mechanism for this change. PLCs established the notion that learning should be the focus, and teaching is the force that drives the instruction (Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2014). Moreover, the focus on enhancing student learning has required teachers to identify, with more precision, what they want students to learn, how to assess whether students are learning those skills, and how to deal with challenges in instilling information or capacities in students. PLCs promote results and are focused on continuous improvement and student learning (Reichstetter as cited in Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2014).

The use of data is a noted benefit of PLCs. PLCs are aware that their efforts to develop shared mission, vision, and values; engage in collective inquiry; build collaborative teams; take action; and focus on continuous improvement must be emphasized. Focusing on the “end” and teaching as the “means” can become the “why” schools have PLCs and “how can teachers ensure that students achieve.” According to Rentfro (2007), there are four critical questions that must guide educators when participating in a PLC.

- What do we want each student to learn? (Planning and pacing instruction)
• How will we know if each student is learning it? (Collect data)

• How will we respond when a student is experiencing difficulty with it? (Intervention)

• How will we respond if the student already knows it? (Enrichment)

Many teachers like to engage in strategies that they believe work because of their own experiences, expanding students’ knowledge by learning the experiences of others is invaluable for teachers who want to gain a better understanding of the learning process and promote higher levels of learning in their students. The increased collaboration promoted by PLCs has greatly improved the teaching culture and has led teachers to perceive that PLCs will provide advantages to students and teachers. Furthermore, there is evidence that students reap benefits from PLCs, including, but not limited to, better performance scores on achievement tests. By focusing on the results of the PLC, teachers can avoid wasting time and resources on useless strategies that are seemingly promising but do not actually improve results for students. The PLC arena concept will need to be equipped with tools necessary to shift the classroom focus away from the teacher and onto the student. This shift will prompt meaningful educational reform because it will involve a different kind of work and commitment on the part of all education stakeholders to make a conscious transition from teacher-centered learning to student-centered learning. This transition will ultimately be a much more effective way to educate students within the current educational system.

PLCs provide a promising model for school improvement by enhancing the knowledge and skills of teachers. PLCs were developed largely based on the premise that teaching and learning are complex concepts that require more than simple knowledge about education based on the premise from teachers. PLCs build on business models that assume that organizations
have the capacity to learn. They encourage professional development that supports more comprehensive approaches to teaching and learning.

The goal of professional learning communities are for educators to collaboratively work together using collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker & Many, 2006).

Professional learning community are an ongoing cycle of:

• Gathering evidence of current levels of student learning
• Developing strategies and ideas to build on strengths and address weaknesses in that learning
• Implementing those strategies and ideas
• Analyzing the impact of the changes to discover what was effective and what was not
• Applying new knowledge in the next cycle of continuous improvement

(Dufour, Dufour, & Many, 2006)

Statement of Problem

Many PLCs have become dysfunctional and have lost sight of their goals or end results, which should always be student achievement and growth. Weber (2011) Stated that there are five dysfunctions of PLCs: lack of norms, lack of team goals, lack of trust, lack of communication, and lack of essential learning outcomes. These norms can lead to a non-collaborative environment and non-conducive environment of meeting the needs of students. For students to make gains in reading and reach their academic potential, educators must have trust in one another to help students achieve their goals and master a standard. The perception of teachers should be a positive experience and should have a positive outcome. As educators engulf
themselves in weekly PLCs, are the perceptions positive or negative? Are strategies and findings from PLCs used in the classroom? The purpose of this study was to identify if teachers perceive PLCs to assist with daily instruction and conducive to teaching environments.

**Purpose of Study**

School reform, student growth, and achievement have been points of emphasis for educators and policymakers. The emphasis on closing the reading achievement gap is prevalent and evident in American schools. The ESEA and NCLB unsuccessfully attempted to rectify this problem. Previously, Tennessee received federal funds as part of the Race to the Top initiative. The purpose of these funds was to initiate educational reform and close reading achievement gaps. It may also be argued that math achievement gaps are present.

The purpose of this study was to examine the perception of the effectiveness of PLC meetings throughout a Middle Tennessee school district and attempt to determine if teachers believe there is a correlation between PLC meetings and a decline in test scores in the last three years also an attempt to determine if teachers believe there is a correlation between PLC meetings and student achievement. The researcher scrutinized the frequency of PLC meetings, if PLC meetings are focused on answering the four critical questions as stipulated by Rentfro (2007), and if PLCs have a common goal. The study examined if Educators should be able to correlate this achievement and actions resulting from PLC meetings. Educators should be able to ascertain strengths and weaknesses of students as a result of PLCs and use this information to drive instruction.

**Target Population**

The target population of this study was teachers, principals, and academic coaches in a Middle Tennessee school district. These individuals are essential in the PLC process and are present at each PLC meeting. The academic coaches occasionally attend meetings to provide
their expertise to teachers and collaborate with teachers to assist and promote student achievement. The principals in the meeting should ensure that all resources are available to teachers and that teachers are discussing best practices, strategies, and students’ assessments.

**Research Questions**

Literature review indicated distinctive changes in how a school or team should conduct themselves when becoming a Professional Learning Community. Characteristics of PLCs are essential in the positive outcome and goal of a PLC-driven school. Educators and administration should change their mindset and begin with the end in mind. Accordingly, the following research questions were developed for this study.

1. What practices do educators perceive are increasing the effectiveness of Professional Learning Communities?

2. What practices do educators perceive are assisting an increase academic student growth in the classroom?

3. How do educators perceive the effectiveness of Pre and Post Common Formative Assessments in Professional Learning Communities?

**Limitations and Delimitations**

Schools with varying socioeconomic student populations were scrutinized in this study. A variety of teachers were interviewed, which allowed the researcher to obtain numerous opinions and ideas regarding PLCs within different schools. Teacher honesty was a limitation of this study. It was possible that teachers may have believed they were betraying their principal if they were honest and candid during the interviews, which may have skewed research results. It was also feasible that questions were not answered in an honest manner on the survey.
Additionally, only one school district was used for this research. There are two school districts in the city where the research occurred, but only one district was used for this study. A delimitation of this research is the interview process and survey process of a multitude of educators. The number of participants provided a series of opinions and ideas regarding PLCs throughout different grade levels within the research district.

The Researcher

The researcher in this study is currently an academic interventionist in a Middle Tennessee school district. Previously, the researcher taught 5th grade reading standards in a school with numerous socioeconomically-disadvantaged students. The researcher has also taught grades 1-3. This study is based upon observing and participating in grade-level PLCs. Differences were noticeable; some students in the research district have made gains, and other students in the research district have not. Thus, the researcher sought to determine if differences in conducting and analyzing data within PLCs and teacher-shared strategies during PLCs impacted student learning.

Description of Terms

Professional Learning Community or PLC. A group of educators that meets regularly, shares expertise, and works collaboratively to improve teaching skills and the academic performance of students.

Academic Achievement. The level of schooling a person has successfully completed and the ability to attain success in his/hers studies.

Accountability. The assignment of responsibility for conducting activities in a certain way or producing specific results.
**SMART Goals.** Goals set by students or educators that are specific, significant, and comprehensive. These goals are attainable. The acronym SMART represents specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time-related.

**Data Teams.** Grade level, department or course–alike teams that examine work generated from a common formative assessment.

**Data Analysis.** The process of systematically applying statistical and/or logical techniques to describe and illustrate, condense and recap, and evaluate data.

**Collaboration.** The action of working with someone to produce or create something **Common Formative Assessment.** Teacher–created assessments that are collaboratively scored and provide immediate feedback to students and teachers.

**Summary**

In summation, this study will examine the effectiveness of PLCs in the research district. According to Dufour and Eaker’s (2009) findings, PLCs work if everyone is transparent, focused on the four critical questions of PLCs, and an end goal is addressed. Student achievement and growth should be attainable if this is occurring in PLC meetings throughout the research district. Teachers should be collaborative and also learning from each other, while their students are learning. Research has proven that when PLCs are effective, and teachers deem them to be effective, test scores elevate and students grow academically.

**CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE**
Introduction

Public education has been a popular topic of debate and discussions for many years. Beginning with the Lyndon Johnson presidency through the current administration, the United States federal government has poured billions of dollars into educating our youth. The U.S government measures education through four categories: school finance, development of teachers, accountability and school choice. During the late 1990’s the lack of achievement and outcomes compelled the government to take action. This action was the basis of ESEA, SBR, NCLB, Race to the Top, and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Along with these programs that address accountability for school districts, the government realized that families in poverty did not have the same education or educational choice as those of affluent neighborhoods. Through research and the need for change, PLCs became the factor for positive change.

PLCs gained momentum in the late 1990’s due to pressure from the federal government. According to the website, “All Things PLC”, there are several schools across the country that are PLC communities and record their successes on the website. The website currently has over 100 schools that share their success stories and lists contact information for principals. The website also has articles, research, tools, resources and blogs regarding creating a successful PLC. PLCS are a way to produce student achievement through teachers working together collaboratively.

Presently, the replacement of NCLB with ESSA the federal government still requires states to report achievement and growth for federal funding. This measure is more flexible under ESSA but is still a requirement. One of the significant accomplishments of ESSA, is an explicit rejections of the one-fits-all model of NCLB and Race to the Top (Reeves and Dufour, 2018). The act recognizes that each state has different needs. Instead of mandates, the act refers to qualifications as menus. For example, in the state of Alaska an urban environment is vastly
different from an urban environment in Illinois. In small rural systems, teachers may work in isolation, where a single math teacher serves all students in the middle and high school grades; these teachers need to collaborate with peers across district, county, and state lines (Reeves & Dufour, 2018). This situation creates the need for PLCs amongst a district so teachers can be supported.

This chapter presents a review of the literature as it pertains to the effectiveness of PLCs, and the different components that makes a PLC successful and unsuccessful. The chapter includes a history and origin on PLCs and research to support the need for them. The chapter discusses the six characteristics of successful PLCs and how they are important. The chapter examines how data teams are not a separate entity, but they work within the PLC meetings by creating common formative assessments. The chapter reviews in detail a school transitioning from a traditional environment to a PLC environment beginning with the principal. The theoretical framework is the constructivist theory and is presented in this chapter. This theory supports PLCs by stating that individuals learn best and gain knowledge by experience and learning by doing. Accountability and the need for accountability is discussed in this chapter. The chapter explores the two types of accountability for PLCs and designing accountability within a PLC. An examination of successful PLCs within several different schools and a failing PLC within a school is reviewed. The chapter discusses the lack of norms that cause PLCs to become toxic and unsuccessful. The chapter concludes with a summary of the literature review.

The purpose of this literature review was to examine the Professional Learning Community (PLC) process within a Middle Tennessee school district and determine if teachers deem this process to be effective for instruction, achievement and growth of all students especially regarding the district’s and state’s summative assessments.
History and Origin of Professional Learning Communities

According to DuFour and Eaker (1998), public schools were originally organized based on the concepts and principles of the factory model. In 1983, the Excellence Movement fostered educational change. The movement offered a consistent direction for reform, but not a new direction. This setback prompted the Restructuring Movement, which deemed to be full of empty promises and was unsuccessful in reaching its goals. The inability of the Restructuring Movement to achieve the anticipated results not only discouraged educational theorists, but also caused some besieged educators to respond to the constant criticism of their schools with growing defensiveness and resignation. Numerous reform efforts yielded a lack of clarity regarding intended results and a lack of perseverance. During the Restructuring Movement, the government composed eight goals to achieve success for students. This was not a complete success. Although there was a universal consensus for the needed change and accountability, there was not a clear, concise way to achieve this. The restructuring seemed to have left students virtually untouched by the reforms that swirl around but not within, their classrooms. No form of school reform has proven to be successful. Change is inevitable in education as was necessary for school reform. PLCs emerged as a concept that improved teacher well-being and positively impacted student achievement (“Professional Learning Communities”, 2003). PLCs brought forth the notion that learning should be the focus, rather than teaching (Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2014). PLCs offered the opportunity for teachers to develop and share their expertise (Dufour and Eaker, 1998). PLCs allow teachers with expertise in a certain subject helps teacher develop leadership roles and involvement in school improvement efforts (“Professional Learning Communities: Elements that Define a PLC”),
This corresponds well with the generally accepted belief that improving classroom instruction is a significant factor in raising student achievement (“Professional Learning Communities”, 2003).

Hord (2009) states, Professional Learning Communities are defined by what the words state:

Professionals: Those individuals who are responsible and accountable for delivering an effective instructional program to students so that they each learn well. Professional show up with a passionate commitment to their own learning and that of students, and share responsibility to this purpose.

Learning: The activity in which professionals engage in order to enhance their knowledge and skills.

Community: Individuals coming together in a group in order to interact in meaningful activities to learn deeply with colleagues about an identified topic, to develop shared meaning, and identify shared purposes related to the topic.

Characteristics of PLCs

There are six essential characteristics of PLCs: shared mission, vision, values and goals, collaborative teams focused on learning, collective inquiry, action orientation and experimentation, commitment to continuous improvement and results orientation. In order for PLCs to be effective, these six characteristics must be addressed and present during meetings. These characteristics are the basis of the true purpose of PLCs. The purpose of schools is student learning, and that the most significant factor in whether students learn well is teaching quality; teacher quality is improved through continuous professional learning (Hord, 2009).
Shared Mission, Vision, Values and Goals

One of the Notable characteristics of PLCs is a shared mission, vision, values and goals. PLCs must have a vision, values, mission to be effective. Dufour and Eaker recognizes this characteristic into four building blocks with the following questions:

- Mission/purpose – Why do we exist?
- Vision – What do we hope to become?
- Values – How must we behave in order to make our shared vision a reality?
- Goals – Which steps will we take first and when?

(Dufour & Eaker, 1998)

A shared mission answers the question, what is our purpose or why do we exist? Each district and school has a mission statement, this is the same in PLCs. Educators have to know why they are doing the work they are doing. Dufour and Eaker (1998) states when creating a mission or purpose, two distinct questions need to be asked:

- If we believe all kids can learn, exactly what is it that we will expect them to learn?
- If we believe all kids can learn, how do we respond when they do not learn?

Dufour and Eaker researched four schools and found that these schools all believed all kids could learn but some schools did not address the question of how they would respond if the students did not learn. The lesson of this study is that principals, teachers and school staff must go beyond their beliefs and assumptions. Educators must challenge themselves to hone into solutions of students not learning. Mission statements that do not answer these questions will contribute very little to the creation of a learning community (Dufour & Eaker, 1998).

A shared a vision in a PLC asks the community, what do we hope to become? The mission of a PLC establishes a purpose, the vision gives an organization a sense of direction.
Vision represents realistic, credible, attractive future for the organization – a future that is better and more desirable in significant ways than existing conditions (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). An effective vision statement verbalizes an image of the PLCs future that attracts all staff. This image should be so compelling that it motivates staff to work in unison to make the vision a reality.

Creating a vision can be challenging, but it is extremely important to the success of a PLC. An organizational cannot flourish without a vision, but the key is that its members must believe in the vision. This concept can be problematic for educators. This is where co-creating strategy may benefit. Co-creating or developing a written vision statement with members is a strategy that will most likely to result in the shared vision critical to a learning community (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Building a vision is not a one-time experience. It is a daily challenge and an ongoing process. This process includes working with all staff to ensure that the school is transforming to the vision everyone committed to. The key to meeting this challenge is not to impose a vision on an unwilling faculty, but rather to help faculty members identify common causes, interests, goals and aspirations (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). This will enable ownership and support for all PLC members in the vision-building process.

A PLC that works together to build a shared vision motivates and energizes staff. When people can connect their daily tasks with larger goals and collective purposes, they are more likely to think their work is meaningful (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). A shared vision gives guidance to PLC members. The members have a clear direction of purpose and it simplifies the decisionmaking process.

Having a shared vision also establishes a higher standard within the community. If the vision has a standard of excellence, the community will not expect anything less from themselves
or their colleagues. When a shared vision has high standards, it leads to a clear agenda for action. A vision statement enables a faculty to assess current policies, practices, programs and performance indicators and then to identify discrepancies between the existing conditions in the school and those described in the vision statement (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). The vision statement acts as link between reality and what is hoped for in the future. A shared vision is continuous and requires all members to believe in it for success. The vision must have longevity, must have constant communication and can always be revisited.

Values is the third building block and answers the question, how must we behave in order to make our shared vision a reality. When members have reached an agreement on the vision, the focus must shift to attaining an agreement on shared values and how they will be promoted. One way to achieve this is creating a team within the school (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Values will be different in each PLC community and each climate if the term “values” is likely to be problematic, the members can use a different term such as “guiding principles” or “collective commitments” (Dufour & Eaker, 1998).

The fourth building block is goals. This building block within PLC characteristics and it demands establishing priorities. This task determines what must be accomplished first, the specific steps that must be taken to achieve the objectives, and the time for the process (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Goals, when reached can be a celebration for not only PLC members but for students also. They represent measurable milestones that can be used to assess progress in and advancing toward a vision; thus they make visions more substantive (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Visions are to inspire staff but goals are to foster accountability. It is the identification and pursuit if explicit goals that foster the experimentation, results orientation and commitment to
continuous improvement; the other characteristics in the professional learning community (Dufour & Eaker, 1998).

Not only are goals assessed, they serve as an indicator in the change process. PLC members, the school and district need to observe change and results. Goals are needed to transform a traditional school to a PLC community. Members must celebrate short-term and long-term goals. An initiative will lose critical momentum if there are no short-term wins to celebrate (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Short-term goals along with short-term wins are the fuel that leads to long-term goals and long-term wins; this will lead to a successful PLC within a school.

In schools, teachers and administrators share a vision, mission, values and goals focused on student learning and a commitment to improvement. The vision is used as a context for decision making regarding instructional practice and collaborative learning efforts (Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2014). The vision and mission of a PLC is its collective commitment to guiding principles that articulate what the people in the school believe and what they seek to create (Dufour and Eaker, 1998). Members of a professional learning community recognize and celebrate the fact that their mission statement is attainable and suitable.

This is demonstrated through data team meetings.

After addressing the four building block questions, educators and leaders must ask questions such as:

- What is the purpose of our school?
- Who are our students?
- What are their strengths and needs?
• How can our collective efforts improve the quality of their education and the quality of their lives?
• What are we collectively willing to commit and sacrifice?
• What specific indicators of progress will we track to ensure we are making progress in meeting the needs of our students?

(Mohammad, 2011)

When there is a commitment to these questions and they are made public, teachers can become powerful forces in guiding a positive behavior for PLCs.

**Collaborative Teams focused on Learning**

Collaboration is a major characteristic of the PLC process. PLCs are based on the premise that through collaboration, professionals achieve more than they could alone (Dufour and Eaker, 1998). A collaborative team’s purpose is to ensure organizational growth more than individual growth (Hellner, 2008). This means that building a school’s capacity to learn is a collaborative effort rather than an individual task (Dufour and Eaker, 2008). Teachers work conducively and favorably when they help one another. For example, teachers were surveyed and reported that when they were members of a strong collaborative culture, they saw significant benefits in their day-to-day work in critical instructional area, such as planning lessons, developing teaching skills and content. Eaker (1998) stated that people who engage in collaborative team learning are able to learn from one another, thus creating momentum to fuel improvement. Collaboration is a door to empowerment for teachers. By collaborating, productivity increases. Teachers should be placed in situations where they can learn from other teachers (Bailey, 2016).

A correlation with school success has been linked to PLC collaboration. Through research, collaboration (e.g., opportunities for teachers to engage in ongoing collegial
opportunities where they talk about teaching, receive frequent feedback on teaching, design
classes together, teach each other, etc.) has been found in successful schools and was absent or
missing in unsuccessful schools (“Professional Learning Communities: Elements that define a
PLC”, 2014). Team learning is not the same as team building. Collaborative teams focus on
organizational renewal and a willingness to work together in continuous improvement processes
(Dufour and Eaker, 1998). In a collective and collaborative learning community, teachers seek
new knowledge, skills and strategies, share information, and work together to solve problems and
improve learning opportunities inherent in real site–based challenges. Teachers are “empowered
as professionals” by the practice of sharing (Hellner, 2008). Along with the characteristic of
collaboration, collective learning coincides. These two terms might be central to the functioning
of a PLC judging by the repetition of the theme in various guises throughout literature.
Collective learning allows teachers to share information, work together to solve problems and
improve learning opportunities inherent in real site–based challenges.
Collaboration collegiality form the twin pillars supporting interactive professionalism.

**Collective Inquiry**

Teams in a PLC relentlessly question the status quo, seek new methods of teaching and
learning, test methods, and then reflect on the results (Bailey, 2006). As part of the team’s
decision making process, teams work to build shared knowledge for best practices and their
current reality. This characteristic is a structure in which grade levels work together thoroughly
to examine their educational practices. During this process, educators work together to ask
questions, develop theories of action, determine action steps and gather and analyze evidence to
assess the impact of their actions (“Why collaborative inquiry”, 2018). By teams carefully
probing and reflecting on data and the results of their actions, they begin to think differently.
Educators begin to question long-standing beliefs and consider implications for their professional practices.

Many educational researchers acknowledged the sovereignty of PLCs or the concept of PLCs to transform schools and help teachers meet the challenges confronting them; and promoting collaborative inquiry as a strategy for solidifying teaching and learning. Teachers are encouraged to take an active role during this process and express and test hypotheses during PLC meetings. Collaborative inquiry can have a profound impact on the professional practices not only of the participants but of their colleagues as well (“Why collaborative inquiry”, 2018).

**Action Orientation and Experimentation**

Members of a PLC constantly turn their learning and insights into action; they recognize the importance of engagement and experience in learning and in testing new ideas (Bailey, 2009). Teachers are learning by doing. Educators move quickly to turn ambitions and goals into a reality in their classrooms. They understand that the most powerful learning always occurs in a context of taking action, and they value engagement and experience as the most effective teachers (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, et.al, 2006). Teachers working together in teams and engaging in collective inquiry promotes achievement.

**Commitment to Continuous Improvement**

Members of PLCs continuously pursue better ways to achieve mutual goals and accomplish their fundamental purpose of learning for all. Systematic processes causes all team members engross in an ongoing cycle of:

- Gathering evidence of current levels of student learning
- Developing strategies and ideas to build on strengths and weaknesses in that learning
- Implementing the strategies and ideas
• Analyzing the impact of the changes to discover what was effective and what was not
• Applying the new knowledge in the next cycle of continuous improvement

(Bailey, 2006)

Educators need to understand that the goal of PLCs is not to merely learn a new strategy, but to create conditions for an everlasting learning environment in which innovation and experimentation are not viewed as tasks to be achieved but as a way to conduct everyday business indefinitely. Participation in this process is not set aside for team leaders, it is a norm for every member of the team.

**Results Orientation**

Results orientation is the final characteristic of PLCs. Members realize that their efforts in the other area of characteristics must be assessed on the fundamentals of results rather than intentions. Unless teams administer ongoing assessments with tangible results, the assessments and meetings are pointless.

PLCs focusing on results leads to each team or educator developing measurable improvement goals that are aligned to school and district goals for learning. It also drives teams to create a series of common formative assessments that are administered to students multiple times throughout the year gather ongoing evidence of student learning (Dufour, Dufour, Dufour, Eaker et al., 2006). Educators review the results from their common formative assessments in an attempt to identify and address areas where students have strengths and weaknesses. All team members observe these results in an effort to learn from one another. More importantly assessments are used to identify students who need intervention and additional support for learning. Common formative assessments (CFAs) pose as one of the most powerful tools in the PLC process.
Sharing Personal Practice

Hellner (2008) stated that teachers can be the best students. Teachers observing classroom practices, giving feedback and mentoring each other leads to individual and community improvement. Dufour (2004) delineates this attribute of PLCs referring to “collaborative conversations and make public what has been traditionally private – goals, strategies, materials, pacing, questions, concerns, and results”

When teachers share personal practice, it incorporates a review of the teachers’ behavior by their peers and visiting each other’s classrooms to observe, script notes and discuss observations by each other. This process is a part of the “peers helping peers” process (Hord, 1997). The idea of this process, is for individual and community improvement and supported by the mutual respect and trustworthiness of staff members. Mutual respect and understanding are the fundamental requirements for this kind of workplace culture (Dufour & Fullan, 2013). One goal of creating a shared personal practice environment is teachers finding help and support, and trust by building warm relationships with your team. Fostering this kind of environment, encourages teachers to debate, discuss and disagree respectfully. Teams become comfortable sharing successes and failures. Teachers praise one another on their triumphs and give empathy when their teammates have mishaps.

Just as students need an appropriate learning environment, teachers do too. This is a part of sharing personal practices. Teachers need an environment that values and supports hard work, the acceptance of challenging tasks, risk taking and the promotion of growth (Hord, 1997).

Supportive and Shared Leadership

A shared and supportive leadership among staff with a distribution of power, authority, and decision-making is coined with the term egalitarianism (Hellner, 2008). PLCs often are viewed as
a foundation for developing teacher leaders. The PLC process is contingent on leaders understanding the importance of building a collaborative culture in their schools. This necessitates that the purposes and goals grow among the participants based on their values, beliefs, and individual shared experiences (Thompson, Greg and Niska, 2004). Staff must feel permitted to participate in the PLC process and have faith that their voices and concerns will be received. Administrators in a PLC environment are committed to sharing decision-making with teachers and providing opportunities for teachers to serve as leaders. Sharing power and authority with teachers through decision-making and shared leadership increases leadership capacity and builds a belief in the school’s collective ability to affect student teaching.

Leadership is shared and distributed among formal and informal leaders. This means the PLC process basis is no individual educator have all the knowledge and expertise to improve a school or meet the needs of the staff and classrooms. It requires a collective effort by all, combined resources and knowledge and a shared expertise of all who are invested. When schools embrace this premise, when teachers and staff work together to combine resources and share their expertise, the true work of a PLC begin (Goble, 2012).

**Data Teams Inside of PLC’s**

Dufour and Eaker (1998) state that continuous improvement requires that each member of the organization is engaged in considering several key questions:

1. What is our fundamental purpose?
2. What do we hope to achieve?
3. What are our strategies for becoming better?
4. What criteria will we use to assess our improvement efforts?

These questions are used to drive data teams inside a PLC community. A commitment to continuous improvement is evident in an environment in which innovation and experimentation
are as ways of conducting day–to–day business. In a PLC, the concept of the instructional data time is often widely utilized (Peery, 2011).

In a PLC, the concept of the instructional data time is often widely utilized. An instructional data team is a small grade–level, department, course–like, or organizational that examines work generated from a common formative assessment (Peery, 2011). When a school is a true PLC, its members collectively pursue a shared mission and shared goals. If PLCs are the “what” of school improvement, then the practices of Data teams serve as the “how” (Dufour, & Reeves, 2015). Data teams hold collaborative, structured meetings that focus on the effectiveness of teaching and learning. The Data team process inside a PLC school, consists of six unambiguous steps:

1. Collect and/display the data
2. Analyze data and prioritize needs
3. Set, review and revise incremental SMART goals
4. Select common instructional strategies to be employed to address discovered in Step Two
5. Determine results indicators
6. Monitor and evaluate

In the sixth step, additional meetings will be used to create Common Formative Assessments based on results from previous steps. Steps 1-6 are very similar to the characteristics of a PLC.

Data teams inside a PLCs school bases their six steps to align with the federal requirements of response to intervention (RTI). Data teams are grade-level teams; they generate common formative assessments based on prioritized standards and then meet frequently to examine these assessments to improve instruction. Data teams should not be viewed as a separate entity of a
PLC; they are essentially the same the process sort of confusing more in depth. When data teams are implemented properly, they are the vehicle that moves the school from a teaching organization to a learning organization. To ensure the data team process is successful and effective, the school or team must judge the effectiveness on results. Working together to improve student achievement becomes the routine work of everyone in the school (Dufour, 2004). Every teacher participates in an ongoing process of identifying the current level of student achievement, establishing a goal to improve the current level, working together to achieve that goal, and providing periodic evidence of progress. SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, rigorous, realistic, results-focused, timely and trackable) is relatable to PLCs. Learning how to frame goals as a team that includes students is an important skill that would help every PLC remain focused and realize the outcome that needs to be accomplished.

Common Formative Assessments

Assessment is a critical component of PLCs. Assessments and data drive the learning and lead the teacher in the correct direction. Often, this tool or component is missing or not used substantially. Historically, the goal of assessment in the United States was to assist schools in what was universally accepted as their fundamental task: sorting, ranking, and selecting students (Dufour, Dufour & Eaker, 2008). However, schools are to fulfill a new purpose, which is a high level of learning for all. Educators are urged to use assessments not merely to monitor student learning or diagnose problems, but more importantly, to inform and impact their instruction to improve student learning.

Common formative assessments are created by teachers based upon a standard that needs to be mastered. When teams develop common formative assessments throughout the school year,
each teacher can identify how his/her students performed on each skill compared with other students (Dufour, 2004). Individual teachers can call on their team colleagues to help them reflect on areas of concern. This is an excellent example of collaboration. Each teacher has access to the ideas, materials, strategies and talents of the entire team. According to Ainsworth and Viegut (2006), teachers in PLC meetings collaboratively score the assessments, analyze the results, and discuss ways to achieve improvements in student learning on the next common formative assessment they will administer.

Common formative assessments are derived from pre and post-tests, and are the driving force instruction. Each team focuses on power standards. If a standard is worthy of being taught, it is worthy of being assessed. A power standard refers to a process whereby educators prioritize the content and performance standards for a given subject matter area in terms of their endurance, leverage, and ability to prepare students for readiness at the next level of learning. Identifying power standards is not ignoring other standards, it is simply prioritization, not elimination (Peery, 2011).

Teachers analyze strengths and weakness in student understanding to establish and achieve definite goals for improvement; they are utilizing formative assessments results to their fullest potential. Teachers need to discuss students’ strengths and weaknesses and subsequently make inferences regarding these strengths and weaknesses. As the meeting concludes, each teacher should have an insight on what skills need to be reassessed and an outlook on future standards.

**Transitioning Staff to a Professional Learning Community**

Staff development and training on the correct way to implement PLCs should also be addressed when PLCs are formed. The context of staff development focuses on the school level
and has strong support from the district’s central office (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Staff and principals cannot create a productive and effective professional learning community on their own. Central office must assist in achieving this goal. Professional development is most effective when it engages the entire staff of a particular school in an effort to achieve incremental improvements related to a set of common objectives over 3-5 year (Sparks and Hirsh as cited in Dufour & Eaker, 1998). District offices can help schools create staff programs by:

- Promoting shared vision and values
- Fostering collective inquiry
- Promoting collaboration
- Encouraging experimentation
- Focusing on results

(Dufour & Eaker, 1997 p. 58)

Providing professional staff development is essential for success of a PLC. The purpose of a comprehensive staff development program is to improve the ability of educators to help all students achieve the intended results of the school (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Staff development needs to be researched-based and clearly state expected results. Most of the time, administration envision staff development as workshops; this approach suggests that educators learn best when they leave their schools to attend training sessions. In contrast, PLCs view staff development in terms of the workplace, making all the difference.

The context of staff development should be job-embedded. In the right school context, learning is so deeply embedded in the daily work of educators that it is difficult to distinguish between where the work ends and the learning begins. Teachers are engaging in a powerful form of staff development each time they work together to develop curriculum and assessment
strategies; engage in the ongoing cycle of inquiry, reflection, dialogue, action, analysis, and adjustments to improve results; and give one another feedback as they practice new skills.

**Role of a Principal in a Professional Learning Community**

As a leader of a school focused on PLCs, a principal should always listen, be supportive, start slow and easy, stay focused, seek out resources and realize it is all about the students (Goble, 2012). Teachers should be able to come to their leader with concerns and the principal should always listen. Teachers need to have time to plan, collaborate and attend professional development. Leaders must take action to find ways to minimize or eliminate the distractions and unnecessary mandates that align to the PLC process (Goble, 2012).

Being supportive in the PLC process requires principals to support their teachers in every form. This means supporting them as they work on pacing guides, common formative assessments (CFAs) and lesson planning. Principals should be in meetings supporting teachers in data discussions and intervention plans. The way a principal can achieve this is by offering suggestions, answering questions or listening to feedback. Most importantly, principals should support teachers with encouragement, and make the extra effort to celebrate the big and small successes.

Starting slow and easy in a PLC environment, allows teachers to start with a single subject and standard. Beginning with one standard or topic will have teachers less overwhelmed with the process. Also, focusing on a single standard, allows teachers to collectively collaborate to develop CFAs and gather common data, and plan for interventions. This accelerates the learning and implementation process.

There will be many distractions for principals and teachers that will challenge a school’s commitment to the PLC process. The key is for the principal to stay focused on the process of
building a collaborative community that focuses on learning and accentuates results. Becoming a functioning PLC doesn’t happen overnight, it requires a sustained collective effort from everyone in a school (Goble, 2012). As a PLC leader, keeping staff focused on goals is a priority.

PLCs gained momentum in the early 1990’s; there are several resources a principal can obtain to assist them in making their school a successful PLC environment. In 2018, there are a plethora of resources available for PLCs such as webinars, professional developments, and technology solutions to help a principal lead and support their school. Seeking out resources will simplify the process and engage others who share a commitment to the school (Goble, 2012).

The result of a successful PLC is student growth and achievement. Working together to ensure students are learning and growing should be a focus of a PLC community. Schools should work together every day to the final destination of success for all students.

The principal has a vital role in the success of PLCs. The principal must first believe in the shared mission statement so the staff and faculty will follow. Principals must engage the faculty in the co–creation of a shared vision and values. The principal plays a key role in creating the conditions that enable schools to become professional learning communities (Dufour & Eaker, 2004). Principals of PLCs lead through shared vision and values rather than through rules and procedures. This change enables a principal to become a leader as opposed to a manager. A principal must abandon the traditional position of authority and recognize that his/her role must include that of “learner,” working with teachers and other school staff to investigate and seek solutions that will improve student learning (Williamson, 2009). Below is a table showing the variance of a principal engaging in a PLC environment versus a traditional principal.
Table 2.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emerging From</th>
<th>Progressing toward</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Solitary decision maker</td>
<td>Participant in learning process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expert</td>
<td>Learner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Facilitator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominating leader</td>
<td>Participating leader</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Williamson, 2009)

As a principal evolves toward becoming a leader and learner, his/her should foster an environment within their school that encourages ideas and collaboration. To create and sustain a PLCs, administrators should follow the following five steps

1. Create a schedule and other organizational structures that provide teams for teachers to work together and reduce isolation (Williamson, 2009). An example of this could be a teacher’s planning time. Teams can meet, discuss and share ideas.

2. Incorporate policies that promote greater autonomy, foster collaboration, and improve communication. For example, one grade level may share its meeting norms with another grade level.

3. Provide professional development at a variety of times both during the school day and other scheduled times. An illustration of this is conducting a school – wide meeting before or after school and allowing teachers from different departments to share ideas and concepts on certain topic.

4. When the opportunity arises to hire new staff, search for teachers who are comfortable accepting feedback, reflect upon their practice, and who share a similar commitment to
improve student learning. This also means that a principal need to examine individuals that are potential team players and have a desire to share with the faculty.

5. Be transparent regarding personal learning and encourage others to do the same. Principals should create an atmosphere of trust and respect among the school personnel. Principals are encouraged to research how to become a democratic leader of their communities.

Principals not only should read and create a wealth of knowledge for a PLCs, they should also provide reading materials and training for their staff regarding PLCs. Principals and district leaders should make articles available to faculty and staff; the implications of the points in the articles should be collaboratively discussed in small–group settings (Eaker & Keating, 2012).

PLC principals know that data are vital to achievement and to a PLCs. Effective principals connect all their work to student learning; they use student learning data to inform everything from the school improvement plan to classroom observations and evaluation of teachers (Eaker & Keating, 2012). This is process is where SMART goals or specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and timely goals become essential. Collaboratively, SMART goals will be developed by teachers, potentially in their PLC meetings, and principals will oversee this development. To promote SMART goals and create a PLC that fosters high-level learning, principals must consider the following factors:

• Analyze all available student learning data.
• Develop a school improvement plan.
• Monitor team effectiveness and the guaranteed and viable curriculum by attending team meetings, reviewing the quality of team products, and monitoring team common formative assessment results.
• Monitor the effectiveness of plans for additional time, support, and enrichment.

• Complete the teacher observation and evaluation cycle.

(Eaker & Keating, 2012 p. 95)

Finally, administrators necessitate the idea that common formative assessments are pertinent for instruction in a PLCs. According to Ainsworth and Viegut (2006), administrators who recognize the potential of common formative assessments in improving the quality of instruction and subsequent learning for all students play a vital role in implanting this process in their schools. They can deliberately seek creative ways to change daily teaching schedules to promote collaborative educator planning. Administrators can provide support for teachers through instruction-based pre and post-assessment.

**Accountability**

Accountability is measured in education by student performance. It is the idea of holding schools, districts, educators, and students responsible for results. Student performance on state testing ensures the state and the federal government that monetary resources that are allocated towards education are used properly and aids in student success. Accountability is defined as holding everyone with responsibilities to high standards of performance.

Accountability is needed in PLCs to ensure that schools and districts are meeting accountability with the state and federal government. Strategic accountability works when it comes from within a PLC and is tied to school and district mission, visions, goals, and action plans (Easton, 2016). Strategic accountability lead teachers and principals to action that will make a significant difference in student learning. Strategic accountability is something PLC members have to buy into for themselves and other in the learning community. There are formal and informal accountability; members are accountable to:

• Themselves for their own learning
• Others in own PLC for enhancing every individual’s learning and the learning of the group as a whole
• Themselves and others in their own PLC for doing what they say they will do (taking action and following through)
• People outside the PLC (other PLCs, the whole school, the district, parents, community, students) for learning and doing what they will do

(Easton, 2016)

**Informal Accountability**

Informal accountability is an individual concept. It is subjected to honor, values and integrity. Teachers are motivated by a desire to uphold a positive deposition. If enough individuals within a PLC are moved to be informally accountable because of their self-concepts and values, the PLC as a whole may reach an accountability tipping point (Gladwell, 2002). This quality enables PLCs to focus on responsibility, leadership and service. Informal accountability also falls within the characteristic of norms and assessing each other.

**Formal Accountability**

Formal accountability is defined as being transparent and showing results from the PLC to the public or school. Broadcasting goals of a PLC is a form of formal accountability; at the end of the year, PLCs can share results along with compelling evidence (artifacts, data, teacher and student work, including video) to show that they’ve goals or purposes (Easton, 2016). Not only is sharing goals important in accountability, but also sharing challenges and issues is equally important. Accountability is about transparency of your PLC. This means PLCs working with other PLCs, working with other schools and districts.
Accountability for change that benefits students is what happens in classrooms and the school as a whole, leading to academic improvement as well as classroom and school cultures that support learning (Easton, 2016). Members of PLCs invite other educators from inside and outside their PLCs into their classrooms, share teaching materials and student work. This final outcome shows how accountability has taken place and the PLC is transparent to others. Finally accountable PLCs engage in one of the six characteristics of a PLCs, action research.

**Designing Accountability**

A principal can create a design team to coordinate and foster PLC informal and formal accountability. A design team compromises delegates from each PLC and administrators in a building (Easton, 2016). The role of a design team is to process and delegate a plan to enable everyone to see the final product and avoid competition amongst team members. These delegates are not grade level chairs or represent a subject area, but merely advocates for preserving strategies in a subject area. The delegates are communicators and report the progression of PLC meetings, and identifying gaps.

The final accountability is of undeniably is student data, both quantitative and qualitative. This may take some time and is not instantaneous. Educators in PLCs must be relentless in striving for ultimate accountability, but to get to that point, they must focus on interim accountability by being informally and formally accountable to themselves, their colleagues, and their students.

**Examination of Successful PLCs**

**South Elementary**

In 2003, South Elementary School in Eldon, Missouri implemented PLCs due to increased accountability and the growing needs of students (Rentfro, 2007). Teachers met
collaboratively twice a week. The first meeting focused on planning and pacing instruction; the second meeting focused on identifying and problem-solving for at-risk students. Grade–level teams met twice a week to also discuss at-risk students and to identify the instructional practices in all classrooms, debriefing with teachers and initiating deeper conversations with students and staff about learning. Teachers also had an early release day on Wednesday to meet in collaborative teams. Teams met with administration three times per year to review benchmark results and discuss progress monitoring. This school followed every aspect of PLCs, including creating common formative assessments CFAs. The results and success in student academic growth of the school was astounding. The benchmark data showed a 24.1% gain in advanced and proficient scores for communication arts between 2001 and 2005. In addition, 1st grade students scoring on developmental reading assessment increased 12.2% between 2001-2002. These gains have contributed to South Elementary being recognized for numerous awards. Such as, being nationally recognized by All Things PLC, an internet-based clearinghouse for PLC resources, for its use of the PLC model and being recognized as a Missouri Model PLC for the past two years (Renfro, 2007). The school now serves as a host model school for various districts to witness PLC practices in use and having several staff members share their successful practices at district and state conferences. The school is reaching out to help other schools become successful.

**Fruita Middle**

Fruita Middle School in Colorado also experienced the positive academic growth derived from PLCs. The school began its journey of a true PLC in 2011. The principal reported that teachers functioned well independently, but lacked interdependence. Students were being taught the curriculum, overall achievement scores were good, but these components did not ensure that students were on a trajectory of success for graduation (“Fruita Middle”, 2018). Administrators
surveyed the data and realized that although the students were being taught the curriculum, there was a lack focus on learning essential curriculum. Data indicated that the organizational health of the staff was very low (“Fruita Middle”, 2018).

As an introduction to PLCs, the instructional leadership teams had collaborative teams choose two to four essential skills that the team agreed all students needed to work on and master at the end of the year. The master schedule was changed so teams could meet each meet to collaborate as they worked through the PLC process and were changed again to accommodate prescribed interventions for students who had not yet mastered essential skills (“Fruita Middle”, 2018). Collaboration began to improve, and the staff was noticing success of working as an interdependent PLC.

In 2014, the school sent staff members to attend PLC conferences and did a book study of “Learning by Doing”. Collaborative teams produced products based on the book that guided the process of bringing the school’s vision to reality, including teachers sharing best teaching practices with their colleagues based on CFAs (“Fruita Middle”, 2018). Presently, teachers are part of meaningful collaborative teams; the teams include teachers from special areas such as art, music and physical education. These changes have affected the growth of student data.

According to the State of Colorado growth model, Fruita Middle School is the color of green in every subgroup, tested subject, and in every grade level (“Fruita Middle”, 2018). Green means that the school scored above a 50 on state testing. The school’s growth summary for the State of Colorado indicated that the school had the highest growth in language arts and math compared to all middle school districts in the state. Fruita’s highest growth derived from their struggling learners. This closed the reading and math achievement gap for the school.
Gamble Rogers Middle

Gamble Rogers Middle School located in northeastern Florida is another PLC success story. Performing below the state in reading and math in 2011 and realizing that teachers never had an opportunity to observe and learn from their colleagues, was the agent of change. The first year that the school implemented the PLC model, the principal referred to the year as PLC lite. The teachers slowly emerged in the PLC process that year by having small collaborative teams that consisted of teachers from the same grade level and content area. The school’s instructional coach who has spearheaded the school’s embrace of PLCs stated, “We had a lot of teachers who had a lot of strengths that were not necessarily being tapped into” (Mathewson, 2018). During the first year of implementation, teachers were given valuable time to collaborate by sharing ideas, lessons and strategies focused on teaching and learning. The teachers spent time reviewing grade level standards, creating CFAs and creating activities to increase student success (“All things PLC”, 2018). While collaborating, teachers-built relationships amongst each other within their similar departments. Departments also attended conferences focused on PLCs. PLC leaders were chosen by the leadership team. The individuals were given binders with informative information such as relatable articles, and expectations of establishing successful collaboration teams.

Entering into their sixth year of collaboration and a focus of learning that is enhanced by the PLC process, the school is reaping the benefits. Educators are now grouped in crosscurricular pairs, so math and science teachers come together by grade, as do English language arts and social studies teachers (Mathewson, 2016). The PLC teams are now transformed by the school’s leadership team. The changes were made based on the most effective collaboration. The school has learned from the process and has continued to build on previous years of work. The
demographics of PLCs remain the same, but the school has incorporated things based upon teacher feedback. They continue to shape the process so that it best suits the needs of the school. The school uses OneNote notebooks into each team’s online notebook; the Instructional Coach uploads agendas, forms and helpful paperwork into each team’s online notebook (Mathewson, 2016). The online storage gives teams a simpler way to store work, artifacts and feedback for comments and questions. A school-wide shared vocabulary is used to enable teachers of different subjects discuss cross-disciplinary concepts in the same way. It is clear to students now that they use the same formulas in math and science classes for different purposes, deepening their understanding (Mathewson, 2016).

Gamble Rogers attributes their success to the implementation of PLCs, the school is now performing above the state with 58% of their students passing the statewide summative assessment in math and 56% of students passing the statewide summative assessment in reading. The school has also been recognized as a model PLC school by St. Johns County (Mathewson, 2016).

**Examination of Failed PLCs**

Sims and Penny (2014) determined that teachers believed the focus of their PLC was narrow and the time was spent only evaluating data as opposed to collaboration. Teachers also suggested that creativity was obsolete in the classroom due to the focus of bringing data to PLC meetings. PLCs also failed in this school because administration seemed to be disengaged in the meetings. This created a negative atmosphere for teachers and students. Data teams in these PLCs constricted their focus on metrics and the results of the CFA assessments. Aspects such as lesson planning, time, data, student achievement and teachers’ perspectives were scrutinized.
In each area, many teachers had a negative view. Time and data were viewed negatively. Teachers believed their students were viewed as numbers, and the meetings did not show true student performance.

Author Steven Weber examined the notion of why some PLCs fail in schools. There were five areas that he deemed as “Five dysfunctions of a professional learning community”. These dysfunctions were: lack of norms, lack of team goals, lack of trust, lack of communication, and lack of essential learning outcomes.

Team norms are the foundation of a PLC (Weber, 2011). Teams feel like they can operate without norms because they are common sense, however, one dysfunctional team member can highlight the purpose as to why norms are needed. Each team member needs to understand how to communicate, how shared decisions will be handled, when to arrive for meetings and how to professionally disagree (Weber, 2011). Norms should be revisited by teams for success. Norms need to be posted and revisited for all team members, but especially those that are new to a grade level, school or district.

Lack of team goals will contribute to a failing PLC. Teams must establish goals. There are many reasons why teams do not establish goals. Some do not have a lack of trust and do not wish to share instructional strategies or discuss misunderstandings (Weber, 2011). A team without goals will have a deficiency of purpose, urgency and a destination. You cannot establish a win without goals.

According to Lencioni (2007), a lack of trust occurs when team members are reluctant to be vulnerable with one another and are unwilling to admit their mistakes, weaknesses, or needs for help; without a certain comfort level among team members, a foundation of trust is impossible. A PLC that operates with trust will ask:
• Which students seem to struggle with the key concepts and skills identified by the team?
• Which skills or concepts do I struggle to teach?
• If our students do not do well on the state test, then what strategies should we incorporate at our grade level? At the grade levels prior our grade skills?
• Some students are struggling with note taking and organization skills. What can teachers do to support students who are struggling in school, due to lack of study skills?
• Our students are struggling with Algebra I, are there areas of the curriculum man that could be revised to support teaching and student learning?

Hierarchical leadership is different from shared leadership that occurs in an effective PLC. Lack of communication occurs when teams operate without established norms or goals. Some communication barriers occur because teachers fail to take advantage of email, discussion threads or other methods of communication between meetings (Weber, 2011).

Effective teams believe and agree that all students will have positive outcomes. Developing essential learning outcomes involves trust, conflict, debate, time, and the ability to come to consensus (Weber, 2011). Learning outcomes exhibit skills, knowledge, and qualities students should have mastered upon completion of a standard.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Constructivism Theory**

The constructivism theory is one of the foundations of Vygotsky’s social development theory. Constructivism states that learning is an active, contextualized process of constructing knowledge, rather than obtaining it. The theory also states that people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world, and situations through experience and reflecting others experiences (“What is Constructivism”, 2018).
Constructivism correlates with professional learning communities by allowing teachers to become constructivist educators and promotes the theory by providing the atmosphere and collaboration required of constructive learning. Constructivist teachers encourage students to constantly assess how the activity is helping them gain understanding (“What is constructivism”, 2018). When students and educators question themselves and their strategies, the constructivism theory expresses that they become expert learners. This principle of constructivism leads to collaboration in professional learning communities. The constructivist theory was not viewed as a theory of teaching, but the approach whereby teachers give learners the opportunity to raise questions, defend strategies and ideas, model and have concrete, contextually-meaningful experiences, and allow them to see patterns (Fosnot, 2013).

The premise that learning is an active process in which learners construct concepts and new ideas from prior and past knowledge is a primary theme in the constructivist framework (Yilmaz, 2008). The learner forms a hypothesis and depends on cognitive structure and creating decisions based on what he/she already knows. As a constructivist educator, discussions should be engaging between students and educators while prompting students to create principles by themselves. Constructivism does not dismiss the active role of the teacher or the value of expert knowledge; it actually modifies the role, so teachers help students to construct knowledge rather than reproduce a series of facts (“What is Constructivism”, 2018). A constructivist educator provides tools such as problem solving and inquiry-based learning activities with which students formulate and test their ideas, draw conclusions and inferences, and pool and convey their knowledge in a collaborative learning environment. This approach and theory convert the student from being a flaccid receiver of information to an engaged and active participant in the learning process.
Previous researchers found that the constructivism theory is the foundation for professional learning communities. This theory moves from applied research to real-world experiences that can be investigated within the educational environment.

**Impact and Implications**

The impact of PLCs has shown a positive effect for schools that have adopted the whole PLC process and followed through. The longer schools adopt the concept of a true PLC, the larger the benefit is in student growth and achievement; and the larger the benefit is for teachers enhancing their skills and meetings students’ needs. The timeframe for the positive impact varies from school to school and district to district. PLCs have expanded in popularity due to research and successful outcomes in several schools. Research continues to show that not only do they assist in student growth and achievement, but they also aid in school culture. A review of 11 studies by the University of Florida researchers, published in 2008, found measurable, positive impacts on teaching practice as well as student learning, as evidenced by performing on standardized tests (Mathewson, 2016). This may be contributed to schools following and embracing the PLC model as a whole and recognizing the strength in the model. In several schools studied, student proficiency on state tests went from 50% or fewer students passing to more than three-quarters following the transition to PLCs (Mathewson, 2016).

The PLC model is a framework for schools to structure a high-performance collaborative team of educators that are unified toward the goal of improving student learning. Although schools use the framework of a PLC, it is not a prescriptive one-size fit all approach. PLCs cannot be limited to focusing on teaching wisdom and knowledge to qualities teachers already possess. Instead, PLCs should support teachers in making decisions based on their contexts, their goals, current and new professional knowledge and the needs of their students (Vescio, Ross, &
Adams, 2008).

**Summary**

The need for PLCs derived from the development of education reconstruction and reform. PLCs have six characteristics that if followed, can establish success. One of the essential characteristics is a shared mission, vision, values and goals. This characteristic must be established first in order to move forward. It is the foundation for setting up a PLC. Although PLCs are multifaceted, the primary goal is student growth and achievement through collaboration and the analysis of data. PLC structures are constantly evolving as data and research remains current and discovers discrepancies. PLCs can drive student improvement and achievement; however, they must be implemented correctly. All school stakeholders must have a vital role in ensuring the success of PLCs. Collaboration is critical if PLCs are to be effective. Each member must be transparent and willing to share data, offer help, and place students first. Data analysis and data teams are essential in PLCs. Data teams are not to be observed as a separate entity, but as a continuation of PLCs. Data should drive instruction and examining student data allow teachers to better develop effective instruction and collaborate in an effort to prompt student growth and achievement.

Using the constructivist theory for the PLC process is essential. This theory explains how teachers collaborating together, discussing data, and strategies equip them to improve and enhance their skills and knowledge for the success of their student. This theory offers the explanation that learning by doing is vital to success.

Understanding why PLCs are successful and why they fail gives insight to a school’s improvement plan and the growth of students. Also establishing goals and norms are critical to successful PLCs. Principals understanding the basis of what makes a PLC successful benefits staff, students and the school’s climate.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY
Introduction

The purpose of conducting this study is to question educators regarding their use of PLC practices and if these practices correlate with student growth and achievement in their classrooms in a middle Tennessee school district. This study questioned educators regarding their use of PLC practices and if these practices correlate with student growth and achievement in their classrooms. This study sought to determine if practices used and discussed in PLCs drive teachers’ instruction. The researcher will determine if teachers perceive their current PLCs to be effective and contribute to state summative test scores. The researcher used qualitative research to examine the process of PLCs in different schools. The frequency of meetings and the type of clientele the schools served was considered. The researcher also noted if each PLC was answering the four critical questions of a PLC posed by Dufour and Eaker (2009).

Research Questions

The following questions guided the research:

1. What practices do educators perceive are increasing the effectiveness of Professional Learning Communities?

2. What practices do educators perceive are assisting in increasing academic student growth in the classroom?

3. How do educators perceive the effectiveness of Pre and Post Common Formative Assessments in Professional Learning Communities?

Qualitative Research

Qualitative data was used for this study. Qualitative research is aimed at gaining a deep understanding of a specific organization or event, rather than a surface description of a large sample of a population (“Data Collection Strategies”, 2018). This type of research aims to
provide an explicit rendering of the structure, order and broad patterns found among a group of participants. This research is also referred as field research.

Interviews were conducted in an attempt to measure the perception of how PLCs are useful to teachers’ time and if strategies that emerged from PLC meetings are used in the classroom. Also, open–ended questions were emailed throughout the district asking teachers how PLCs are utilized in their schools. Qualitative responses provided results of study participants perceived PLC meetings. This design allowed the researcher to distinguish the frequency of PLC meetings in schools, determine how the four critical PLC questions are addressed, how the principal assists and engage in PLC meetings, how the academic coach is utilized, and how grade PLC members address weaknesses and strengths of students. These elements foster effective of a PLC. The researcher also attempted to determine if teachers believe PLCs develop more effective teaching and prompt better reflection.

The study included three different methods of collecting data: interview, electronic openended questionnaires, and focus group discussions. The focus group was selected based upon participants that answered the survey. The focus groups included different grade-level teachers, interventionists and academic coaches. The information acquired revealed teachers’ perceptions of the effectiveness of PLCs in their schools.

**Research Approach**

This research used the grounded theory approach. The self–defined purpose of grounded theory is to develop theory about phenomena of interest (Trochim, Donnelly, & Arora 2016). This approach is a process that begins with generative questions to guide the research. Grounded theory research has five stages: preparation, data collection, analysis, memoing and sorting and theoretical outline (“What is Grounded Theory”, 2014). The research began with noticing the
distinct difference in Professional Learning Communities throughout the research district. Preparation, the first stage of this research was instituted by talking to teachers regarding PLCs in their grade level throughout one school. The researcher took notes and formulated questions based upon numerous observations throughout the district. Data collection, the second stage, derived from surveys and interviewing focus groups. These interviews were intensive and were peer debriefed to ensure that findings were accurate and that statements were not misinterpreted or misconstrued. Also, participant observation was conducted during this stage. The researcher attended several PLC meetings throughout the district and took notes during these meetings. Documentation was reviewed, and a matrix chart of positive and negative views from teachers regarding PLC meetings was created. Data were analyzed in stage three. In this stage, the researcher correlated Dufour and Eaker’s (2009) PLC model to what was observed and teachers’ perceptions of PLCs in their schools. Open coding was used for stage three. Journaling or Memoing is stage four of this process. Notes were taken based upon evidence and what literature regarding about PLC meetings. Codes were examined and monitored, and theories were examined.

**Research Participants and Setting for Study**

The data for this research was collected in a Middle Tennessee school district, which is currently a level 1 of effectiveness based on the state of Tennessee TN Ready data. The school district has approximately 12 schools and several pre-school sites within the district. Each school services grades K-6. The district currently services over 7,586 students. Of this population, 53% are Caucasian, 24% are African – American, 12.4% are Hispanic, 5.9% are Multi – Race, 4% are Asian, .3% are American Indian and .2% are Pacific Islander In the research district, 57.9% of students are on free and reduced lunch. Six of the 12 schools in the district receive Title I funds,
meaning at least 60% of these student populations receive free or reduced lunch and are considered low-income families.

The district employs 1,356 individuals; 24 are campus-level administrations, 572 are teachers and 198 are educational assistants. Of the teachers, 89% are Caucasian, 9% are African-American, 1% are Hispanic, and 2% are other. Human resources provided data, 56% of teachers have a graduate degree.

Teachers chosen to participate in the research were all level 2-5 educators as reflected on their TN Compass evaluation scores. Classroom experience among these teachers ranged from a minimum of one year to a maximum of 35 years. The majority of research participants taught in grades 3-6. Some participants were tenured and others were not. Subsequently, the researcher sent a letter via school mail asking prospective participants to engage in an interview for the study. This letter describe the research study and asked for their voluntarily participant consent. After participant consent, the researcher emailed each participant with three potential interview times that would coincide with their schedules. All participants were read a disclaimer before the interview and were informed that they may choose to terminate the interview at any time. Interviews were completed using an interview guide. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

**Data Collection Procedures**

Before collection began, the researcher had to obtain permission from Carson–Newman’s Institutional Review Board. Surveys were collected, and interviews were conducted during the spring semester of the 2017-2018 school year.

A pilot survey and pilot interviews were completed by a small group of educators consisting of interventionists, coaches, and grade-level teachers. Pilot participants were asked if
questions were clear and concise, and interview questions were analyzed and revised. Data collection were via PLC grade-level observations and interviews. Notes were taken from observing PLC meetings, and each interview was recorded and transcribed. In order to maintain the purity of data, techniques such as peer debriefing, triangulation, member checks, and detailed descriptions of context were utilized. Once IRB approval was granted by Carson-Newman University, the researcher received approval from the director of schools in the research district to conduct this study. For the protection of subjects, questions were emailed through an online system and the IP addresses were disabled. In the study, each participant was provided a consent to participate and privacy disclosure form. The disclosure form ensured that names and all demographic data would be protected, and pseudonyms were given to each interviewed. Each participant interview was recorded with the permission of interviewee. A transcribed interview and report were provided. Methods and data were reviewed by peers to ensure no mistakes or bias was made. The researcher reported data results.

**Peer Debriefing**

Peer debriefing was used in this study to maintain the validity and integrity of the data. Peer debriefing is a process that allows an unbiased or neutral person to aid in investigating all parts of the data and research study. This impartial person examines the researcher’s transcripts, final report and general methodology (“Asking the Right Questions Makes All the Difference”, 2018). Ample feedback is provided to enhance credibility and ensure validity.

Peer debriefing was conducted after each interview. Transcripts, documents, and handwritten notes were scrutinized, and audio were replayed. This was ensured that the findings recorded were accurate and that participant statements were not misinterpreted or misconstrued. To warrant a thorough debriefing, all materials were examined by the impartial colleagues.
**Member Checks**

Member checks, or participant validation, is a technique for exploring the credibility of results (Birt, Scott & Cavers, 2016). This technique allows participants an opportunity to review their statements for accuracy (Harper & Cole, 2012). After results and data have been coded and categorized and all documentation has been peer debriefed, participants were presented with the results to check for accuracy and credibility of their statements.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

Each Journaling was utilized upon completion of each type of data collection. The researcher took field notes, and interviews were audio-recorded. Grounded theory was essential for. This allowed identification of a correlation regarding the effectiveness of PLCs. This was essential for analysis because it assisted with coding. Using the researcher’s notes and interviews, the data were examined and a pattern was determined. Once patterns were found, they were coded. This allowed identification of a correlation regarding the effectiveness of PLCs.

**Summary**

The qualitative study was used for this research based on the use of interviews, observations, and the quest to seek and understand the benefits and/or drawbacks of PLCs regarding student growth in a Middle Tennessee school district. Pilot groups were used before interview questions were asked to participants. After the pilot group information was utilized, individual interviews and observations were conducted.

Interviews were coded and analyzed using the grounded theory method of research. The interviews followed a set of questions, but many questions were open-ended, prompted participants to elaborate on answers. Each interview was audio recorded. The findings of this research found Data teams are not to be observed as a separate entity, but as a continuation of
PLCs. Data should drive instruction and examining student data allow teachers to better develop effective instruction after surveys were completed, individual interviews and observations were utilized prompt development of a different PLC approach throughout the research district.
CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

The intention of this Ground Theory research was to examine and identify whether teachers in this school district deemed PLCs to be effective and to determine if PLCs or the lack of PLCs has been one of the factors in declining test scores in the district. The researcher acquired approval from the district’s director of schools, and participants were randomly selected by the researcher. Population of this study entailed teachers, instructional coaches, and administrators ranging in ages from their early 30’s to their mid 50’s. Participants’ years of experience varied, and participants work in various schools across the district. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews and PLC observations throughout schools to determine the effectiveness of professional learning communities.

District Demographics

The district has a diversity of teachers and administration. There are 12 schools within the district and majority of the schools have at least one African – American administrator and one Caucasian administrator. Six of the twelve schools receive Title I funding. There is only one African American coach while the rest are Caucasian. The population of teachers are 89% are Caucasian, 9% are African – American, 1% are Hispanic, and 1% are other. Of this data, 56% of the teachers have a graduate degree. The school employs 572 teachers.

Participant Characteristics

PLC observations were done across grade levels. The researcher stayed the entire time in each meeting. Interviews consisted of a sample of seven teachers, two instructional coaches and two administrators. Teachers taught in grade ranging from first through fifth and the administrators were both elementary administrators. Experience of the teachers ranged from 3-35 years and administrators’ experience ranged from 15-17 years.
**Research Questions**

The researcher examined data related to the following questions:

1. What practices do educators perceive are increasing the effectiveness of Professional Learning Communities?

2. What practices do educators perceive are assisting an increase academic student growth in the classroom?

3. How do educators perceive the effectiveness of Pre and Post Common Formative Assessments in Professional Learning Communities?

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The researcher developed a six-question interview for teachers and administrators related to the perceived effectiveness of PLCs within their grade levels. The questions were aimed at practices that are used in PLCs and if teachers used the finding and practices of the PLCs within their classrooms. Interview questions were structured and allowed participants to elaborate and reflect upon what takes place in their current PLCs. There were questions that asked about if they perceived their current PLCs to be effective and what would an effective PLC looks like to them. Other questions were related to the current practices of their PLCs and the use of pre and post common formative assessments. The observations were designed to allow the researcher an opportunity to comprehend how current PLCs in the district were conducted.

Interviews were conducted at participants’ schools, participants’ home and the researcher’s home. The interviews lasted approximately 6 – 10 minutes. The interviews were analyzed by scripted notes, recorded then transcribed. The observations were analyzed by collecting field notes.
Focus Group

The focus group consisted of grade-level teachers, interventionists and coaches. The key of a focus group is for the generation of new ideas from within a social context (Breen, 2006). The focus group was diverse. The researcher asked questions regarding PLCs within the participants building and also asked probing questions to tenured teachers that have been with the research district for more than five years. The focus group session concluded within 30 minutes.

Observation Findings

Through observing various PLCs, the researcher found that many reading or English Language Arts (ELA) were creating and discussing ELA tasks and lesson plans. The coach facilitated the meetings and some meetings lacked teacher participation. In one upper grade meeting, there was a clear disconnect and the coach had to work diligently to get teachers to discuss strategies that were taking place in their classroom. The PLC did not focus on Dufour and Eaker’s four critical questions. After looking at student data across the district, this grade level seemed to have the lowest scores and the least amount of growth. Other meetings there was teacher collaboration, however, the critical questions were not addressed.

In observing math PLCs, each grade level that was observed discussed data from the CFA previously created. The groups did not state or refer to the four critical questions of a PLC but the grade levels did discussed what was going to occur in the classroom based upon the post assessment data. This discussion did not go into depth. Teachers shared what their small group discussion would consist of. Before each meeting would adjourn, the coach would briefly go over what would be the focus of the next meeting.
**Educator Response Data**

According to Marsh (2015), 75% of teachers enter the profession of education because they want to make a difference in the world. Teachers are not considering collaboration, data or accountability. Marsh (2015), states that some of these reasons cause teachers to leave the profession. The response data from participants offers insight of teachers’ perceptions of PLCs being useful in their school and useful in their classroom.

As researcher conducted interviews individually, participants discussed their passion and hard work they have for their profession. Many had hope that PLCs will eventually contribute to student success while others remained uncertain of the use of PLCs. These characteristics were demonstrated by word choice and the voice of individuals. Themes were discovered throughout interviews.

*Interview Question 1.* What practices do educators perceive are increasing the effectiveness of Professional Learning Communities? Five out of seven teachers (71%) stated that unpacking the standards initially in PLCs was an effective practice. Teachers stated breaking down the standards helped them understand the content at times and teachers also felt like it assisted the new teachers in their grade level. Interview Question 1 subpart a. What practices decrease the effectiveness of Professional Learning Communities? Seven out of seven teachers (100%) stated that the lack of collaboration decrease the effectiveness of PLCs. Surprisingly, I noticed this in my observations. Some teachers also added team members complaining decreased the effectiveness of PLCs and lowered morale. I did not observe this during observations. One teacher stated, “Coming in and complaining about what we don’t have is time consuming. I think if you’re in a true PLC, there’s enough information and talking in a room to come up with whatever you need to get your kids what they need”.
**Interview Question 2.** Do you feel that your current PLCs are effective? Five out of seven (71%) of teachers felt as though their current PLCs weren’t effective. While the other 49% stated that they were effective. One teacher (1%), felt like sometimes they were effective and sometimes they weren’t. This teacher was torn and struggled with the question. The teachers that felt like their current PLCs were not effective made comments such as tangibles were not made to take back to the classroom, it’s an informal meeting and the meetings are all about task while data are not discussed. One teacher commented, “I feel like people don’t come prepared and we end up discussing things that get us off track”. The one teacher that was torn, stated, “I appreciate the discussion that is prompted by our academic coach and the collaboration that occurs during our PLC meetings, but sometimes I think there is a little bit of tension. We have a pretty new team (only three of the seven were on our team the previous year) so it took some time to get our groove and develop the trusting relationships needed for effective PLCs.”

Each teacher that was interviewed had hopes that next year’s PLCs will be different and more effective. The teachers that felt their current PLCs to be effective expressed that they collaborate and everyone provides input. The teachers also stated that they meet more than once a week and have an agenda that they follow.

**Interview Question 3.** What practices do you perceive aids in academic growth in the classroom? Teachers had different answers for this question. However, two teachers (29%) stated that data analysis is a practice that aids in academic growth. Others stated planning together and being intentional. During the interview, each teacher was passionate about how they assist students in their classroom. A teacher commented, “Achievement is always hard, depending on the population that you work with, so it’s important for teachers to understand where the kid is. If a kid is in the 5th grade and on a second-grade level, I want to start filling in some gaps and
help that child practice the current grade level”. It was clear that each participant has different perspectives on this question, however, the teachers discussed how important it was that they make a difference.

**Interview Question 4.** How do educators perceive the effectiveness of pre and post common formative assessment created in professional learning communities? Each educator expressed the importance of pre and post common formative assessments or CFA. Out of the ten teachers that were surveyed, 100% of them agreed that they depend on CFAs to assist them in lesson planning. However, of the 100% only 43% of teachers stated that CFAs are produced during formal PLCs. This is quite a change from four years ago in the district. When asked when teachers collaborate to create CFAs some teachers stated that they created their own, others stated that they meet at other times to create their own and some teachers expressed that their academic coaches create CFAs for their team. In previous years, teachers collaborated and created their own CFAs during PLCs. Questions were formulated through a program called Discovery Education.

**Interview Question 5.** What do you think a productive PLC looks like? The answers to this question varied among participants. The main theme that resounded from teachers was that there should be a starting point of where teachers are going to begin, and an ending point based upon data from CFAs. One teacher reiterated collaboration is key for a productive PLC, while another chose not to answer this question. A teacher quoted, “A productive PLC is where all teachers collaborate and know what we are expecting the students to do. We should be looking as a team for ways to grow our high achieving students and support our lower achieving students. At all times during the PLC, we should have the students’ best interest and learning.” Another teacher gave me an example of and described what her weekly PLCs look like and stated that currently
they are very effective for her since she came from upper grades and now teaches lower grades.

**Interview Question 6.** Do you feel like your grade level utilizes PLC time effectively? Seven out of seven teachers (100%) answered this question with a response of no; while 3 out of 7 (43%) answered. A teacher stated that her grade level did not utilize PLC time effectively due to the team looking at in depth learning of the standard. She said that she felt like this was needed, however, she also felt like student data should have been more of the focus. A teacher from a different school indicated that they met more than once a week, but the academic coach conducted the meetings and they became tense. This teacher went on to say that all of her teammates respected the coach, but the meetings felt uncomfortable when the coach asked questions. The 30% of teachers that felt as though the time was used effectively because each teacher remained focused and sidebar conversations were eliminated.

Educators’ participant responses were coded by the primary researcher and peer researcher. After coding both of the individuals came together and discussed the categories that were highlighted and labeled throughout the interviews and observations. These were reoccurring themes. The categories were given themes and color coded based on how often the label appeared. These themes were combined into final themes. Below, Table 4.1 represents the participants’ responses and their themes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Participants’ Responses</th>
<th>Final Themes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educator 1</td>
<td>No effective practices, building tasks and tasks oriented, quick checks for understanding, scope and sequence, examine and</td>
<td>Continuous tasks</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Data-driven</td>
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<tr>
<td>Educator 2</td>
<td>Complaining and tasks causes non-effective PLCs, tracking data and productive PLCs is charting data from pre and post-test, pre and post provide good information, knowledge of standards, share data and small groups</td>
<td>Continuous tasks</td>
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<td>Data-driven</td>
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<td>Check assessments</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Unpacking standards</td>
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<td>Collaboration from team</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Educator 3</th>
<th>Time wasted on tasks and side bar conversations, discuss data and what is data to collaborate with students, in depth look at standards, collaboration is important, teams do not share the vision or practices that are being developed by the team</th>
<th>Continuous tasks</th>
</tr>
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<td>Data-driven</td>
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<tr>
<th>Educator 4</th>
<th>Meetings are spent discussing tasks, our meetings are all about tasks, sometimes data are but we need to go in depth, pre and post assessments are important, we did not discuss a lot of pre assessments, initially unpacking standards has helped at the end not so much, need more collaboration, people need to come prepared</th>
<th>Continuous tasks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Data driven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Check assessments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Unpacking standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Collaboration from team</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Educator 5 | Most effective was breakdown standards and understanding task, continue to analyze data, pre and post assessments are very important, one day is spent understanding and breaking down standards, work with team to lesson plan and discuss groups | Continuous tasks
Data-driven
Check assessments
Unpacking standards
Collaboration with team |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Educator 6 | Clear focus with learning tasks and being open community, brainstorm if one person’s data is better than the others we discuss it, spot check when assessments are given, assess to see areas of growth and needs, examine state standards and break them down, strategizing and working together made us successful | Continuous tasks
Data-driven
Check assessments
Unpacking standards
Collaboration with team |
| Educator 7 | Tasks were not implemented during my tenure in classroom, being intentional while studying data, not having a curriculum hurts teachers, we reflect on studying data and what to do, CFAs are helpful but can bog teachers and student down, teachers have to find resources to teach standards, it’s helpful when we collaborate; it’s effective and assist in lesson plans | Continuous tasks
Data-driven
Check assessments
Unpacking standards
Collaboration with team |
Administrators and Coaches Response Data

Most administrators in the research district are actively a part of PLCs. They attend each grade level meeting and many offer advices as instructional leaders. Academic coaches are hired teachers within the school district that also play an intricate roll in the PLC process. Each school has two coaches, one that focuses on reading and the other focuses on math. The coaches’ job is to assist teachers in the classroom, help teachers create language arts tasks for students and some coaches facilitate PLCs. As the researcher interviewed coaches and administrators, the concerns were the same. Both were optimistic regarding the future of PLCs in their schools and were working hard to achieve this with teachers.

According to Dufour, Dufour, Eaker & Many (2010), PLCs should focus on four critical questions; these questions are fundamental to the PLC process. These questions lead to differentiated instruction and address standards, common formative assessments, systematic interventions and extended learning (Peery, 2011). The researcher felt compelled to ask this question in interviews based on research.

Interview Question 1. When you lead a PLC, do grade levels answer Dufour & Eaker’s 4 critical questions of a PLC? (1. What is our fundamental purpose, 2. What do we hope to achieve, 3. What are our strategies for becoming better, and 4. What criteria will we use to assess our improvement efforts?) Six out of six principal and coaches indicated that they do focus on those questions, but over a course of time. One principal said, “We want to make sure our teachers can unpack the standards and that they know what students are expected to learn. Next year we will continue to focus on question one but also begin to incorporate question two. We found that our teachers were not doing the PLC model effectively and efficiently, so we decided to step back
and we are taking it in phases. So, we have not made it through all four questions.” One coach stated as she facilitated PLCs, she has had to focus on planning, activities and what students do and don’t learn. In some way, coaches and administrators felt as though grade levels focused on the four critical questions

**Interview Question 2.** What does an effective PLC look like to you? a. Do you feel that effective PLCs are implemented in your building? Four administrators and two coaches were interviewed. Each participant stated that they are working with teachers to create a productive PLC. One participated said, “An effective PLC is truly a learning community. The learning is the most critical piece. In my opinion, it’s where team members sit down and work together, and it is centered on student learning but also on teachers learning. Learning from each other. Learning where students are. Learning how to take them where they need to be, and truly being open about the process of learning from each other.” Each coach and administrator that answered this question, provided information of what they currently do in their PLCs and hopes what they will be more productive in the future. The participants indicated that PLCs could be more effective, but they have gotten better.

**Interview Question 3.** When you observe classrooms, do you see the practices and strategies that were discussed in previous PLC? If not, what strategies or practices would like to see discussed and implemented in PLCs that will aid student growth in the classroom? 100% of administrators and coaches say that most of the time, they saw strategies that were discussed in PLCs. One principal did state that she may see the strategy, but some teachers do not include the rigor and deeper level thinking that was discussed in the PLC. A coach also commented that some of the teachers she worked with were excited that ideas discussed in PLCs were transferred into the classroom and it became “practical”.
**Interview Question 4.** How do you perceive the effectiveness of pre and post common formative assessments in professional learning communities? a. How do teachers utilize that information? b. Do you find that teachers are comfortable with creating their pre and post CFA within PLCs? The answers of this question varied between coaches and administrators. The administrators that were interviewed felt as though pre and post tests were essential and stated that coaches did an excellent job with helping teachers create them. When this question was posed to coaches, the coaches felt as though pre-assessments were not needed but they help teachers create them. The coaches all agreed that post-assessments were necessary, but the teacher could do a quick check to see what knowledge students already had. Each administrator and coach indicated that CFAs were created during the PLC process.

Administrators and coaches’ participant responses were coded by the primary researcher and peer researcher. After coding both of the individuals came together and discussed the categories that were highlighted and labeled throughout the interviews and observations. These were reoccurring themes. The categories were given themes and color coded based on how often the label appeared. These themes were combined into final themes. This was the same process used to code educators’ responses. Below, Table 4.2 represents the participants’ responses and their themes.

Table 4.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Participants’ Responses</th>
<th>Final Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

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68
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coach 1</th>
<th>Teachers are taught number talks and math tasks using concrete, pictorial and abstract skills, teachers want time for planning instead of focusing on data, post tests are used on a routine basis,</th>
<th>Continuous tasks</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>but you don’t have to always pre-assess, we use a checklist of standards that shows mastery, have to foster collaboration, thoughts and ideas</td>
<td>Data-driven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coach 2</td>
<td>PLC are cycles, create tasks and look at standards, analyze data and predict data, you don’t always need to pre and post assess, and questions should be different. Look and analyze standards, teachers love to collaborate and transfer ideas from PLCs to the classroom</td>
<td>Continuous tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Data-driven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Check assessments</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Unpacking standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Collaboration from team</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

69
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Administrator 1</th>
<th>Coach implements tasks and focus on Dufour &amp; Eaker’s critical question one, some teams take time to look at the evidence or data, the teams meet after school to do this, lack of good quick assessments, needs more knowledges of creating pre and post assessments and quick monitoring, make sure that teachers know how to unpack standards, make sure that student work is brought to each meeting and having discussions while looking at work samples</th>
<th>Unpacking standards</th>
<th>Continuous tasks</th>
<th>Data-driven</th>
<th>Check assessments</th>
<th>Unpacking standards</th>
<th>Collaboration from team</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Administrator 2</td>
<td>Teachers are working on breaking down standards, and focusing on the critical questions of a PLC, place value on pre and post assessments and work on them guiding instruction, ensuring that teachers understand how standards correlate to tasks, using work samples from different classrooms and determining mastery and non-mastery</td>
<td>Continuous tasks</td>
<td>Data-driven</td>
<td>Check assessments</td>
<td>Unpacking standards</td>
<td>Collaborating from team</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Coding**

The researcher employed a peer researcher to conduct the initial open coding process to gather and assign recurring themes and labels. Each label or words were highlighted throughout the research as reoccurring data and information. The data were analyzed to identify the trends and patterns to draw conclusions regarding how educators perceived the effectiveness of PLCs.
The primary researcher piloted the initial coding process. After the Open Coding process was complete, the data were analyzed by coding the highlighted labels into categories. The Axial Coding process followed. Highlighted categories were written, and connections were made to identify nine themes that emerged. The nine themes were combined into six final themes, this allowed the primary researcher to discover the data.

The final 5 themes for data were: collaboration from team, more data driven, continuous tasks, unpacking the standards and check assessments. Majority of the interviews addressed these themes. It was also recognized in observations. The 5 themes were categorized in three topics: (1) collaboration and effectiveness, (2) standards and tasks, and (3) utilizing data. Each topic honed in on participants responses and those were connected to the themes.

**Member Checks**

Member checks were used after each interview, to ensure the researcher was clear with the information given by interviewee. After each interview, the researcher summarized each interview to ensure accuracy. The researcher also utilized the support of a fellow educator that was employed by another school district. This educator has taught grades second through fifth for a total of 12 years. The educator earned her master’s and Education Specialist degrees. The peer researcher studied the data and was able to validate data for trustworthiness and accuracy.

**Results**

There were five final themes and three categories that emerged from the data of observations and interviews.

**Summary**

The research was created based on the Grounded Theory research process. This research consisted of a series of observations and semi-structured interviews that led to the investigation of the following questions: (1) What practices do educators perceive are increasing the
effectiveness of Professional Learning Communities, (2) What practices do educators perceive are assisting in increasing academic growth in the classroom, and (3) How do educators perceive the effectiveness of Pre and Post Common Formative Assessments in Professional Learning Communities? Each interview question revolved and centered around the research questions. These questions were designed to gain insight into how teacher’s thoughts and perceptions regarding PLCs within their schools and the district. The district has altered the focus and style of PLCs within the last three years.

There were two set of interview questions for participants, one for teachers and one for administration and academic coaches. Each question was open-ended and allowed participants to expand on their answers. Questions were based on the foundations of PLCs, data and assessments.

The research data were organized into three categories: collaboration, standards and tasks and utilizing data. There were five themes that emerged from these categories: collaboration from team, more data driven, continuous tasks, unpacking the standards and check assessments. Teachers, administrators and coaches had similar feelings regarding PLCs and stated that a lot of time was devoted to creating tasks.

Interviews with teachers revealed that they want what is best for students and want PLCs to be effective. Teachers believed in empowering their students and wanted to collaborate with peers to do what is best for students. A seasoned teacher that has been with the district for over a decade, felt as though previously, PLCs were effective and essential to teacher and student learning. She craved for that PLC to return.

When the researcher observed the PLC environment across grade levels, some had a clear objective while other did not. Reading data was posted throughout the conference room but in
some PLCs, it was not addressed. In other observed meetings, mainly lower grades, data were discussed and lesson planning for the following week was discussed.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter is divided into five sections to address the results of the research for this study. In the first section the research is summarized. The second section details the findings of the research and its relationship to existing literature on PLCs. The third section entails conclusions of the study, while the fourth section reports possible limitations of the study. The final section, the fifth section suggests possible recommendations for future research.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this grounded qualitative research study was to determine if teachers perceived professional learning communities to be effective in their district and individual school. The study examined data from PLC observations and 16 semi-structured interviews with 10 teachers, two academic coaches and four administrators within the districts. Observations were done in grades levels kindergarten through fifth grade in the schools’ conference rooms. Interviews were done at schools, participants’ homes and the researcher’s home. The district services 12 schools, K-6 and currently qualifies as a level one based on state TNReady data. Based on research, the PLC model flows from the assumption that the core mission of formal education is not simply to ensure that students are taught but to ensure that they learn; the focus should be learning, and teachers must “buy-in” to this concept (Dufour, 2004). Data support that PLCs should be collaborative, address the four critical questions, be data driven and focus on student learning not teaching. Research has shown that academic scores improve, and classrooms become more productive.
Research Questions

The researcher conducted a grounded qualitative research study to determine if the change in the perception of PLCs can correlate with the decline of test scores within the past three years. This is related to the following research questions:

1. What practices do educators perceive are increasing the effectiveness of Professional Learning Communities?
2. What practices do educators perceive are assisting an increase academic student growth in the classroom?
3. How do educators perceive the effectiveness of Pre and Post Common Formative Assessments in Professional Learning Communities?

Findings

The research question was answered through six semi-structured interviews and PLC observations. Each interview was recorded and transcribed. Data were coded and gathered by the researcher initially and then by a peer researcher. Successively, several themes and categories became evident. The researcher and peer researcher coded themes by highlighting and labeling phrases and words that had similarities. Not only was interviews coded, observation notes were also coded. The primary researcher found 6 themes by color coding them and tally marking the frequency of data. Interviews enclosed information from teachers, administrators and academic coaches that perceptions and perspective were similar but also deemed to be different. The following below, is a summary of observations, interviews and field notes.
Collaboration from Team

The question was asked to participants of was what their perception of practices that increase the effectiveness and practices that decrease the effectiveness within PLCs. Several participants gave collaboration as a practice that increases the effectiveness of PLCs. They felt as though they could learn from their peers better than learning from coaches that facilitate the PLC meetings. The follow-up question to this was what practices are perceived to decrease effectiveness. Many participants stated lack of participation and collaboration from peers. Participants felt as though this factor was something that deemed PLCs to be ineffective and there were no strategies or ideas being exchanged. Rose (2014), expresses, teacher teams need to be intentional about creating and agreeing to team norms, learning to actively listen, arriving at consensus around important matters, resolving conflict, and developing an attitude of trust. Collaborative team members must also be introspective and data-informed about their own performance (Rose, 2014).

As the researcher compared the field notes to interview answers, it was noticed that norms were not posted and in any meetings, there was lack of collaboration amongst team members and many teams did not openly discuss strategies and what was implemented in their classrooms. As researcher interviewed coaches and administration, a question was asked if the four critical questions of PLCs are answered during the meeting, all coaches answered that those questions were not answered, and the focus is mainly on planning, activities and tasks. Administration said that they are focusing on the first question, what is our fundamental purpose. Administration said they were working toward including the four critical questions in PLCs.

The sixth question asked was if teachers felt as though their grade-level utilize PLC time effectively, 70% of educators felt as though their time was not effective. They gave examples of
unpacking standards, creating tasks and discussions. Dufour (2009) states that PLCs should be intentional in order for positive student growth outcome. Without intentional effort, PLCs will not necessarily lead to improve instructional practices, positive student outcomes and be meaningful.

**More Data Driven Meeting**

Interview questions four and five addressed these questions. Participants were asked how do they perceive the effectiveness of pre and post common formative assessments and how they use the information. The participants were also asked what a productive PLC looks like in their opinion. Educators all discussed data and the lack of data in these questions. PLCs are not just about sharing research strategies to utilize in the classroom, they are about taking data analyzing and learning from it and allowing it to lead your teaching. Sparks (2013) states that there should always be a three-phrase instruction learning cycle: pre-planning, instructional planning, and follow up. These phases are addresses creating learning targets, collaborating with other teachers on analyzing pre-assessment data and discussing improving instructional strategies based on results. Comparing field notes, the researcher did not see this being done in reading PLC meetings. In comparison, the district reading scores are the lowest within the last three years; this correlation relates to the change in PLCs. The researcher observed that in math PLCs, the coach and teachers analyzed data from a post test. The academic coach asked questions and encouraged teachers to have conversation and discuss what instructional strategies would take place based on data. Teachers talked but did not sound receptive to exchange ideas and did not take notes. When teachers, coaches and administrators were asked what a productive PLC looked like, in some way, 100% of participants included collaboration and analyzing data in their answer. However, when observing PLCs, many of them did not include much collaboration or data analysis.
Continuous Tasks

This year, the research district implemented teachers creating tasks based upon state standards. PLCs focus on creating tasks to teach standards to students in the classrooms. 100% of teachers expressed the tedious work that is required. 70% of teachers conveyed that using PLC time for this was at times not helpful. Reviewing field notes, tasks were only discussed in reading PLCs. Over the time the researcher observed meetings, tasks were discussed with the academic coach in grades third through fifth. Teachers allotted the entire time of some meetings to create and connect tasks to standards. In these meetings, data were not discussed. These findings were reflective during interviews. Creating tasks are not a part of normal PLC characteristics.

Unpacking Standards

The researcher asks educators what practices you perceive aids in the academic growth in the classroom. Some teachers gave similar responses, while other gave different responses. It seemed as though the similarities were with upper grade teachers. Administration and coaches were asked a question similar to this. They were asked when they observed classrooms, did they see practices and strategies discussed in PLCs implemented in the classroom. Their responses were very similar also. One teacher stated that knowing what the standards are and being competent is a practice that aids in academic growth. She also stated that knowing the reality of where your student is and filling in gaps aids in academic growth. In unison with this teacher, another teacher stated using the scope and sequence and knowing the standard. Every teacher that was interview, related their answer to state standards in some fashion. Coaches and administration answered this question by stating that see practices that were discussed in PLCs implemented in the classroom. However, they do not observe teachers going in depth with the standard and using higher order of thinking.
As the researcher compared field notes, she noticed that the standards were posted in the conference room for teachers, however some coaches did not refer to them often. There were coaches that referred to the standard and had teachers plan with the standard in mind but this was minimal. The researcher did hear coaches state that the standard was “broken” down last week. So they may have referred to the standard in previous meetings. In math PLCs, the standard was frequently addressed, and the coach ensured that each teacher knew how to address this standard in the classroom. Pirtle and Edtobia (2014) wrote, in our work with districts and schools, we used a structured approach that defines what teachers do in a PLC, this approach includes studying standards, reviewing concepts and skills necessary to master the standards, and determining how the standards are assessed. As researcher went through field notes of six PLCs observation meetings, she could one example of teachers studying standards and discussing skills necessary to master standards. This was in a first grade PLC meeting that was facilitated by the school’s math coach. The researcher asked the coach for test scores for this grade level and students made tremendous academic growth.

Check Assessments

Data for PLCs are important, and teachers are responsible for collaborating and creating their own common formative assessments or CFAs. During the research, the researcher observed common formative assessments presented in PLCs. This occurred during math PLCs and was created by teachers and the math coach. The questions on math CFAs were taken from similar questions from the math curriculum iReady. The assessments were about 10-12 questions and teachers had these assessments graded prior to meeting. Questions were asked to teachers how they perceived the effectiveness of pre and post CFAs and what information they gained from pre and post assessments. 100% of teachers agreed that pre and post assessments were important and effective. However, 50% of teachers stated that they make their own and do not collaborate
with their team to create these assessments in reading. Math was slightly different. Each teacher stated that they always did some type of pre-assessment before a lesson is introduced and they bring the results to PLC meetings. One teacher stated that it seemed that discussing the CFA in PLCs is not always helpful. A veteran teacher that has been with the research district over 30 years, stated that three years ago, CFAs were discussed and an effective part of meetings, but she did not see that representation this year.

The question that was presented to principals and coaches was if teachers were comfortable creating PLCs. This response was divided 50%. Two coaches stated that initially they had to assist teachers in creating their own CFA but as the year progressed, teachers felt compelled to create their own. The other coaches believed that teachers still need assistance from them to create meaningful questions for CFAs. This was the same response from principals. All principals that were interviewed expressed that their academic coaches had to assist teachers in creating measurable questions for CFAs. While 90% of coaches stated that pre-assessments were critical, 10% of coaches stated that pre assessments were not needed. Creating CFAs was not observed by researcher in PLC meetings. Assessments should be checked and discussed. The examination of teacher practice must be guided by the results of assessments that teachers carry on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis; so CFAs will assist teachers in making similar judgements about student progress toward the standards, or the needed adjustments to the curriculum content and plan (Rose, 2011).

Conclusions of the Findings

The conclusions of this qualitative study found that characteristics that lead to successful PLCs were not established in this district presently. This is a shift based on previous years of successful PLCs. Three years ago, the research district used spreadsheets to input data and PLCs were a collaborative effort. Teachers created their own CFAs and grade levels could visually see
the success of students based upon data walls and TNReady data. None of this was observed during the research. PLCs are meetings that create tasks for students and overall, based on interviews, teachers no longer perceive them to be as effective as they were previously. There were six characteristics that emerged from the research. These characteristics are what teachers deemed to be ineffective or what needed to take place. These characteristics were: collaboration from team, data driven, continuous tasks, unpacking standards and check assessments. All answers from participants were completely anonymous and participants indicated that they PLCs would be effective if these characteristics were addressed. By observation, the researcher concluded that all of these characteristics were lacking in the meetings or did not have teacher buy in throughout meeting. These findings could be a contributing factor of declining test scores within the past two years.

Limitations

The sampling of participants represented a limitation since only 10 teachers, four administrators and four coaches were interviewed. This is not a complete representation of the entire school district. The population of participants were randomly selected by researcher based upon a selection needed from different schools. The limitation of this study could not examine or look at other factors that have changed and may have affected the decline of test scores in recent years.

Recommendations for Future Research

In an effort to understand the correlation of failing test scores and changes in PLCs within the district, further research must be conducted. The researcher recommends a longer time frame and include more participants from the district. The participants, which would still include teachers, coaches, and administrators would participant in a more in-depth interview process. Participants would be chosen based upon years that they have served in the district.
To correlate test scores and the effectiveness of PLCs, the researcher would look at the downward or upward trend in summative test scores within the district. The researcher suggests examining math and reading data separately and understanding that other factors may contribute to changes in scores.

**Summary**

The conclusions of this study showed a difference in the perceptions of PLCs within the school district and indicated that the majority of teachers did not feel as though they were effective. Since the paradigm has shifted in recent years with the change in PLCs, this could be a contributing factor for failing summative test scores within the last 3 years.

Literature states that there are characteristics to ensure PLCs are effective and aid in student growth. After observations and interviews, the researcher found that many of these characteristics were obsolete. It is the hope of the researcher that the term professional learning communities is not used loosely and PLC meetings become a collaborative effort to foster growth and achievement for both student and teacher.

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Appendix A

Permission to Conduct Study
IRB Permission Letter

May 16, 2018

Carson Newman University Institutional Review Board
1646 Russell Ave.
Jefferson City, TN. 37760

Dear Carson Newman IRB:

Brief Description of Study: This study attempts to find the perception of the effectiveness of professional learning communities within the school district. It aims to evaluate if strategies and assessments that are discussed and designed, are being implemented in Tier 1 instruction. The study also desires to determine if data in professional learning communities is driving instruction within the classroom.

On behalf of Murfreesboro City Schools, I am writing to grant permission for Dominique “Nikki” Boykins - Watts, a graduate student at Carson Newman, to conduct her research titled, Professional Learning Communities in A Middle Tennessee School District: The Perceived Effectiveness and Implementation.

I understand that Dominique Boykins - Watts will be looking at data (surveys and interviews, etc) of 14 teachers, coaches and administration in Murfreesboro City School District and determining the results of the intervention. The data used is a part of the regular education program and the participants will remain anonymous. We are happy to participate in this study and contribute to this important research.

Sincerely,

Linda Arms Gilbert, Ed.D.
Director of Schools
Appendix B

Informed Consent
Informed Consent Participation Form

Title: Professional Learning Communities in a Middle Tennessee School District: The Perceived Effectiveness and Implementation

TITLE OF STUDY
Professional Learning Communities in a Middle Tennessee School District: The Perceived Effectiveness and Implementation

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR
Dominique M Boykins - Watts
Department of Education
1646 Russell Ave. Jefferson City, TN 37760
865-591-3260
dmwboykins@cn.edu

PURPOSE OF STUDY
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

The purpose of this study is to seek the perception of professional learning communities within the district. It aims to seek if teachers utilize what is discussed in PLCs and if they are beneficial to the teachers. The study also inquires if formative assessments are created and data is discussed.

STUDY PROCEDURES

The first procedure will be the observation of professional learning communities within the researcher’s school. The researcher will observe grades of kindergarten, first, and fourth grades. The researcher will take notes throughout the meeting. After the meeting, the researcher will ask if any teachers will be interested in participating in interviews.

The next step will be data collection done through a brief survey. This survey has a list of 15 questions with 5 being open-ended questions. The survey should take no more than eight minutes. At the end of the survey, the researcher will offer educators to participate in interviews.

Data collection through interviews will be the last step. Each interview will be audio recorded. Peer debriefing will occur after each interview by impartial colleagues. Member checks will happen after all data was collected. Interviews took around 30 minutes for each participant.

Each participant will be able to view their responses and receive a copy of the study when completed.

Participant’s Initials: ____________
Informed Consent Participation Form

Title: Professional Learning Communities in a Middle Tennessee School District: The Perceived Effectiveness and Implementation

RISKS

There are minimal to no risks in this survey.

You may decline to answer any or all questions and you may terminate your involvement at any time if you choose.

BENEFITS

There will be no direct benefit initially to the participant, however, the researcher hopes that the findings of Effective Professional Learning Communities will eventually benefit students and the school district.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Your responses to this survey and interviews will be anonymous. Please do not write any identifying information. For the purposes of this research study, your comments will not be anonymous. Every effort will be made by the researcher to preserve your confidentiality including the following:

- Assigning code names/numbers for participants that will be used on all research notes and documents
- Keeping notes, interview transcriptions, and any other identifying participant information in a locked file cabinet in the personal possession of the researcher
- The use of pseudonyms will be used

Participant data will be kept confidential except in cases where the researcher is legally obligated to report specific incidents. These incidents include, but may not be limited to, incidents of abuse and suicide risk.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have questions at any time about this study, or you experience adverse effects as the result of participating in this study, you may contact the researcher whose contact information is provided on the first page. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, or if problems arise which you do not feel you can discuss with the primary investigator, please contact the Institutional Review Board at (365) 471-2000.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part in this study. If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to sign a consent form. After you sign the consent form, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. Withdrawing from this study will not affect the relationship
Informed Consent Participation Form
Title: Professional Learning Communities in a Middle Tennessee School District: The Perceived Effectiveness and Implementation

you have, if any, with the researcher. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

CONSENT

I have read and I understand the provided information and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and without cost. I understand that I will be given a copy of this consent form. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

Participant’s signature ___________________________ Date __________

Investigator’s signature ___________________________ Date __________

Participant’s Initials: ________

Page 3 of 3
Appendix C

Interview Guide for Teachers

Interview Questions for Teachers

1. What practices do educators perceive are increasing the effectiveness of Professional Learning Communities?
   a. What practices do you feel decrease the effectiveness of PLCs?

2. Do you feel that your current PLCs are effective?
   a. What do you utilize from your PLCs that helps in your classroom?

3. What practices do you perceive aids in academic growth in the classroom?

4. How do educators perceive the effectiveness of Pre and Post Common Formative Assessments in Professional Learning Communities?
   a. What information do you gain from a pre and post assessment and how do you use that information?

5. What do you think a productive PLC looks like?

6. Do you feel like your grade - level utilizes the PLC time effectively?
Interview Guide for Academic Coaches and Administrators

Interview questions for Coaches and Administrators

1. When you lead a PLC, do grade levels answer Dufour & Eaker’s 4 critical questions of a PLC? (1. What is our fundamental purpose, 2. What do we hope to achieve, 3. What are our strategies for becoming better, 4. What criteria will we use to assess our improvement efforts?)

2. What does an effective PLC look like to you?
   a. Do you feel that effective PLCs are implemented in your building?

3. When you observe classrooms, do you see the practices and strategies that were discussed in the previous PLC? If not, what strategies or practices would you like to see discussed and implemented in PLCs that will aid student growth in the classroom?

4. How do you perceive the effectiveness of pre and post common formative assessments in professional and learning communities?
   a. How do teachers utilize that information?
   b. Do you find that teachers are comfortable with creating their pre and post assessments within PLCs?