ABSTRACT

An Examination of Qualities of Effective Professional Learning Communities in Urban Schools

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This study seeks to identify characteristics of effective Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in urban schools. Beginning with a body of research on education reform, challenges faced by urban schools, and implementation of PLCs, this study analyzes five case studies of PLCs in urban, Title I schools from the literature and develops a model of characteristics of effective PLCs using a grounded theory approach. Findings indicate six characteristics of effective PLCs: administration, collaboration, relationships, focus, teacher beliefs, and support. In effective PLCs, administrators regularly interact with the PLC through collaboration. Effective PLCs also exhibit strong accountability structures and support systems. This research indicates the role of administrative leadership in PLCs of striking a balance between holding teachers accountable for improving their practices and providing the supports necessary in order for them to do so. It also indicates the importance of PLCs as a structure for increasing communication between teachers and administrators.

AN EXAMINATION OF QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES IN URBAN SCHOOLS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES iv

CHAPTER ONE. Introduction and Literature Review 1

Introduction 1

Purpose: Reform and the State of Urban Schools 1

Rationale: PLCs an Effective Reform Strategy 4

What is a PLC? Origin, Definitions, and Frameworks 6

Implementation and Effectiveness 8

Criteria for Effective PLCs 10

Research Question: What Characteristics of PLCs in Urban Schools Make Them Most Effective? 12

CHAPTER TWO. Methods 13

Introduction 13

Participants 13

Procedure for Selecting the Sample 13

Introduction to the Cases in this Study 14

Strategies of Inquiry 17

Data Analysis 18

CHAPTER THREE. Analysis 20

Introduction 20

Administrative Leadership 20

Collaboration 24

Relationships 30

Focus 32

Teacher Beliefs 37

Support 41

Summary 48

CHAPTER FOUR. Conclusions 50

Overlap of Administration, Accountability, and Support 51

Role of Administration in Accountability and Support 58

Accountability and Support Balance Each Other 61

PLCs Connect Teachers and Administrators 62

Implications 64

Recommendations for Future Research 66

Conclusion 67

REFERENCES 69

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Diagram of the six themes and their categories 21

Figure 2: The three overarching groups 52

Figure 3: Detailed version of the three overarching groups: Administration, Accountability, and Support 57

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction and Literature Review

Introduction

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are a hot topic in the current discussion on education reform. A growing body of research outlines the defining features of PLCs and the characteristics that make them successful. However, less research focuses on PLCs implemented in urban schools. This study examines five case studies in the current literature that examine PLCs in urban schools. This study analyzes them for key characteristics that made the PLCs effective. Leading up to this study was a review of the literature focusing on various reform strategies used in the past fifty years to improve the quality of education in America, and research on the challenges that urban schools uniquely face. PLCs are shown in research to be an effective school reform strategy, although the definitions, types, and levels of effectiveness of PLCs vary. PLCs can be quite enigmatic; there is no perfect example, definition, or description of a PLC. One thing is clear, however. They have potential as a reform strategy aimed at improving student achievement, especially in urban schools where reform is often needed the most. Thus, identifying the characteristics of effective PLCs in urban schools could help administrators and teachers implement this new reform strategy successfully.

Purpose: Reform and the State of Urban Schools

Educational reform in the United States has been a topic of debate for decades. In the nineteen-forties and fifties, America saw a movement towards “progressive education," which pushed for increased emphasis on the practicality of education and its relevance to young people and their interests. Unfortunately, this push came at the expense of traditional subjects like mathematics, history, science, English, and foreign languages. This period saw a decline in percentages of students enrolled in core academic subjects across the country. In 1957, the Soviet Union's launching of Sputnik sparked a public appeal for increased academic rigor in schools. However, efforts to improve the rigor in subjects like mathematics and science fell by the wayside amid the tumult of the nineteen-sixties and seventies. During this period people became more disturbed by the gap in educational achievement between white students and students of color, and there was a push for children from disadvantaged backgrounds to have equal educational opportunities. At the same time, the youth culture pushed for more freedom and choice in schools at both the high school and university level. In the face of pressure from various fronts, schools in this period took a passive role in defining curriculum, leading to lower overall standards and expectations for students (Ravitch, 2001).

Finally in 1983, *A Nation At Risk* was published. This national report commissioned by President Regan in 1983 used urgent language to move national and state governments to take action to improve the quality of the American education provided to all students (McBeath, 2008). This document led to another series of reform initiatives, including the creation of standards by each state, the multicultural movement, the self-esteem movement, and the constructivist movement. In spite of renewed vigor for school reform, the century closed with continued criticism of the current state of education in America (Ravitch, 2001). Landmark research by Linda Darling-Hammond revealing a treatment gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students spurred even greater emphasis on providing an equitable education for all by reforming underperforming schools.

It was into this context that the No Child Left Behind Act was born. This law signed in 2001 established that all schools be held accountable for students' individual performance on standardized high stakes assessments. Schools that did not meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) in increasing student scores risked being shut down by the government or losing funding (US Department of Education, 2008). This added pressure placed even greater emphasis on finding reform strategies that would improve struggling schools and help bridge the achievement gap. Urban schools in particular face heavy pressure to improve, given the many additional challenges they face.

The challenges faced by urban schools--due to location and the student populations they serve—have been outlined in countless studies. These challenges range from difficulties with students in the classroom to structural inefficiencies. When it comes to students, urban schools face high poverty rates among students and their families (Bryk, 2010; Grubb, 2011). Urban schools experience high dropout rates among students (Rumberger, 2000; Strange, 2011; Swanson, 2009), increased behavior problems in the classroom (Kretovics, 1991; Anthony, 2005; National Center for Education Statistics and Bureau of Justice Statistics 2012; McCready, 2010; Voltz, 1998), and low student achievement (Ruby, 2006; Kraus 2008; Neild and Balfanz 2006; Voltz 1998; Talbert 2004). Teachers encounter difficult working environments in many urban schools as well (Dallas, 2006; Brown and Wynn, 2007; Kozol, 2006). This is further exemplified by high teacher turnover (Guin, 2004; Ingersoll, 2012; Ronfeldt, 2013), which can greatly affect the morale of a school faculty and student achievement. Structural problems like a factory-based model, or ineffective systems further inhibit urban schools from reaching their full potential (Darling-Hammond 2006; Talbert 2004; Fulton 2003). Finally, many urban schools suffer from low funding, or lack of resources (Brown 2004; Crosby 1999). These challenges, often unique to urban schools, often pose a greater challenge to educators and make reform efforts all the more important.

With recent awareness of the inequality found in the current educational system as well as the added pressure of national government mandated accountability policies, stakeholders have become increasingly interested in reform strategies that can be used to turn schools and districts around for all schools, and for urban schools in particular. One strategy that has become widely accepted is the implementation of PLCs, or Professional Learning Communities.

Rationale: PLCs an Effective Reform Strategy

PLCs are thought to be very effective in increasing student achievement in all types of schools. This is true both in theory and in practice. Several researchers believe that the structure of the PLC creates an environment conducive to improving teacher quality and by extension student achievement. Indeed, DuFour asserts, “When educators do the hard work necessary to implement [the principles of PLCs], their collective ability to help all students learn will rise” (DuFour, 2004). DuFour is not the only researcher who sees PLCs as an effective strategy for improving student achievement. Hord and many others agree with him in this regard. PLCs theoretically can influence student achievement gains, and this has been tested in numerous studies. In a review of eight studies on PLCs, Vescio et al. found that in all eight, student achievement improved as a result of teacher participation in a PLC (Vescio et al., 2008). In each specific example, student achievement increased dramatically as a result of PLCs. Other case studies report similar examples of increased student achievement. In one study, student scores in reading, writing, and mathematics jumped from 61%, 73% and 37% to 89%, 91% and 94%, respectively, in a six-year period (Hipp, Huffman, Pankake, & Olivier, 2008). Other case studies report gains in student achievement (Huggins et al., 2011; Richmond & Manokore, 2011). In a study of a school district in Connecticut, students—especially Black and Hispanic students—made marked improvements in mathematics, reading, and writing on state assessments. These occurred over a four-year period during which PLCs were implemented in the school, and interviewed teachers attributed the increase to the establishment of PLCs (Thessin & Starr, 2011). In another study, Sänger Unified was a district in serious trouble, but which made enormous gains after implementing DuFour's PLC framework. The superintendent of the district stated, "Two years after being targeted as a school district with serious academic deficiencies and one of the worst in California, we were able to exit program improvement status and our lowly state designation. In the past seven years, Sänger has had nine state distinguished schools and three National Blue Ribbon Schools…This would not have been possible without the focus and collaborative effort of teachers, staff, and administration working together as a professional learning community." (Smith 2012, p. 27).

Findings in Burdett's (2009) study of the various characteristics of PLCs and their impact on student achievement concurred that student achievement "increased based on the well established dimensions of PLCs within K-5 elementary schools" (p. 116) and recommends PLCs as a strategy for administrators seeking to increase student performance. Another case study focusing on a principal and his process of implementing

PLCs notes the resulting academic gains: “The school had been placed under the state review system…for its special-education passing rates, which hovered at 25% for language arts and 9.2% for mathematics. In the six years following, the scores rose to 32% and 31%. [The principal] attributed those changes to…a school-wide effort to improve practices.” (Mindich 2012, p. 9). In addition to these studies on PLC implementation in specific schools and districts, some research has approached the topic by identifying schools with unusually high student achievement and then searching for evidence of PLCs in the school. These studies found a strong correlation between higher student achievement and the key elements of effective PLCs upon which PLC literature agrees (Jacobs 2010; Cowley 2002). Not only can PLCs increase student achievement; they also have notable impacts on retaining teachers and creating positive school cultures. The literature on PLCs clearly shows that PLCs are a noteworthy method of school reform aimed at increasing student achievement as well as providing other benefits to schools. Given this knowledge, it is beneficial to investigate what PLCs are and what makes them effective.

What is a PLC? Origin, Definitions and Frameworks

PLCs originated with Peter Senge’s (1990) landmark book, *The Fifth Discipline*, which first proposed creating learning organizations in the corporate world. Senge’s model advocates a radical shift in the way businesses and organizations function, and he argues that in today’s age, there is a great need to shift from the historically hierarchical, managerial structures of organizations to a team-centered approach. This approach is guided by five major disciplines: systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, building shared vision, and team learning. The combination of these five disciplines, outlined in the book, can radically transform the effectiveness of businesses. His model was well received in the business world, and was later transferred to schools. This transferal was described in his later book, *Schools that Learn: A Fifth Discipline Fieldbook for Educators, Parents, and Everyone Who Cares About Education*, (Senge, 2012) which translates the structure of a learning organization expressed and outlined in the *Fifth Discipline* into ideas and practices for teachers, school administrators, community members, and parents.

In spite of their many benefits and effects on student achievement, there is a lack of consensus in PLC literature on what exactly defines a PLC. Some researchers prefer to offer broad, general definitions that encompass a variety of PLC examples, while others choose to narrow their definitions to very specific, concrete terms. One study broadly defines PLCs as "group[s] of professionals who posses a common vision for student learning and agreements that involve collaborating, sharing and reflecting on their practice and who inquire into the teaching and learning process" (Kilbane, 2009). This definition incorporates many of the key components outlined in PLC literature into the definition of a PLC itself. Conversely, a more concrete definition, given by McKenzie and colleagues, defines PLCs as "communities of professionals who communicate effectively, plan together, and create common practices around improving instruction" (McKenzie, Skrla, Scheurich, Rice, & Hawes, 2011). This definition offers a more communicable vision of what teachers are supposed to do in a PLC. Many researchers define PLCs in terms of "Big ideas" (DuFour, 2004) or other critical components such as trust, relationships, and supportive structures (Tobia & Hord, 2012).

Beyond definitions exists a growing body of frameworks, which offer key components of effective PLCs. Shirley Hord (1997), a leading researcher on PLCs, outlines five key characteristics: shared values and vision, collective creativity, supportive and shared leadership, supportive conditions (including physical conditions and people capacities), and shared personal practice. Richard DuFour (2004) offers another leading framework, which defines PLCs in terms of big ideas. DuFour asserts that true PLCs ensure that students learn, have a culture of collaboration, and focus on results. Further research on PLCs offers additional components, including structural conditions like a time and space for the PLC to meet (Huggins, Scheurich, & Morgan, 2011; Kilbane, 2009; Tobia & Hord, 2012), and trusting relationships (Brown & Benken, 2009; Cranston, 2011; Kilbane, 2009; Tobia & Hord, 2012).

Implementation and Effectiveness

Definitions of PLCs have become muddied over time likely because schools have applied the concept of a PLC in so many different ways, thus creating a multitude of PLC structures. PLCs vary in scope of participation. Some PLCs are comprised of teachers from a single school (Graham, 2007; Dallas, 2006; Huggins, 2011; Dupree, 2012), while others are made up of teachers from various schools in a district (Richmond & Manokore, 2011; Nelson & Slavit et.al, 2008). They also vary in the levels of buy-in they experience from participants. Some are made up of volunteers who have chosen to participate in the PLC almost as a form of professional development (Brown and Benken, 2009; Richmond & Manokore, 2011), but in others, teachers are required by schools or administrations to participate (Dupree, 2012; Huggins, 2011; Mindich & Lieberman, 2012). Some have leaders (Koellner, Jacobs, Borko, 2011; Kanold, 2011; Hipp, Huffman, Pankake, Olivier, 2008, Nelson & Slavit et.al, 2008), and others are set up without a leader to encourage all participants to see themselves as leaders (Dallas, 2006). Some are made up of just teachers (Dallas, 2006), while in others, both administrators and teachers attend (Huggins, 2011; Ferguson 2013; Hoffman, Dahlman, & Zierdt, 2009). Some also include school personnel such as content specialists and librarians (Dupree, 2012).

Besides participants, PLCs vary in their structural organization. Some exist within a single grade and subject level (Dupree, 2012, Graham, 2007, Schechter, 2010) while others span subjects or grade levels (Nelson & Slavit et.al, 2008, Graham, 2007) Some are made up of only two or three teachers (Graham, 2007), while others are made up of five to ten teachers, or even entire school faculties (Kilbane, 2007; Graham, 2007; Lieberman & Miller, 2011). Some meet daily (Huggins, 2011; Schechter, 2010), others meet weekly, every two weeks, or monthly (Kilbane, 2007; Lieberman & Miller, 2011; Ferguson, 2013; Sieveke-Pearson, 2010). Furthermore, the concept of the PLC has been expanded to the creation of administrative PLCs, which are made up of principals from single or multiple districts, other administrative leaders, and even university faculties (Hackmann, 2006, Hewitt, 2012; Hipp & Weber, 2008; Sieveke-Pearson, 2010). Comparing PLCs can pose challenges to the researcher due to the high variance in the types of PLCs implemented from school to school.

Unfortunately, another consequence of widespread implementation of PLCs has occurred: some schools, although they use PLC terminology, have in fact strayed from the original idea of what a PLC should be. Hord notes a “wide divergence between what is reported in research studies of PLCs, what many practitioners share and describe as their practice of PLC, and what some PLC consultants…write for their constituents”

(2012, 38). She explains the varying degrees of implementation of the full PLC model as she and other researchers have outlined it. She calls the three levels, "we meet," "we work collaboratively" and "we engage in continuous cycles of school improvement" (39-41). According to Hord, at the lower degrees of implementation, the PLC does not enjoy the same effectiveness that it would if it were enacted in full. This suggests that not all PLCs are created equal, and some are more effective in improving student achievement than others. This is evident in various case studies, which describe not only varying degrees of implementation, but also varying levels of PLC effectiveness.

Criteria for Effective PLCs

Since PLCs can have varying levels of effectiveness, there must be criteria for evaluating them. How does one measure the effectiveness of a PLC? The literature on PLCs tends to agree that student achievement must be a necessary result of an effective PLC. Indeed, DuFour describes this as the sixth and final characteristic of a PLC: "Finally, a professional learning community realizes that its efforts to develop shared mission, vision, and values; engage in collective inquiry; build collaborative teams; take action; and focus on continuous improvement must be assessed on the basis of *results* rather than *intentions*. Unless initiatives are subject to ongoing assessment on the basis of tangible results, they represent random groping in the dark rather than purposeful improvement." (DuFour 1998, p. 29). Other researchers have developed their own criteria for determining a PLC's effectiveness, agreeing that student achievement is the ultimate indicator of an effective PLC, but also adding some other criteria. Bolam et. al. (2005) suggest that a PLC's effectiveness be judged based on "its ultimate impact on pupil learning and social development; its intermediate impact on professional learning, performance and morale; its operational performance as a PLC" (p. vi). Perhaps other signs besides student learning—namely the impact of the PLC on teacher practices and school culture—can also indicate the effectiveness of a PLC. Certainly these improvements can very well lead to increased student success, although they may not necessarily. However, several studies tout PLCs for their effectiveness in decreasing teacher turnover and helping to create school cultures more conducive to learning, suggesting that perhaps these benefits are ends in themselves (Black, Neel & Benson, 2008; Shernoff et. al., 2011; Wynn, Carboni, & Patall, 2007).

Finally, a variety of workbooks have been developed, which help administrators and teachers assess their PLCs. These workbooks each take a slightly different approach, outlining specific measures of PLC success. One handbook states, "To improve, collaborative professional learning teams conduct regular evaluations of their work. Evaluations can focus on three aspects of the team's work — their efficiency, their effectiveness as a team, and their results. Taking time periodically to assess and analyze the results of assessments in each of these areas provides valuable data that teams can use to strengthen their work." The same workbook goes on to describe the types of evaluation that each PLC team would undergo. This included formative evaluation, which looked at the PLC's accomplishments and efficiency over time and summative evaluation, which looked at whether or not the PLC was reaching the student learning-focused goals it had set. These criteria suggest that there are more indicators of PLC success, like efficiency and effectiveness as a team, than just increases in student achievement. Yet, they still acknowledge student learning as the ultimate goal and indicator of effective PLCs.

Research Question: What Characteristics of PLCs in Urban Schools Make Them Most Effective?

Although several voices in PLC literature have identified key characteristics that make PLCs effective, there is limited research on PLCs implemented in urban, Title I, middle and secondary schools. While the research is limited, there do exist some case studies around PLCs, primarily research at the school level in particular locations. It seems important to analyze both within and across the cases to see if these key characteristics do indeed contribute to the effectiveness of PLCs and what factors might impede PLC effectiveness. This study looks at how PLCs operate within the unique environments of inner city, secondary schools and seeks to identify characteristics that make those PLCs effective. A framework of the characteristics is developed with the hope that it will aid principals and teachers in the implementation of PLCs specifically in urban, middle and secondary schools.

CHAPTER TWO

Methods

Introduction

This study is a qualitative analysis of five case studies drawn from already-existing PLC literature. This chapter outlines the target population represented by the cases as well as the procedures used to select the cases that were ultimately analyzed, offering a concise introduction to each of the five cases selected. This chapter also describes the Grounded Theory method of analysis used to draw themes from the cases as well as the data analysis procedures used (Glaser & Strauss, 2006).

Participants

The target population of this study was Title I, urban secondary schools serving students grades 6-12. The sample included five case studies that reported on schools that fit that description. They are identified in this chapter as Dallas (2006), McKenzie (2011), Huggins (2011), Hipp (2008), and Wallace (2010). In each of the five case studies, the school implemented PLCs with considerable success. Cases were selected using purposeful sampling as opposed to opportunistic sampling, meaning that cases were chosen based on the extent to which they were rich in information with respect to the purposes of this study.

Procedure for Selecting the Sample

Cases were found using the database ERIC, using keywords such as “urban” or “inner-city” PLC, or learning community. Among the cases that resulted from the search, those that examined urban, Title I schools were considered. Next it was considered how the school in the case had implemented PLCs, and the degree to which the PLCs reflected the definition of a PLC in the literature. Third, the level of success of the PLC was considered. Special attention was given to cases that demonstrated some kind of marked success whether it was through student scores increasing, or a positive culture, as demonstrated by the narrative of the case, or some other positive result. Not all the cases showed the same kind of growth or improvement but all were examined for evidence of some quality effect of the PLC within the school. Fourth, the length of the case and the amount of information provided about the PLC and the school was also a deciding factor. For example, case studies shorter than five pages were not considered because of the lack of detailed information about the case. Each case that met the first criteria was read carefully and assessed in terms of these criteria.

Introduction to the Cases in this Study

Dallas (2006)

This case follows a first-year PLC of the sixth grade English teachers in a struggling middle school. The PLC was created for that group of teachers because they had the lowest test scores of any subgroup in the school. In the case, the teachers dealt with feelings of frustration due to a perceived lack of support from the administration. Furthermore, the teachers had never collaborated together before, and the administration did not provide many communication structures to facilitate the transition. Thus, the PLC faced challenges in its first semester of implementation. But by the end, although student scores were not drastically improved, the PLC developed into a strong support system, from which the teachers benefitted immensely.

Definition of a PLC in This Case: According to this case, PLCs “establish the notion that everyone in school is a learner. Ideally, when teachers model learning to their students, then students are more motivated to be learners themselves.” (p. 70) This study recognizes that PLCs range in implementation from school-wide cultures to two-person teams. Still, the case does not provide one common definition, which would apply to the study.

McKenzie (2011)

This case synthesizes qualitative data gathered from three unusually successful urban high schools. It describes extremely positive cultures of collaboration and commitment among faculty and staff, as well as highlighting strong beliefs among the teachers of equity orientation, teacher efficacy, and locus of control. The PLCs in this article were quite old, and had in fact withstood multiple changes in administration.

Definition of a PLC in This Case: This case also noted the wide divergence in implementation of the concept of PLCs, citing “true communities of professionals” as those who “communicate effectively, plan together, and create common practices around improving instruction” (p. 112).

Huggins (2011)

This case describes how a hands-on, instructionally oriented principal initiated PLCs in her school. This principal used very strict, structured methods to get teachers to deprivatize their practices and to shape their attitudes and beliefs towards taking responsibility for the learning of all students. Yet, she balanced this with lots of support personally and through her instructionally-minded administrative staff. One unique feature of this story is the high levels of involvement that the principal and her staff had in attending, leading, guiding and supporting the PLC.

Definition of a PLC in This Case: "In this study, professional learning communities are defined as subject-specific groups of teachers…Although some studies are concerned with school-based professional learning communities…this study is concerned with only within-school and within-subject professional learning communities." (p. 71)

Hipp (2008)

This case compares two very different schools' implementations of PLCs. One was an elementary school, so it was not considered for this thesis. The other school participated in a large research project on PLCs, but before then already had a longstanding culture of shared values and collaboration. Thus the PLCs were at a more mature stage. This school is characterized by shared leadership at all levels, strong commitment to students, and a positive relationship with the district.

Definition of a PLC in This Case: This case incorporates Hord's 1997 framework, which describes five dimensions of PLCs (values and vision, collective learning, leadership, supportive conditions, and shared practice), along with Fullan's change model, which outlines three levels through which a process moves (initiation, implementation, institutionalization) to note the developmental level of the PLCs studied.

Wallace (2010)

This case focuses primarily on a principal's perspective on implementing PLCs in his school. After experiencing low student achievement, the school showed improvement through the principal's focused PLC initiative. The principal in this case showed a notable level of respect and support for his staff and was present at PLC meetings on a weekly basis. The teachers worked together comfortably and appreciated the principal's involvement in the PLC.

Definition of a PLC in This Case: In defining PLCs the author of this case also cites Hord's 1997 framework. PLCs are defined as "a school in which teachers and administrators continuously seek and share learning and then act on what they learn," also noting that "smaller learning communities" are separately defined as one in which "students and teachers are scheduled together and frequently have a common area of the school in which to hold most or all of their classes" (p. 12).

Strategies of Inquiry

This study used the inquiry method of Grounded Theory as defined by Glaser and Straus (2006). The intended outcome of this method was to develop a theory that outlines the components that make PLCs in urban schools effective. This method of inquiry was the most logical since the data was qualitative in nature. Multiple cases were chosen for analysis with the intent of finding themes or trends across all of them related to the general success of PLCs. Grounded theory was the best fit for the goals of this study.

Grounded Theory requires open-mindedness on the part of the researcher in order for the categories and themes to emerge without bias. Because the author of this study was writing about PLCs for the first time, she had perhaps less knowledge of the subject than others who study PLCs. The data analysis of grounded theory involved coding and reorganization of the codes so the themes might emerge. The final narrative of this study recognizes distinct characteristics that make PLCs in urban, Title I schools successful. It also attempts to weave these characteristics and components of each of the five cases into one cohesive theory.

Data Analysis

Procedures for reducing and coding the data include the following: Each case was read multiple times to obtain a general sense of the material. Then, the data of the five case studies was reduced by only coding specific sections. The introductions and the methods sections were ignored, with the focus of the coding rather on the analysis sections, as well as parts of the conclusions. Whichever sections were relevant to the research questions of this study were coded. Any time the case gave direct information about the school/PLC that was studied, that section was coded as well.

Procedures for coding the data included coding the data by reading through each case line by line. Generally each line was given one or more codes, depending on the content of the sentence. Codes were drawn from the content of the sentences themselves, or from prior knowledge of PLCs and important aspects of PLCs. Codes were also developed based on the original senses of the material gained from initial readings of the cases. Throughout these two first stages, personal notes were also kept to record ideas and connections between the cases.

A further procedure for the analysis included choosing twenty-two of the most common codes for further analysis. These are listed below.

- Leadership in PLC meetings
- Roles in PLC meetings
- Teacher attitudes
- Teacher beliefs
- Teacher buy-in
- School administrative staff
- District administration
- Teachers’ relationships with school administration
- Support felt by teachers
- Supplies provided to teachers
- Relationships
- Trust
- Unity
- Collaboration
- Content of PLC meetings
- Lesson planning and modeling
- Structures
- Focus and goals
- Teacher commitment/dedication
- Above and beyond
- Positivity
- Classroom management

For each of the twenty-two, each case was searched for all evidence related to that code, and the evidence was consolidated into tables. This organization facilitated further analysis of the codes within each case and helped elucidate common threads between the cases and between the codes. From these twenty-two, six prominent themes emerged. The six that had the most evidence from all five cases, and which were the most commonly mentioned or represented across all the cases. In many cases, the other codes fell into subcategories under those six major categories.

CHAPTER THREE

Analysis

Introduction

Analysis of the five cases across the 22 codes clustered into six themes, or aspects of effective urban PLCs. These six themes are: *administrative leadership, collaboration, relationships, focus, teacher beliefs*, and *support*. Although not every theme was present in every case due to the variety among the cases, these themes still stood out as major findings of the research. Each theme also had specific categories and subcategories. Figure 1 offers a visual of the six themes and their categories. The six themes and their related categories are described in the sections that follow.

Administrative Leadership

In every case study, leadership was a major finding of the authors. In all but one, the administrative leadership was praised for its role in supporting the work of PLCs. Alternately, in Dallas (2006), the PLC managed to survive and even thrive in spite of poor leadership. The fact that leadership was a major theme in every case shows the ubiquitous importance of wise administrative leadership in the implementation of PLCs. Two categories exemplify this theme: leadership of the principal and leadership of the district.

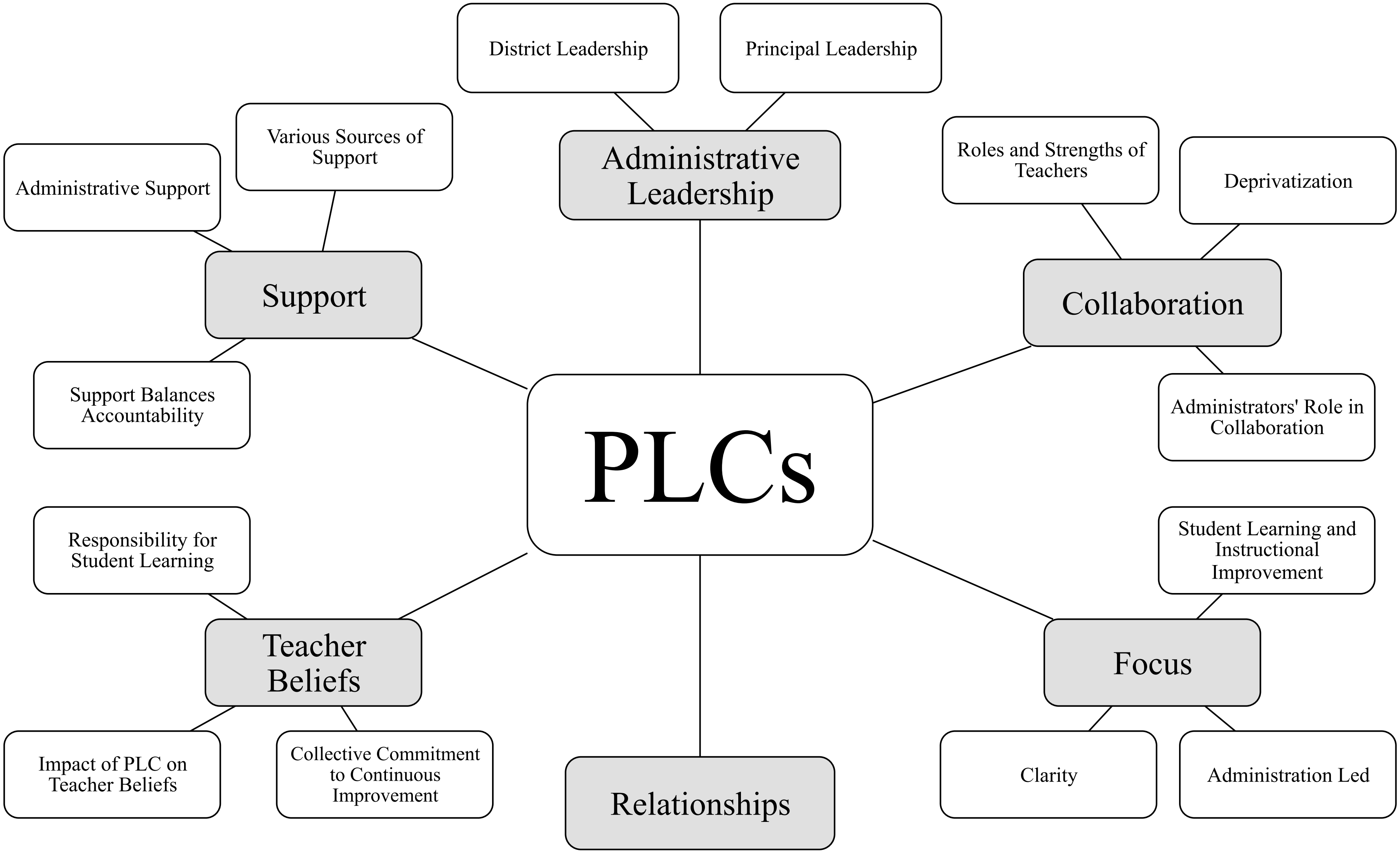
District Leadership
Principal Leadership
Administrative Leadership
Various Sources of Support
Administrative Support
Roles and Strengths of Teachers
Deprivatization
Support
Collaboration
Support Balances Accountability
PLCs
Administrators' Role in Collaboration
Responsibility for Student Learning
Student Learning and Instructional Improvement
Teacher Beliefs
Focus
Impact of PLC on Teacher Beliefs
Collective Commitment to Continuous Improvement
Relationships
Clarity
Administration Led

Figure 1: Diagram of the six themes and their categories

Principal Leadership

Principal Leadership includes both principals and other administrative staff members (such as vice or assistant principals), all of whom play a significant role in the success of a school. Among the five cases, each principal led with his or her own style. Principals in the cases had varying levels of attendance and involvement in PLC meetings and they took various approaches to establishing focus and goals for the PLCs. In whatever way it was referenced, the role of the principal in bringing about the success of the PLC or lack thereof was clearly emphasized. The following quotes from each case study provide supporting evidence of this:

> *Hipp (2008)*: "Leadership sets the tone and direction for the school climate." (p. 185); "The principal of the school was truly enthusiastic about joining with any effort that would put them in touch with other educators attempting to make changes for school improvement." (p. 186)
>
> *Huggins (2011)*: "the way the principal of Riverside Academy used her leadership role as an instructional leader to implement the math PLC community and drive the student math achievement is highly significant." (p. 84)
>
> *McKenzie (2011)*: "The type of focused, coherent instructional leadership in the schools in this study was consistent with the type of leadership Elmore (2004) and other researchers have found to be effective in countering instructional fragmentation and orienting districts and schools toward consistent improvement of teaching and learning." (p. 110)
>
> *Wallace (2010)*: "Research findings from Renaissance High School indicated the importance of the visibility and attendance of the principal in the team meetings. The principal has never missed a PLC meeting and is there to support the teachers." (p. 278)
>
> *Dallas (2006)*: "The negative environmental factors, specifically the perceived negative messages and the lack of discipline support from the administrators, contributed early to the tensions discussed in the initial meetings of the PLC. These tensions served as a rallying point for the community and actually drew them together." (p. 87)

Each of these cases and quotes demonstrates the significance of administrative leadership in the operation of PLCs. Several of the quotes mention instructional leadership, indicating that the principals and other school administrators in those schools took an active role in helping teachers improve instructional practices. Indeed, Horng and Loeb (2010) define instructional leadership with a view of the principal as the organizational manager, responsible for developing an instructionally focused school culture, rather than as one who oversees teacher acquisition of instructional knowledge. In other cases the leadership set the tone for the school culture in either a positive way or a negative way.

District Leadership

District leadership was also a frequently mentioned aspect of strong leadership across the cases. The only case that gave no mention of district level leadership was Dallas (2006). In general, district leadership was found to be supportive of the work of the PLCs. Some districts initiated the implementation of the PLCs, whereas others supported the PLCs by providing vision or resources to support their work. The following evidence demonstrates the role that each district played in supporting the PLC.

> *Hipp (2008)*: The word, "positive" was used several times to describe central office, including the following: "It is seen as a positive support rather than as a barrier to the work of the school" (p. 190). Central office supported the work of PLCs was by allowing school administrators to make decisions about staff development and by providing resources as needed. Furthermore, Hipp et. al. found a "strong central office-to-campus relationship" due to people being promoted to central office positions who had previously worked in the school.
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> *Huggins (2011)*: The school "implemented PLCs in math and science teaching as part of the districtwide effort to increase student achievement." (p. 71).
>
> *Wallace (2010):* The principal indicated the importance of having district support in his plan to implement PLCs in his school: "I won't take over another school

> district or another high school, not unless I am able to implement those, my vision and my planning…So they've got to feel that. They've got to feel and know that it's important." (p. 211)
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> *McKenzie (2011)*: This case had the strongest coupling of the schools with district leadership: "It was clear from our conversations with informants that the high levels of [student mathematics and science achievement] did not result from the school working in isolation from district efforts. Specifically, informants described leadership for instructional improvement as originating at the district level and often as providing a coherent framework within which the school's own efforts were to be nested." (p. 110). The authors also indicated a balance between leadership between the principals and the districts: "The weakest of the three principals worked under the strongest district leadership. The other two principals had similar degrees of strength at the district level, but were stronger and more respected by the teachers." (p. 111)
>
> *Dallas (2006)*: District leadership was not mentioned at all in this case.

In conclusion, Huggins (2011) is an example in which the district initiated the PLC, whereas in Wallace (2010), the district supported a principal's vision to implement PLCs. Hipp (2008) demonstrates how a district can support the work of PLCs through policy and resources, whereas McKenzie (2011) shows how a district can support the work of PLCs by setting overarching vision. Although the cases do not show one clear path for districts to support the work of PLCs in schools, they do bring to light the importance of some type of district support in the process of implementing PLCs.

Collaboration

Collaboration was another important finding in this study, as every case gave evidence of regular collaboration among members of the PLCs. The following definition describes the type of collaboration characteristic of the cases. "Working with their peers, teachers in professional learning communities (PLCs) collect and analyze classroom data, share best practices, and make instructional decisions as a team. Together, they engage in deeper learning as teaching professionals to better meet the needs of their students"

(Rasberry, 2008). The following evidence demonstrates this kind of collaboration in the PLCs:

> *Dallas (2006)*: "By the spring semester the group planned and shared ideas freely. [One of the teachers in the PLC] was excited that she now had two filing cabinets full of strategies and activities for instruction." (p. 86) Indeed, several teachers in this study expressed appreciation for the productive results of collaboration in the PLC: "I feel…blessed to hear a lot of good ideas… and all the wonderful things you've brought in, suggestions, and ideas, and stuff" (p. 82). Furthermore, the researchers found that "the collaboration became rich, and the talk surrounding pedagogy more in depth" as the year went on (p. 85).
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> *Hipp (2008)*: The PLC in this case was referred to several times as a "Team," and the comment was made about teacher leaders: "Teachers have good ideas and aren't hesitant to speak up. They provide suggestions, make decisions, ask other's opinions and adjust accordingly." (p. 187) Collaboration also occurred across disciplines, as "Physical education and art teachers were helping with reading; principal and assistant principals were going to classrooms to help with teaching math" (p. 187).
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> *Huggins (2011)*: "Collaborating on solutions to their classroom struggles helped teachers get to know other teachers' strengths. And knowing other teachers' strengths facilitated teachers knowing who might be helpful in solving particular classroom struggles." (p. 82)
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> *McKenzie (2011)*: A teacher quoted in this case stated, "'As far as the biology team is concerned the [PLC meeting] that we're having every other day is really very effective because that's the time or that's the chance for all of the teachers, biology teachers, to put in all the strategies…we've been using in the past and then for the new teachers [to put in strategies] that they just learned from college. So, we're putting in all those strategies, ideas, and then we make sure that we are really following [them]'" (p. 112); The researchers found that collaboration improved the teachers' instructional practices and their sense of "esprit de corps."
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> *Wallace (2010)*: The principal in this case emphasized the importance of planning and collaborating during PLC meetings in order to be prepared to teach and unified as a department: "It's just like, coaching. We spend a lot of time planning... How we're going to block things, how we're going to run things, how we're going to do it, and then took that and put it into practice on the field" (p. 208), saying that PLCs gave teachers the time and space to "collaborate and dialogue." He elaborated on the kinds of things the teachers did during PLC meetings: "We do PowerPoints together. We've increased technology. We do everything together. It's exactly what it says: professional learning community" (p. 221)

In many of these cases, collaboration in the PLC centered primarily on preparing for instruction, either by sharing instructional strategies or working collectively on resources and materials. The cases also touched on collaborating to solve problems that teachers experience in the classroom and collaborating across disciplines. Three categories exemplify the theme of collaboration: the roles and strengths of teachers, administrators' role in collaboration, and deprivatization.

Roles and Strengths of Teachers

The first category within the theme of collaboration is the roles and strengths of teachers in the PLC. As part of the collaborative process, teachers in each PLC developed unique roles and learned each other's strengths. In some cases, these roles developed relative to age and experience, whereas in other cases, the roles developed out of teachers' instructional strengths. In whatever manner, teachers identified in themselves and in each other various strengths that they brought to the table and capitalized on that diversity of capacity. This phenomenon is exemplified by the following:

> *Dallas (2006)*: "Matthew established himself as the literature expert and provided 'fresh text' ideas for teaching the various skills. Joy provided classroom activities that motivate and connect to students, and Ken managed the meetings." (p. 86)
>
> *Hipp (2008)*: "In myriad roles leaders provided exceptional facilitation and organizational skills that sustained the energy of the school communities." (p. 193)
>
> *Wallace (2010)*: The principal said, "'you've got young—the older teachers have gotten better because of the young ones.' He smiled and laughed as he stated, 'The young ones have helped, too.'" (221) The principal also alluded to the roles that various members of the PLC play at each meeting, saying, "We all sit down. And then I make one a team leader. Everybody signs in every day. "Everybody, what are we going to talk about today?" (p. 221)
>
> *McKenzie (2011)*: "all of the teachers, biology teachers, [put] in all the strategies…we've been using in the past and then for the new teachers [to put in

> strategies] that they just learned from college. So, we're putting in all those strategies, ideas, and then we make sure that we are really following [them]'" (p. 112)
>
> *Huggins (2011)*: "Additionally, collaborating on solutions to their classroom struggles helped teachers get to know other teachers' strengths. And knowing other teachers' strengths facilitated teachers knowing who might be helpful in solving particular classroom struggles." (p. 82)

In each case, the teachers in the PLC divided the work of collaborating by assuming different roles. They played off of each other's strengths and developed specialized roles based on their strengths. This helped the PLCs generate deeper collaborative discussions and it helped them accomplish their planning more efficiently.

Administrators' Role in Collaboration

Not only did teachers collaborate with each other in the PLCs; they also collaborated with school administrators. Hord (2010, p 55) describes this collaboration between administrators and PLCs in the following manner: "In the PLC, principals (with the teachers) are learning, questioning, investigating, and seeking solutions that will lead to improved student results." This is the kind of active role in collaboration that many principals and other administrators exemplified in the cases, as evidenced below:

> *Huggins (2011)*: This case showed a high degree of administrative involvement and collaboration in the PLC. The principal and two other administrative staff decided to attend PLC meetings "on an almost daily basis…to facilitate the community by asking critical questions and assisting teachers in improving their practice." (p. 74) This proved to be effective: "Collaboration among the school leaders and the teachers ensued about what the teacher could do for the students who had not mastered the material" (p. 78); and the "teachers were "able to obtain ideas from not only their colleagues, but also school leaders during the math PLC meetings" (p. 80).
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> *Hipp (2008)*: This school set goals for holistic student success and achievement on state tests. Then, "the principal and the team leaders explored how they could help the teachers reach that goal." In fact, administrators took an active role helping with classroom instruction (p. 187).

> *McKenzie (2011)*: Although the case did not directly mention collaboration between teachers and principals, assistant principals and instructional coaches (also part of the administrative staff) were assigned as liaisons to the PLCs, and the coaches played a large role in helping out the teachers—observing them, giving them feedback on their teaching, model teaching, helping with planning, etc. All of these are evidence of collaboration.
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> *Wallace (2010)*: *"*Mr. Ramirez stressed how important it was for him as the campus principal to be visible and to be in attendance in the PLC meetings as part of the collaborative process. He noted, 'It's a sacred day that they know they have me, to them. It's important. You don't realized how important it is.'" (p. 217) Part of collaboration for Mr. Ramirez was making himself available to his teachers and asking them openly how he could help them improve.
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> *Dallas (2006)*: Alternately, this case showed very little collaboration between teachers and administration. The following demonstrates how administrators' involvement in PLC meetings centered on giving directions to teachers or setting expectations rather than collaborating with the teachers as equals. "an administrator dropped in to the meeting and emphasized implementing read alouds, silent reading, and conferencing on the next Monday." (p. 79) When these kinds of directions were given to the PLC, the teachers often complied just to "satisfy the requirements of the principal even though some of the members were not convinced that what they were doing was best for the students" (p. 80). This demonstrates a total lack of collaboration between teachers and administrators, and it led to feelings of frustration among the teachers.

In these cases, Administrators were a key part of the collaborative process. They assisted with planning and problem solving and they invited teachers to share what they (the administrators) could do to help increase student learning. Only one case—Dallas (2006)—had an administration that had a more directive than collaborative style, and this had negative effects on the morale of the teachers. In the other cases, teachers expressed appreciation for the role that administrators played in the collaborative process.

Deprivatization

The third category within collaboration is deprivatization of teacher practices. In this study, deprivatization is defined to combine the concepts of reflective dialogue and deprivatization, as defined by Kruse and Louis (1993). Reflective dialogue is defined as members of the community “talking about their situations and the specific challenges they face,” and deprivatization is defined as the conversations in which teachers share, observe, and discuss each other’s teaching methods and philosophies; for example, through peer coaching (p. 10). Some case studies gave specific evidence of deprivatization while others described a culture of reflectiveness and dialogue among teachers in the school. In each of the cases, teachers communicated with each other about what worked in their classrooms and what was not working, making them aware of areas in which they needed to improve. This was sometimes aided by data of student achievement on standardized tests. The following quotes demonstrate deprivatization across the cases:

> *Huggins (2011)*: This case gave specific details about the role of deprivatization in PLC meetings: “The teachers typically spent over 75% of the math PLC meeting times deprivatizing their practice through reflective dialogue focused on student learning… In other words, each teacher individually discussed what had happened in their classrooms for the day (because the math PLC was eighth period, the last period of the day) and what percentage of the students mastered the material.” (p. 78). This was accomplished by asking each teacher the same three questions every day: “Who’s learning? Who’s not? What are we doing about it?” In this school, deprivatization was used by the administration to hold teachers accountable and to lead to increased collaboration.
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> *Wallace (2010)*: In this case, the principal stated that PLCs give teachers the “opportunity to collaborate and dialogue and to be able to share the data—the kids, where they stand” (208). He talked about how data is shared in his PLCs: “We're going to share data here in Round Table, and English I teacher, you're going to give us your scores. English I, English I, English I—everyone's going to go around the table and give us your results from your benchmarks” (p. 217). Furthermore, the PLC reflects on lessons by planning modeled lessons, teaching them, and then discussing them: “we all share with each other, how did it go, and what is it that we can tweak to make it better?” (p. 216)
>
> *McKenzie (2011)*: “We have in-depth sessions [about] what worked and what hasn’t worked for us and so forth. We’re doing everything we can to try to be the best teachers” (p. 113)

> *Hipp (2008)*: while there is no mention of specific instances of deprivatization, it does appear that when something is not working in the classroom, teachers reach out to their peers in order to find a solution: “Teachers…ask other’s opinions and adjust accordingly” (187) and “if one person couldn’t get through to a child, other teachers or administrators were sought for assistance.” (p. 189).
>
> *Dallas (2006)*: Although teachers shared about their problems with classroom management in the PLC, there was no evidence in the case study of teachers deprivatizing their instructional practices on a regular basis.

The overall purpose of deprivatization is to make teachers aware of the areas in which they must grow and improve their practices, and it is an important part of effective PLCs. It is important to note that in these examples, deprivatization manifested itself in a variety of ways. For Huggins (2011), it was a structured process, with teachers answering the same three questions every day in the PLC meeting. Conversely in Hipp (2008), it was an informal process of simply reaching out when there was a problem and seeking solutions from co-workers. Although the methods of deprivatization varied from case to case, each PLC showed evidence of teachers sharing the aspects of their teaching that needed improvement.

Relationships

Across the five cases, relationships were the third theme. Relationships characterize the work of effective PLCs. According to Kruse and Louis (1993) teacher relationships in PLCs are described as: “Extended Relationships of Caring: In an effective community, the relationships between individuals are conditioned by a sense of interpersonal responsibility that extends beyond a specific, organizational role.” Notable in the definition is the word “caring” as well as the idea that the relationships extend beyond a professional role. All of the cases except for Huggins (2011) demonstrated that the teachers in the PLCs felt a degree of personal connection with each other that went beyond their roles as educators. This personal connection is clear in the following evidence:

> *Dallas (2006)*: "Joy, in her second year at Main Street, indicated in an interview that without the relationships built during planning time, she would feel completely isolated both personally and professionally, especially since she is not on the same floor as the other three members. Akkia and Matthew both expressed gratitude toward their colleagues in the community for the new friendships and support provided to them as new teachers. Ken responded that the professional learning community has been a lifesaver for him, an opportunity to vent in a safe environment with people he trusts. Barbara and Abbey, the EC teacher and literacy teacher, both felt very connected to the group and enjoyed the camaraderie as the year progressed" (p. 81). This excerpt well describes the effect of relationships in this case, and it was only one of many. The teachers attributed the success of their PLC to the meaningful relationships they formed with each other.
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> *Hipp (2008)*: This case described a school culture that was characterized by caring relationships. "In 2003, descriptors for the culture of the school were presented as: 'family', 'dedicated or committed', dedicated—everyone involved with student learning,' 'don't give up on kids—keep on striving for the best results,' 'sincerity,' 'generous atmosphere, everyone wants to help out,' 'hard working.'" (p. 188). The case found that "those who work in these schools are more than pleased to be there, have respect for their peers, and trust in their formal leaders." (p. 192)
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> *McKenzie (2011)*: A teacher stated, "We work hard, but not only that, but as science teachers of the department, we have a camaraderie…we work well together" (p. 113). The researchers concluded, "During these visits, it was clear that the teachers had a history of working well together" (p. 113).
>
> *Wallace (2010)*: Here, the principal describes the importance of relationships in PLCs: "Team building is taking place without people even knowing it's taking place. You learn to value each other. You learn to respect each other. You learn to appreciate each other. And when you have people, colleagues, adults that care about each other, that is one of the powerful things. And if you and I are going to spend an hour a day, every day during the week, we're going to end up bonding. We're going to end up having each other's back." (p. 215)
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> *Huggins (2011)*: This case showed the least evidence of relationships between teachers. Relationships in this case seemed more strictly professional than extending to the levels of "family" and "trust" described in the previously cited cases. Due to strong accountability structures in the PLC, "the math teachers

> [asked] their colleagues for help, and, at the same time, resulted in their colleagues feeling responsible for assisting them in finding solutions to their struggles." (p. 82). Beyond this, little evidence of personal relationships between the teachers was found.

A key characteristic of the relationships in all the studies was the element of trust. Trust is identified in PLC literature as an important element of successful PLCs. Furthermore the relationships demonstrated in the cases go beyond simply working together in a professional context. The teachers in the studies seemed to truly care about each other at a more personal level. This was facilitated by their work within their PLCs. It is also notable that none of the cases mentioned specific structures in the PLCs that were designed purely to build relationships (team-building, for example). Although these may have been used, they were not the focus of the PLCs or of the cases studied, and it appears that personal, trusting relationships tend to develop naturally rather than synthetically. While no PLC focused primarily on relationships, all of the PLCs focused on something, as evidenced in the next theme.

Focus

In addition to administrative leadership, collaboration and relationships, focus in the PLC was a fourth theme across the five cases. Focus can be described as the biggest priority or goal of a PLC. The examples of focus of the PLCs in the five cases include aspects of both the values and/or the goals of a PLC as defined by DuFour and Eaker (1998). These authors define values of a PLC as "how [people in a school] intend to make their shared vision a reality" (p. 88), and they define goals as "measurable milestones that can be used to assess progress in advancing toward a vision" (p. 100). While values are more theoretical and deal with broad actions that people in the school might take, goals are very concrete and measurable. The various foci of the PLCs described in the cases in this study showed characteristics of both values and goals. The theme of focus is exemplified by the following categories: Focus on student learning or instructional improvement, administration drives focus, and clarity of focus.

Student Learning and Instructional Improvement

While focus on student learning is a common theme in PLC literature, the cases in this study exhibited a variety of foci, with all of them at least loosely tied to student learning. Certainly in some cases, the PLCs evidenced a strong commitment to student learning and success. But others focused more strongly on instructional improvement. In several of the cases in this study, the PLCs had goals that were related to student success on standardized assessments or other school evaluation measurements. In one, the focus was on implementing a very specific instructional strategy. Regardless of whether the focus was more values driven or goals driven, and regardless of the exact phrasing of focus, every PLC had a focus on something. This was exemplified by the following quotes:

> *McKenzie (2011)*: "The focus of the leadership for these high schools, then, was on continuous improvement of instruction for all students, minimization of distractions from this purpose, and persistent avoidance of ineffective practices" (p. 110).
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> *Huggins (2011)*: Dr. Holloway, the school principal "presented a clear focus for the math professional learning community during their meeting times. That focus was increased achievement on the state-mandated assessment in math" (p. 79).
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> *Hipp (2008)*: "Both schools voiced and practiced a strong focus on their commitment to students" (p. 191) and "A common focus exist[ed] on student academics—student success—life-long learning" (p. 185).
>
> *Wallace (2010)*: the principal stated "And the bottom line is we're all here for the same reason: for student achievement, student success and empower our kids." (p.

> 209) He said in reference to standardized tests and school ratings, “We have a vision. We're going to be exemplary.“ (p. 225).
>
> *Dallas (2006)*: In this case, the focus was primarily on implementing a specific literature instruction model: “They had two instructional goals to accomplish: … create a yearlong scope and sequence for the language arts curriculum [and] figure out how to teach using flexible groups and IMS passages” (p. 76).

Each PLC had a slightly different focus. Some concentrated more on instructional improvement, while others concentrated on student achievement. Some much more strongly emphasized test scores than others. Dallas (2006) seems to be the farthest from the trend, with its highly specific focus on implementing a specific literature instruction model, although this focus could be coupled with the focus in McKenzie (2011) of improving instructional practices. The focus in each PLC gave the work of its participants direction and purpose.

Administration Led

In the cases, focus was driven by administration. Sometimes focus was communicated more clearly than others, or the administration failed to set a focus early enough in the development of the PLC. Administration again refers to the principal and other administrative staff including vice principals or assistant principals. In each case, the administration set the overarching focus on student learning and instructional improvement. This was exemplified by the following:

> *McKenzie (2011)*: the author states, “The *leadership* at work in the three high schools…was characteristic of the kind of focused, coherent leadership for improvement described by Elmore (2004) in School Reform from the Inside Out” (p. 110) (emphasis added). For example, one “principal, although supporting a focus on instruction, did not do much of the instructional work…However, this principal had chosen strong instructionally focused staff to lead the school’s instructional improvement and was wise enough to follow their lead in this area” (p. 111).

> *Huggins (2011)*: Dr. Holloway, the principal, “saw focusing on the instructional practices of teachers for student success as her main role in the math professional learning community” (77); ‘The first goal I wanted to see that it improved student performance that we wanted to see in each one of those areas that we were working’” (p. 77). The case makes it very clear that Dr. Holloway very strategically set the focus of the PLC in place.
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> *Hipp (2008)*: One teacher quoted in this case stated ‘’’[The principal] makes it clear that we are here for the kids’” and writers elaborate saying, “the focus on students as a priority appears to have begun when ‘Mrs. X’ became principal, perhaps before, but certainly when she assumed the position. Throughout that time, the mantra regarding the priority/focus of the school has remained the same.” (p. 187)
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> *Wallace (2010)*: “Findings from this study indicate success in student achievement is evidenced through each of the *principals' focus* on learning rather than teaching” (p. 281, emphasis added). Furthermore, it was evident that Mr. Ramirez, the principal, was the driving force behind the very intentional, structured implementation of the PLC program at his school.
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> *Dallas (2006)*: In this case, the teachers initially thought they understood the administration’s intended focus for the PLC. However, miscommunication between the teachers and administration led to the teachers to realize halfway through the year that the administration wanted them to do things differently. Reluctantly, they changed the direction of the PLC and redid some of the work they had accomplished in order to comply with the focus set by the administration.

Focus in these cases was spearheaded by the school’s administration, not the teachers. Not only did administration establish the focus in each school, but also in most cases, the administration also clearly communicated the focus to teachers so that the staff as a whole experienced strong clarity of focus.

Clarity

In all but one case, the focus was well understood by all the members of the PLC. Focus needs to be communicated clearly to PLC members (although it may exist in the minds of the administration, sometimes it can get lost in translation), and it needs to be commonly understood by all PLC members. This was evident in the cases, and it is exemplified in the following quotes:

> *McKenzie (2011)*: “It was clear to the research team that these schools were characterized by a high degree of instructional coherence. Improvement of instruction was the widely understood focus at each campus, and informants at each site emphasized this in their individual and group interviews.” (p. 111)
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> *Huggins (2011)*: “every single person in the math professional learning community communicated success on the state-mandated assessment as the number one goal for the math professional learning community, as well as for the school. Clearly, Dr. Holloway made that focus unwaveringly clear.” (p. 79)
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> *Hipp (2008)*: “While student achievement was almost always offered as the priority for the school, other thoughts went beyond any test or only the cognitive dimensions of the GPMS students—‘‘life-long learning, successful students,’’ ‘‘creating successful students,’’ ‘‘academics and life,’’ ‘‘teachers touch lives, one day, one lesson at a time,’’ and ‘‘we’re interested in our students’ learning—students are everything.’’ To hear such descriptors session after session for two days—*no matter with whom you spoke*—was a powerful experience.” (p. 188, emphasis added)
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> *Dallas (2006)*: The PLC in this case began with a real lack of clarity on the focus of the PLC. However, as the year progressed and they gained clarity of focus, their ability to function as an effective PLC increased significantly: “As they got better at communicating and the expectations were clearer, they became more efficient at lesson planning.” (p. 84). Although there was an intended focus for the PLC, this had not been communicated to the PLC members, and unproductivity had resulted. Conversely, in other case studies, it is overwhelmingly evident that focus was very clearly communicated to the members of the PLC.
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> *Wallace (2010)*: this case study did not address how well the focus of the PLCs was understood by the teachers.

In three of the five cases, the focus for each PLC was clear and strong. All members of those PLCs demonstrated a high degree of unity and coherence in regards to the focus. This indicates a clear communication of the focus to all PLC participants as well as a common understanding of what that focus meant for the work of the PLC and for teacher practices. In Dallas (2006), the focus was unclearly communicated at the outset, but once clarity of focus was reached, the productivity of the PLC increased significantly. This case especially exemplifies the impact that clarity of focus can have on the work of PLCs.

Teacher Beliefs

The fifth theme in this study was teacher beliefs. There were two major beliefs found among teachers in the cases—responsibility for student learning and collective commitment to improvement—and each is described in the subsequent sections. The theme of teacher beliefs was exemplified by the following categories: Responsibility for student learning, collective commitment to continuous improvement, and the impact of PLCs on those two specific teacher beliefs.

Responsibility for Student Learning

Hord (2012) describes teachers taking responsibility for student learning with the following image: a teacher turns her finger "from pointing off into the distance to pointing to herself," saying that being in a PLC is about "turning the finger around." She continues: "That teacher was acknowledging that it was her performance in the classroom that makes the difference. She is holding herself more accountable" (p. 69). This picture describes the idea that the teacher is responsible for ensuring that all students learn. In four of the five cases, the teachers in the PLC held this belief, that teachers should assume the responsibility for student learning. This is demonstrated by the following evidence:

> *Huggins (2011)*: "From her experiences, [the principal] Dr. Holloway knew that many teachers tend to put the onus of learning on students…In fact, Dr. Holloway used the individual public accountability to help transform some teachers thinking about where responsibility lies for the academic success of students. She believed the three questions intentionally asked to teach teacher individually had an effect on shifting that responsibility." (p. 81)

> *Hipp (2008)*: "Commitment to children and helping them be successful is perceived as a true responsibility." (p. 186)

> *McKenzie (2011)*: In this case, teachers and school leaders “had a very positive view of their responsibility for and control over student learning” (p. 116). Furthermore, the researchers found “a professional ‘get it done’ attitude” (p. 117) among the staff, concluding, “During these visits, it was clear that the teachers had a history of…evidencing a strong commitment to the success of their students.” (p. 113)
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> *Wallace (2010)*: The principal at this school said, “our teachers do not make excuses because of where [students] come from; we don't. When I first got here, we used to point to the kids for lack of a success with our assessment. We don't do that anymore. We look at what is it that we're not doing? What is it that I am doing on a daily basis? Not with them, it's what we're doing. So we, our mentality has changed.” (p. 228)
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> *Dallas (2006)*: This was the only case that did not directly address teachers’ beliefs about who is responsible for student learning.

The teachers demonstrated a real belief that the responsibility for student learning lies with the teacher. In some cases, this mindset developed over time, whereas other cases described this as an attitude that colored the culture of the entire faculty. Some, but not all, of the cases described heavy principal involvement in helping to shape this mindset.

Collective Commitment to Continuous Improvement

Besides a belief that student learning is the teachers’ responsibility the teachers, the cases also demonstrated a collective commitment to continuous instructional improvement. Rasberry (2008) describes this as “the understanding that setting high standards for all students is the responsibility of each individual as well as the team collectively. Membership requires not only commitment to time and energy, as stated above, but also to an examination of current practices and why those practices have been put in place, as well as whether they serve the current needs of the organization” (p. 2). In each case, teachers examined their own practices based on student results and identified areas for improvement. This collective commitment to teaching all students at high levels manifested itself among the cases in the following evidence:

> *Hipp (2008)*: “There was no question that if one thing didn’t work another would be tried. If one person couldn’t get through to a child, other teachers or administrators were sought for assistance.” (p. 189) This sort of never-give-up, always-strive-to-be-better attitude is also evident in the words used to describe the culture of the school: “‘family’, ‘dedicated or committed’, dedicated—everyone involved with student learning,’ ‘don’t give up on kids—keep on striving for the best results,’ ‘sincerity,’ ‘generous atmosphere, everyone wants to help out,’ ‘hard working.’” (p. 188)
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> *McKenzie (2011)*: A teacher in this case stated, “We’re doing everything we can to try to be the best teachers . . . . We work hard,” (p. 113), and another teacher said, “so, the thing is I enjoy teaching. I go to bed at night dreaming about what else I can do.” (p. 114)
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> *Wallace (2010)*: In this case, Mr. Ramirez placed a large emphasis on empowering teachers to develop their instructional practices by providing professional development opportunities. He said, “anybody that's going to come work here has to commit to staff development.” (p. 209)
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> *Dallas (2006)*: The teachers in this PLC discussed areas of implementing the reform model in which they struggled. “These issues were addressed in the planning meeting in November, and the teachers discussed ways to be more effective during the [parts of the model with which they struggled the most].” (p. 79)
>
> *Huggins (2011)*: In the following quote, the principal articulates how the teachers in the PLC are constantly challenged to improve their instructional practices: “What we have always felt was, ‘The way that the math will get better is the kids actually have to master the math. If they don’t master the math, they’re not going to do better. Period.’ So, you can’t do something forward thinking if you don’t understand what you did, and it didn’t work. ‘‘What are we going to do to make this work? If this kid did not get it, if this group of kids did not get it, how are you going to change tomorrow to be able to get them to get it?’’” (p. 78)

Manifested in various ways, the teachers across the cases demonstrated a commitment to continuous improvement. In many cases, this involved examining areas of weakness and developing solutions or strategies for improving. In other cases, it centered on engaging in professional development or seeking help from other professionals. The degree of commitment seemed to vary from case to case as well. Teachers in the Huggins (2011) and Hipp (2008) cases especially seemed to have a strong group mentality when it comes to improving instructional practices.

Impact of PLC on Teacher Beliefs

A third category within the theme of teacher beliefs was impact of the PLC on teacher beliefs. Two major teacher beliefs outlined are responsibility for student learning and collective commitment to continuous improvement. PLCs played a significant role in developing those two beliefs in teachers. That is, over time, the accountability practices of PLCs led teachers to take greater responsibility for student learning and to focus more heavily on improvement of practice.

> *Huggins (2011)*: This case gives the most explicit connection between PLC practices and teacher beliefs: “Dr. Holloway used the individual public accountability to help transform some teachers thinking about where responsibility lies for the academic success of students. She believed the three questions intentionally asked to teach teacher individually had an effect on shifting that responsibility…In fact, Dr. Holloway intentionally used the questions to shift teacher’s beliefs about their responsibility for student learning…through publicly asking in the math professional learning community the three questions to each math teacher on a daily basis, the responsibility for student learning was centered as the most significant indicator of teacher effectiveness.” (p. 81)
>
> *Wallace (2010)*: In this case, the principal notes the change that the PLCs had on teacher beliefs about responsibility for student learning. “Our teachers do not make excuses because of where [students] come from; we don't. When I first got here, we used to point to the kids for lack of a success with our assessment. We don't do that anymore. We look at what is it that we're not doing? What is it that I am doing on a daily basis? Not with them, it's what we're doing. So we, our mentality has changed.” (p. 228) Thus, the regular PLC practices of teachers observing their own practices served to transform teachers’ beliefs about teaching and student learning.
>
> *Hipp (2008)*: In this school, which functions as a mature PLC, there is an emphasis on how teacher beliefs developed over time: “The focus on students as a priority appears to have begun when ‘‘Mrs. X.’’ became principal, perhaps before, but certainly when she assumed the position. Throughout that time, the

> mantra regarding the priority/focus of the school has remained the same. The depth and breadth of its adoption have increased over these years so that it is not an administrative platitude, *but rather a genuine believed and behaved value* embedded in the school culture" (p. 188, emphasis added). "Their comments verified that student achievement was the priority and that expectations for both the teachers and the students changed over time. One teacher noted that in years past it wouldn't have been a big deal regarding what percentage of the kids did well on the state test. However, she noted that now, ''We want to do well on the TAAS test every year. That's kind of like the main goal that everybody is aiming at right now.''" (p. 187)
>
> *McKenzie (2011)*: The researchers of this case concluded, "the most important and most unique result of this study of three large, traditional urban high schools that were unusually successful in math and science was the intersection of the PLCs with the equity orientation. The PLCs created a space and time to build a community of teachers who were collectively committed to student success" The strong set of teacher beliefs that they found included positive beliefs about their students, their students' ability to learn, and their responsibility for ensuring that all students learn.
>
> *Dallas (2006)*: This case showed less evidence of teacher beliefs, and therefore less evidence of the effects of the PLC on teacher beliefs.

PLCs can help transform teacher beliefs. In some cases, the accountability structures embedded in the PLCs helped increase teachers' sense of responsibility for student learning and commitment to continuous improvement. The Hipp (2008), Huggins (2011), and Wallace (2010) cases also indicate changing teacher beliefs is a process that occurs over time, but which can be influenced by the practices of PLCs.

Support

Support was the sixth and final theme found across the case studies. It included three categories: various sources, administrative support, and balance with accountability. In every case, teachers sought support, especially from school administration. Generally, support was necessary in order for teachers to meet the requirements and expectations of the job. In this study, support is any kind of assistance provided to a teacher or group of teachers by an outside party that meets a need and helps that/those teacher(s) improve their instruction. The theme of support was exemplified by the following categories: various sources of support, administrative support, and support balances accountability.

Various Sources of Support

The following paragraph exemplifies the wide variety in types of support provided across the various case studies. Support can come from a variety of sources. Different sources provide different types of support. The type of support that teachers sought and found varied as much as the schools themselves, and the source of the support also varied from case to case. The various supports referenced in the five cases included: encouraging friendships between teachers, encouragement from administration, PLC liaisons, clerks, suggestions from teachers and administration, district-provided resources, instructional specialists, specific professional development, tangible supplies such as markers or calculators, and curriculum. The following evidence from the cases show the variety of types of support upon which teachers relied to do their jobs effectively.

> *Dallas (2006)*: A teacher in this case referenced peer support saying, "if I need anything I can go to someone, it's not like I am just out here by myself." (p. 82). Also, support was provided to teachers for implementing the reform model "by asking the literacy facilitator to model a lesson for the teachers." (p. 78)
>
> *McKenzie (2011)*: One principal emphasized that "teachers were to be provided the resources they needed to do their jobs and teacher time was to be protected…'So I will pay for the clerks to stay after work and do whatever it is that the teacher wants" (p. 111). Other interviewed teachers emphasized the support they received from instructional coaches: "They [coaches] bring in ideas, and if we need something, they go get it…I've got rooms when I was missing a balance, and [a coach] brought me one—some balance from some place downtown…They go out of their ways to do extra things for us to make sure that we have everything that we need for teaching." (p. 114)
>
> *Huggins (2011)*: In this case, the teachers "appreciated that fact the school leadership offered solutions to the instructional difficulties they were having. Mr.

> Mercer talked about how this was often helpful for him…however, the appreciation [was also based on] the tangible resources they provided." (p. 80)
>
> *Hipp (2008)*: The researchers in this case found strong district support to the work of PLCs via instructional specialists
>
> *Wallace (2010)*: This school reports high levels of relational support both from peers and from administration: "teachers were supportive and respectful of one another" (p. 215), and the principal stated, "if I see you do something that really impressed me, then I share it with them in the faculty meetings. I'll acknowledge you and tell you what a great job you did." (p. 213)

This category, various sources of support, is not an exhaustive list of every type of support experienced by each PLC. However, it demonstrates the wide variety of types of support experienced by members of the PLCs. Support ranged from physical resources to emotional support to suggestions for improving practice. Support also came from a variety of sources including fellow teachers, principals or other administrators, outside specialists, and district-level leadership. The fact that the types and sources of support varied so much in the cases indicates that no single support or combination of supports can be prescribed to schools. Rather, the type of support must be determined based on the needs of the teachers in a school, and schools must consider which combination of supports will best help meet the needs of the teachers in a PLC.

Administrative Support

Although support was varied across all the cases, the teachers desired administrative support above all. In three of the five cases analyzed, administrators offered direct support, and in Huggins (2011) and Hipp (2008), teachers were quoted indicating that administrative support was something they desired and appreciated. The following evidence demonstrates the importance of administrative support:

> *Huggins (2011)*: A teacher in this case explains how administrators can practically support teachers: “I want to see, ‘Is [leadership] going to support me?’ And, they do. And, I ask them for anything. I get it. We wanted the new T.I.Nspire calculators. We got them like that. We said we needed calculators for each kid to take home. It happened. I mean, whatever I need, it happens here.” (p. 80)
>
> *Hipp (2008)*: The previous sentiment is echoed by a teacher in Hipp in reference to district support: “Central office is very supportive. This is what sets us apart from other districts. Our administration gets us what we need.” (p. 190)
>
> *Dallas (2006)*: Alternately in this case, “the most common problems addressed were issues of the need for more support. Teachers articulated the need for administrative support ” (p. 87). Also, “the teachers articulated a need for more affirmation from the administration for themselves and their students.” (p. 89)
>
> *Wallace (2010)*: the principal, who attended PLC meetings weekly, shared his role as a support-provider to the PLC saying, “I always finish a PLC with: "What is that I can do to help you be the best possible teacher you can be? What is that I can do to help you be the best possible teacher you can be?” He understood that “It's a sacred day that they know that have [the principal in attendance at PLC meetings], to them. It's important. You don't realize how important it is.” (p. 217)
>
> *McKenzie (2011)*: This was the only case that did not directly mention administrative support.

To teachers in the PLCs, having support from the administration was important and appreciated. So, within the theme of support, administrative support was a major category. Additionally, there were two subcategories that emerged related to administrative support. First, administrative support stemmed from a respect for teachers’ needs and opinions. Second, administrative support involved shared decision-making.

Leadership attitude towards teachers: Regard and respect. Supportive administrations respect teachers and take their needs seriously. In four of the cases studied, the principals provided evidence of attitudes towards teachers, which showed regard for their needs, and respect for their ideas. This was exemplified by the following evidence:

> *McKenzie (2011)*: "one of the principals emphasized that in this particular high school…teacher time was to be protected…for this principal, then, teachers' time and energy were valuable resources to be channeled exclusively into instructing students" (p. 111), indicating both a respect for teachers' capacity and a response to their need for time to focus on instruction.
>
> *Huggins (2011)*: "The school leadership took the teachers' suggestions seriously and purchased the necessary materials to bring the ideas that developed in the math professional learning community to fruition" (p. 80), and "Dr. Holloway provided numerous other resources that surfaced as needs during the math PLC meeting time" (p. 81), thus demonstrating consistent respect for the voiced needs of the teachers.
>
> *Hipp (2008)*: The librarian commented that "Teachers have good ideas and aren't hesitant to speak up. They provide suggestions" (p. 187), suggesting a school culture in which the administration respects teachers' ideas and needs.
>
> *Wallace (2010)*: the principal states "I know teachers. We all know how they're competent people." (p. 223), recognizing teacher capacity and showing respect for their abilities as professionals. He also described "the importance of empowering people in order to build leadership capacity." (p. 281)
>
> *Dallas (2006)*: Finally, this case provides evidence of what can result when administrations do not take teachers' needs seriously: "everyone except Matthew tried at one time or another to send students to the office, only to have them returned to class shortly thereafter. Each time the administrator said to handle the situation in the class by moving the child or calling the parent" (p. 81). This perceived lack of support led to frustration and tension among the teachers in the PLC as evidenced by one teaching sighing in a meeting and saying, "It's just one big management problem, and we don't have support from downstairs" (p. 79). The teachers in this study felt that administration refusal to help meet a perceived need indicated a lack of support for their work.

When principals show regard for teachers' needs and use them to dictate the kind of support they provide, they help PLCs to be more effective. By showing respect to teachers, they encourage teachers to communicate their needs.

Decision Making. The second subcategory under administrative support is shared decision making. When administrators respect teachers and respond to their voiced concerns and needs, they also give teachers a voice in decision-making. Decision making was evident in the cases in a variety of ways, exemplified by the following:

> *McKenzie (2011)*: Teachers had a say in the types of professional development they attended: "an array of professional development opportunities, some offered by the campus, some by the district, and some provided by outside sources, and these were based on the determined needs of the district or the individual campus or the individual teacher." (p. 117)
>
> *Huggins (2011)*: Dr. Holloway, the principal, gave teachers decision-making power by providing the support they needed based on their recommendations: "once the issue surfaced in the math professional learning community meeting, and the teachers explained how each student needed the school to provide a calculator for them to take home to do homework, Dr. Holloway responded by pooling budget money from different areas to support the teachers' determination of what was needed to increase student achievement." (p. 81)
>
> *Wallace (2010)*: The principal, Mr. Ramirez, allows teachers some decision making power over the content of their PLC meetings based on their needs: "These are the choices that they make. They chose this book. I could choose everything for them, but I want them to know that they have the power to choose what we're going to do next. But it has to coordinate with what we want, what the campus says or what are some of the areas that we want to improve and get better in" (p. 221). Furthermore, he discusses how teachers are given the freedom to run PLC meetings based on their needs: "they are governed within the components that they need. These are the things that we talk about during PLCs and then you have to give them the flexibility, too. It's not the situation where, you know what? Mondays you better be talking about data only" (p. 216).

Administrators in these cases showed regard for teachers' needs and gave them freedom and decision-making power in regards to how those needs would be met. This helped ensure that those needs were met in productive ways. In conclusion, administrative support is an important aspect of effective PLCs. Two characteristics of administrative support arose: Regard and respect and shared decision-making. In the cases where administrative support was strong, there was evidence of respect towards teachers and their needs. Also, teachers were involved in deciding the type of support they received. And, the levels of administrative support had an impact on teacher morale and attitudes. Support of various kinds plays an important role in a PLC, but administrative support in particular is significant. A third and final category within the theme of support is the way it can balance accountability.

Support Balances Accountability

The cases revealed that without support, accountability can have negative effects on teacher attitudes and morale. Support can balance and mitigate the negative effects of accountability measures. The following evidence from two of the five cases described this relationship between accountability and support:

> *Dallas (2006)*: There was a direct connection between the challenges teachers faced in implementing the balanced literacy model mandated by the administration and the kind of support they needed. Implementation of the balanced literacy groups created class discipline problems and management issues for various teachers, which led to low morale and confusion. The mandate set in place by the administration created needs among the teachers that required a balance of support: "the most common problems addressed were issues of the need for more support. Teachers articulated the need for administrative support on classroom discipline" (p. 87). In this case, support found in peer relationships rather than from administration—was a necessary balance to the mandates instituted by the administration.
>
> *Huggins (2011)*: "What often balanced teachers' perceptions of time spent in the math professional learning community within the confines of the structures and through Dr. Holloway's detailed and directive approach to instructional leadership was being able to obtain ideas from not only their colleagues but also school leaders during the math professional learning community meetings. Although teachers did not always agree with their instruction being so highly scrutinized, they appreciated the fact the school leadership offered solutions to the instructional difficulties they were having." (p. 80)

These two cases indicate that support helped teachers meet the requirements of accountability mandates. The cases describe very strong mandates and structures put in place by administrations that were necessarily balanced by support.

Support played a large role in helping the PLCs studied to be successful. Administrative support was cited in each case as being either a boon or a source of frustration, depending on whether or not it was present. Administrative support centered on teachers' needs and showed respect for teachers' opinions. It also was a way to incorporate shared decision making into the PLC processes. Further, administrative support had a significant effect on teacher attitudes and morale. Furthermore, support was found to balance accountability. Without it, accountability placed too heavy of a burden on teachers, but with it, teachers were able to rise to the expectations established by accountability measures.

Summary

The results of this study yielded six major characteristics of PLCs: Administrative Leadership, Collaboration, Relationships, Focus, Teacher Beliefs, and Support. Under each of these themes were categories. Administrative leadership was further described by both principal and district leadership. Findings showed that strong, involved leadership at both levels can serve to guide and maintain PLCs. Collaboration, the second theme, was characterized by deprivatization, teachers' roles and strengths, and administrative role in collaboration. These categories indicated that collaboration involves teachers sharing their results in the classroom with each other, especially when they encounter challenges. The roles of teachers and administrators indicate that a variety of participants can make collaboration successful. The third theme, relationships, did not have any additional categories. This theme was characterized by relationships between teachers that extended beyond professional relationships, with trust being a significant aspect. The fourth theme, focus, included categories related to both the nature of focus—focus on student learning and instructional improvement—as well as the initiation of focus, with administration playing a role in both driving focus and ensuring its clarity among teachers. The fifth theme of teacher beliefs highlighted two core beliefs that teachers in the cases held: teacher responsibility for student learning and collective commitment to continuous improvement. It was also found that PLCs can help develop these beliefs in teachers. The sixth and final theme was support. The categories under support—various sources, administrative support, and support balances accountability—indicate that support from both teachers and administrators is an essential in helping teachers and PLCs function effectively. These six categories help describe characteristics of effective PLCs in urban, Title I schools. With a combination of administrative leadership, collaboration, relationships, focus, teacher beliefs, and support, PLCs in such schools can hope to achieve success.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusions

This study developed out of a need to investigate the best possible ways of implementing PLCs, a promising school reform strategy, specifically in urban, Title I schools. It sprung from research on the long history of reform initiatives in education documenting the nation's attempt to address the treatment gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students in American society. Urban schools in particular are often most in need of reform due to the difficult conditions faced by urban administrators, teachers and students alike. Research indicates that PLCs can be a powerful method for increasing student achievement in all kinds of schools. Originating with Senge's (1990) *The Fifth Discipline*, and later transferred to schools, PLCs are defined in various ways; commonly cited definitions include Hord's (1997) five characteristics of PLCs and DuFour's (2004) big ideas. Just as PLC definitions vary among researchers, their implementation varies among schools. PLCs tend to be evaluated based on their effects on increasing student achievement. However, they may also be considered effective based on other results like decreasing teacher turnover or improving the culture of a school. This background research led to the research question: what are key characteristics of effective PLCs in urban schools and how should these groups be implemented in order to maximize their effectiveness? Analysis of five case studies written by Dallas (2006), Hipp (2008), Huggins (2011), McKenzie (2011), and Wallace (2010) revealed six major themes that described characteristics of effective urban PLCs. These were administrative leadership, collaboration, focus, relationships, teacher beliefs and support. A description of and evidence for each theme was given in the preceding chapter. The following section outlines three new groups: administration, accountability, and support. Within these three groups, the six themes outlined in the previous chapter are reorganized into a model that shows the connections between the six themes. This helps to explain the conclusions regarding how administration, accountability, and support must work in sync in order for PLCs to be successful in urban school populations.

Overlap of Administration, Accountability, and Support

Although the six themes that emerged as characteristics of effective PLCs were each important and distinct, they can be synthesized into three major groups: Administration, Accountability, and Support. Different categories within each of the six themes can be slotted into each of these three overarching groups to help explain how these three elements interact with each other. This section gives a brief description of the three overarching groups and of how the categories in this study slot into this framework. The overlap between these three groups will be further explored in the three subsequent conceptual findings: the specific role of administration in those two areas of accountability and support; the function of accountability and support balancing each other in PLCs; and, the role of PLCs in building stronger ties between teachers and administrators.

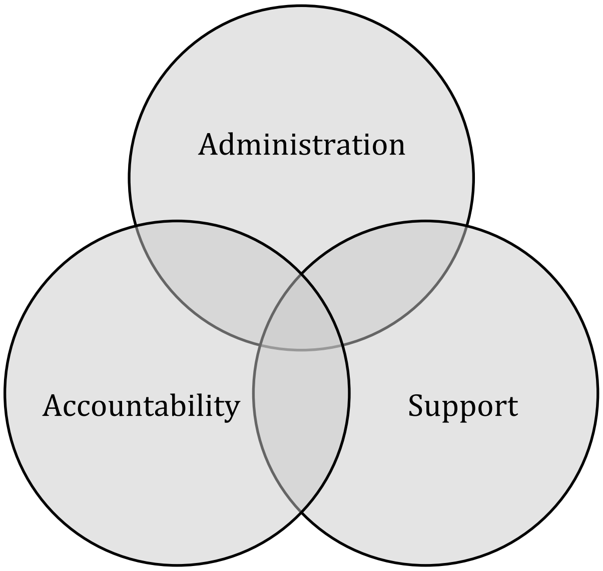

Figure 2: The three overarching groups

Administration

The most significant finding of this study was the ubiquitous role of school administration in the work of PLCs. This was evidenced in a wide range of aspects of PLCs from setup and structure to daily collaboration during the meetings. Findings from research on PLCs agree that administration is key. In their book, *Leading Professional Learning Communities*, Hord and Sommers (2008) urge principals to lead PLCs and engage with them in specific ways, including: setting a school-wide focus on student learning, establishing structures that encourage teachers to take responsibility for student learning, serving not only as the initiator of new and progressive programs in the school but also as a fellow collaborator alongside the teachers, addressing issues of change associated with the implementation of PLCs by discussing them with staffs, and working directly with teachers during PLC meeting time. Principals are called to lead the charge and the direction of PLCs. They must take an active role in establishing them in such a way that they effectively improve teacher capacity and increase student achievement. Evidently, administrative involvement in PLCs must also be ongoing and evolving to meet the needs of teachers and PLCs. In the cases studied for this research, the various avenues for administrative involvement in PLCs were obvious, although administrations in the cases interacted with the PLCs in different ways. The Wallace (2010), Huggins (2011), and McKenzie (2011) cases were characterized by varying degrees of focused, centralized leadership that placed high emphasis on the concept of PLCs. Hipp (2008) described administrative leadership as being widely distributed, and involved in all aspects of teaching and learning. Conversely, in Dallas (2006), administrative involvement was barely existent, as was administrative support, and this ultimately had a negative effect on the PLC. In each case, the way in which the administration interacted with the PLC had a very significant impact on its outcome, though in different ways. Both PLC research and evidence from this study show that strong administrative involvement is necessary for PLCs to be successful. The nature of this involvement will depend on the principal's leadership style and the existing school culture. Administrators must realize the extent to which their actions affect the work of PLCs. The ways in which an administration can interact with PLCs are innumerable, and certainly some ways are more beneficial to PLCs than others. Some of these will be discussed in later sections of this chapter.

Support

The second overarching group of this chapter is support. Although most support in the cases came from administration, there were two major supports that occurred instead between teachers, separate from administration. These were relationships and collaboration. Through relationships and collaboration, teachers can provide each other with emotional and professional support. An important commonality among the teachers' relationships in several cases was that relationships went beyond expected professional roles, even to the point of feeling like "family." The relationships were a source of emotional support through the difficult aspects of teaching. The teachers felt a sense of solidarity in the face of the many challenges of teaching in an urban school, and in some cases the PLC provided a safe space to "vent" their frustrations. This was possible thanks to the close, trusting relationships they developed with each other. Other studies agree on the importance of emotional support for teachers, especially in high-poverty schools (Gallagher, 2012). In urban schools, the circumstances can place a greater emotional strain on teachers than those of non-urban schools, thus the importance of supportive relationships between teachers in a PLC should not be overlooked. The teachers in the PLCs supported each other not only emotionally through relationships, but also professionally through collaboration. As the PLCs developed, teachers felt deepened responsibility to help each other solve problems by collaborating. The teachers in the cases indicated appreciation for this collaboration ultimately because it helped them improve their teaching. The fact that among teachers, relationships and collaboration serve as important forms of support indicates that administrative involvement in PLCs is not *absolutely* necessary for teachers to find support. In schools with little administrative support, PLCs are not necessarily doomed; those teachers could still support each other in PLCs through caring relationships and constructive collaboration.

Accountability

The overarching group, accountability is the most amalgamated of the three. It draws from a variety of the six themes found in Chapter Three. In most literature about PLCs, accountability is referenced in terms of accountability legislation like No Child Left Behind (Choi, 2011). Or, it is discussed in terms of teachers holding each other accountable. Hord (2012) offers an explanation that merges these two ideas of accountability:

> "But because the stakes have never been higher in education, these hit-and-miss efforts [of professional development] will not be enough. The demands of legislation that hold students, teachers, principals, and schools to high expectations are great. Beyond preparation and training, these demands require educators committed to the best interest of those served by the profession—the students. For example, teachers acting in a professional manner extend themselves beyond minimum expectations and exhibit an ethical and moral responsibility to do everything in their power to ensure the success of their students…If a community of professional learners operates together to its fullest, members are open to listening to feedback from their colleagues and growing from what they hear. They hold one another accountable for not only simple acts, such as coming to meetings on time and with all of the materials they need for the conversation to be productive, but also for doing what they said they would do to improve their teaching and students' learning." (p. 13)

In this study, the seemingly unrelated themes of focus, the teacher belief of taking responsibility for student learning, and deprivatization, all seemed to fall under this overarching group of accountability. In the cases studied, each played a specific role in holding teachers accountable for high levels of student learning. The focus of the PLC (on either student learning, instructional improvement, or achieving certain standardized test scores) set a concrete expectation for teachers. It motivated them by establishing areas in which they could be doing better and by giving direction and purpose to their future actions. The teacher belief of "taking responsibility for student learning" is directly described in the Hord quote above and is a clear aspect of accountability. Teachers who hold this belief intrinsically hold themselves accountable for doing everything in their power to help their students achieve at the highest possible levels. Indeed, Nehring & Fitzsimons (2011) report, “in schools where teachers assumed collective responsibility for student learning, achievement gains were significantly higher” (p. 517). Finally, deprivatization is the structure embedded in the work and dialogue of PLCs by which teachers hold each other accountable. By consistently putting their practices under the scrutiny of their peers, teachers were extrinsically motivated to follow through in improving their instructional practices such that student learning increased. It is notable that in some of the cases studied, the PLC actually had the effect of developing stronger intrinsic motivation rather than extrinsic motivation in teachers to improve their instruction and maximize student learning. That is, the structure of deprivatization in the PLCs actually contributed to developing teacher responsibility for student learning. These three things—focus, responsibility for student learning, and deprivatization—worked in tandem to push teachers to teach all students excellently and to hold them accountable for doing so.

These three overarching groups bring together the variety of findings of this study, and place them in a framework. The six themes (administrative leadership, collaboration, relationships, focus, teacher beliefs, and support), categories and subcategories outlined in Chapter Three fit into this framework as shown in Figure 3. The reader might notice that in some cases, a theme fits into one circle and its categories and subcategories fit into a different circle, demonstrating the interrelated nature of the findings of this study. The following three conceptual findings elaborate on the overlapping sections of this framework and draw in the other themes mentioned in

Chapter Three. First is a description of the role administrators might undertake in PLCs in order to foster both accountability and support. Second is the necessity of incorporating supports into the work of PLCs, which serve to balance accountability. And third is the idea that PLCs serve a valuable function in negotiating the relationship between teachers and administrators.

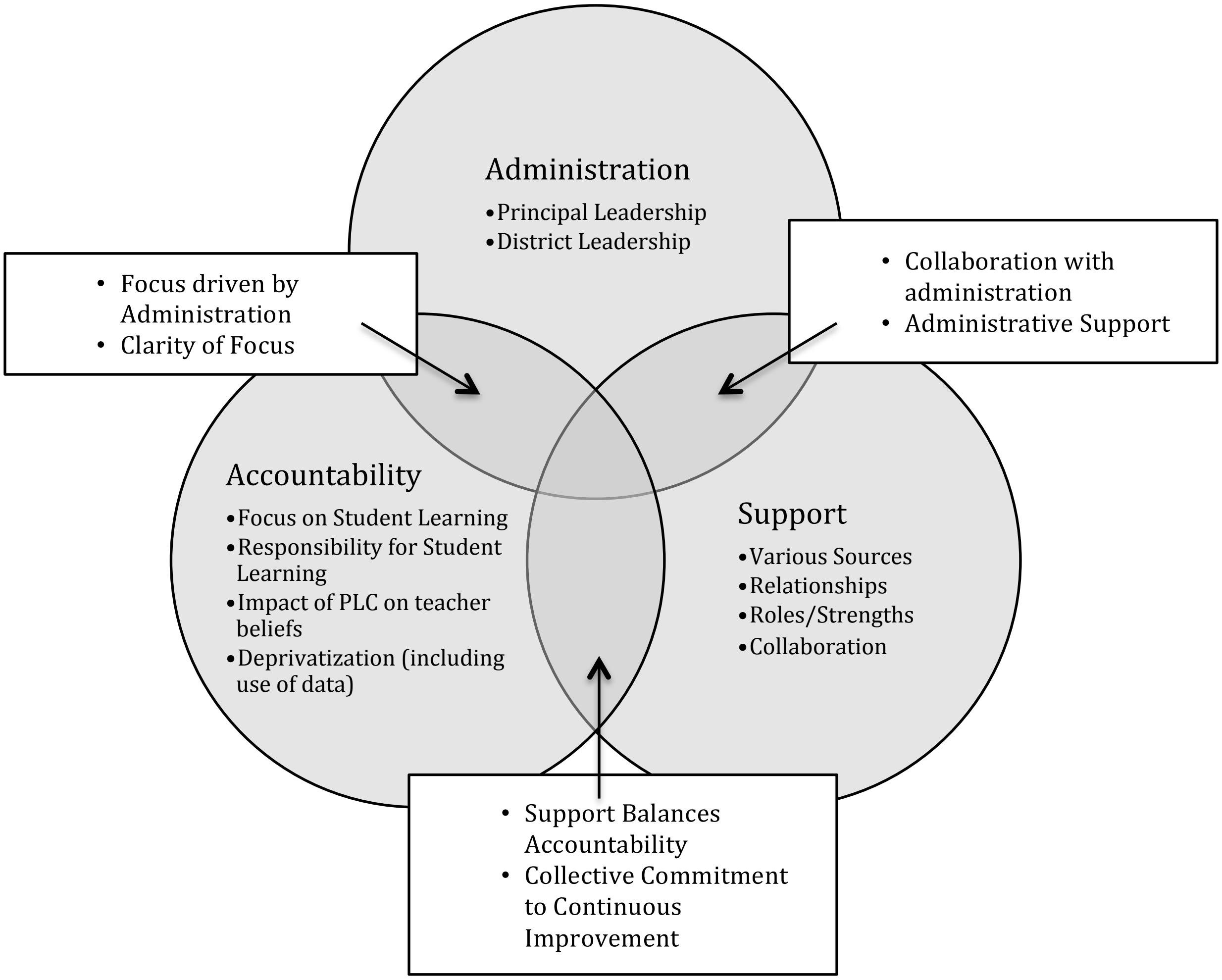
Administration
•Principal Leadership
•District Leadership
• Focus driven by Administration
• Clarity of Focus
• Collaboration with administration
• Administrative Support
Accountability
•Focus on Student Learning
•Responsibility for Student Learning
•Impact of PLC on teacher beliefs
•Deprivatization (including use of data)
Support
•Various Sources
•Relationships
•Roles/Strengths
•Collaboration
• Support Balances Accountability
• Collective Commitment to Continuous Improvement

Figure 3: Detailed version of the three overarching groups: Administration, Accountability, and Support.

Role of Administration in Accountability and Support

It has already been stated that administration was a very significant theme of this study. This section identifies specific ways in which school administrators can and should be involved in PLCs in regards to accountability and support.

Administration plays an important role in establishing accountability in a PLC as seen in the five cases studied. First, the administration set the focus for the PLC. The PLCs all generally focused on student learning and instructional improvement, often with the support of district-level leadership. This is consistent with research (Hord & Sommers, 2008), which urges administrators to always focus on student learning and which encourages coherence between district and school visions. In this study, it was also significant that administration clearly communicated focus so that teachers widely understood what was expected of them. These findings are backed by research on PLCs that says that principals must establish clear focus and communicate it regularly. Indeed, Nehring & Fitzsimons (2011) reported the significance of "a clear vision and goals communicated regularly and consistently by the school leadership" (p. 517). DuFour and Eaker (1998) even recommend that principals communicate focus daily. Administrators also established accountability in their PLCs by implementing specific structures in the PLCs that led to deprivatization and transformed teachers' beliefs. Huggins (2011) is a prime example of this; in the case, the principal's three questions asked of teachers daily, "Who's learning? Who's not? What are we doing about it?" were designed to bring about this transformation in teacher beliefs. Furthermore, in some of the cases, the administration required the use of data in PLC meetings as a form of deprivatization. Indeed, DuFour and Eaker (1998) assert that effective principals "provide time and create structures for staff reflection and discussion. They supply the data, information, and feedback that enable teams to make the necessary course corrections and improvements to achieve their objectives." (p. 187). Not only did administrators set up these structures, but several also made a priority of regularly attending PLC meetings. This regular attendance in part ensured that accountability structures were serving their purpose. Administrators may be tempted to let PLCs function independently of administrative supervision once they are established. The findings of this study indicate that the opposite may be better. Not only must the principal set the focus for the school, but he or she must also take an active role in ensuring that the focus is communicated on a regular basis. Likewise, not only must the principal establish structures in the PLC that encourage deprivatization, but he or she may do well to ensure that this takes place by regularly attending PLC meetings and taking part in the kinds of conversations that involve deprivatization and development of teacher beliefs.

Besides ensuring accountability, administration also plays a vital role in providing support to teachers in PLCs. The types of support that administration provided–offering emotional support, purchasing materials and technology like calculators, offering instructional strategies, hiring secretaries to do clerical tasks, providing instructional coaches to work closely with teachers, and providing professional development related to teacher needs—varied from case to case. No single form of support was provided by all administrations, indicating that administrators must be sensitive to the needs of their teachers and adapt the type of support they provide accordingly. In spite of the variation, it was clear from several studies that administrative support was very important to teachers. One of the most interesting ways in which the administrators in the cases supported teachers was through collaboration. Administrators, by discussing problems that the teachers faced in the classroom and offering various solutions, were actually a direct source of ideas regarding improving teaching practices. In many cases, the administrators collaborated with teachers to figure out better ways of teaching effectively. In addition, it was through collaboration between administrators and teachers that administrators were able to discover and understand what the teachers most needed in order to do their jobs well, enabling administrators to support teachers in the most relevant ways possible. This also created opportunities for shared decision-making between administrators and teachers, where teachers determined for themselves what they most needed.

These findings are consistent with leading research on effective PLCs, which urges principals and other administrators to model learning by engaging in collaborative learning alongside teachers. Indeed, Hord and Sommers (2008) praise the principal leadership style of “collaborator,” explaining, “we think the collaborator style adds one more dimension in which everyone is a leader, which happens by building shared leadership among the staff.” (p. 39). Similarly, Ann Lieberman is quoted by DuFour and Eaker (1998) in regard to the role of the principal in schools: “the 1990’s view of leadership calls for principals to act as partners with teachers, involved in a collaborative quest to examine practices and improve schools. Principals are not expected to control teachers but to support them and to create opportunities for them to grow and develop.” (p. 184). Just as administrators should consider taking an active role in enforcing accountability structures in PLCs, administrators might also take an active role in collaborating alongside teachers in PLCs as a means of both offering direct support and informing the types of future support they provide to teachers. Though it seems counterintuitive, increased administrative involvement in a PLC can lead to *increased* shared decision-making between teachers and administrators. Indeed, teachers cannot aid in decision-making if they never have access to the administrators themselves.

Accountability and Support Balance Each Other

The previous section covered the overlap between the sphere of administration with the two spheres of accountability and support. This section covers the overlap between accountability and support themselves. In the cases, support often balanced accountability, a concept supported by PLC research. Hayes and colleagues (2004) argue that “that when educational leaders lead learning they build professional learning communities that focus on improved outcomes for all students *within a context of pressure and support or supportive demandingness*. When this focus is not present, leadership practices become complicit in the acceptance, and indeed, reproduction, of inequitable outcomes for students from groups that have a tradition of gaining less benefit from participation in schooling“ (p. 125, emphasis added). Both accountability and support are necessary components in a school, and without one or the other, a school might find itself skewed too far in one direction. The Huggins (2011) case is an important example of this balance due to the fact that the administration was apparently overbearing and imposing on the teachers’ classroom practices. Were it not for the equally strong levels of administrative support and involvement in the PLC, it is possible that the teachers would have been very unhappy. The authors reported,

> What often balanced teachers’ perceptions of time spent in the math professional learning community within the confines of the structures and through [the principal’s] detailed and directive approach to instructional leadership was being able to obtain ideas from not only their colleagues but also school leaders during the math professional learning community meetings. Although teachers did not

> always agree with their instruction being so highly scrutinized, they appreciated the fact the school leadership offered solutions to the instructional difficulties they were having. (80)

Since administrators can play such a heavy role in both accountability and support, it is necessary that they find an appropriate balance of the two.

PLCs Connect Teachers and Administrators

Support and Accountability are two very important aspects of schools. They balance each other, and both are necessary in order for teachers to continually improve their practices. In some cases, the teachers served as their own network of accountability without the influence of administration, as well as their own support network, without administrative support. In other cases, administration initiated some or all of the accountability and support, playing a significant role in both. The significance of administration interaction with PLCs indicates that PLCs are not for teachers alone. Yes, teachers should hold each other accountable and support each other within PLC meetings regardless of administrative presence, but ideally, administrators would also be there, participating in holding teachers accountable and offering support. When this worked in the cases, there was evidence of a strong collaborative relationship between teachers and administrators, in which they worked together and had mutual respect for each other. It seems that PLCs are an important bridge between teachers and administrators, and administrator involvement in PLCs can significantly enhance the accountability and support that teachers receive in PLCs. Perhaps the importance of PLCs as an school reform strategy lies not in their power to connect teachers with each other, but in their power to connect teachers with administrators. In order for this kind of symbiotic relationship to occur, it seems that administrators need to take the lead in understanding how to structure PLCs and understanding how they might fit as members of the PLC. It seems that they must demonstrate regard and respect for teachers and their needs and provide support when it is needed to balance the accountability structures put in place in the PLC.

The following is a possible explanation and elaboration of the dynamics between teachers and administrators within PLCs and why the PLC itself serves to mediate between the two entities of teachers and administrators. It seems that in PLCs, two different entities find themselves at odds. Administrators have goals for teachers to improve their instructional practices and increase student achievement, which are met by holding teachers accountable. The cases indicated that one of the most important components that teachers seek in their PLCs is administrative support. PLCs provide the space and the structures in which both entities can bring their needs to the table and get what they need from the other. Administrators participating in PLCs can hold teachers accountable, and teachers can voice their needs and obtain support. Of course, in order for this two-way exchange, administrators in PLCs must be open to listening to and providing for those needs. This again places the burden of responsibility upon administrations. There must be a significant amount of communication and respect between the both parties. PLCs provide the space and structures for both teachers and administrators to communicate these needs to each other in a setting in which everybody involved is working towards the same goals: increasing student learning.

Implications

Administrators

With administrative leadership as the key finding of this study, the majority of the implications deal primarily with the role of administrators in the workings of PLCs. A natural application of this study would be to require that all administrative leaders of a school undergo training on how to interact with PLCs before initiating PLCs in a school. School administrators must understand the purpose and vision of PLCs, the potential of PLCs to transform teacher beliefs and hold teachers accountable, and what the administrator's role is in bringing that transformation about. Administrators must have attitudes of respect towards teachers and willingness to collaborate alongside teachers and provide support in order to balance the accountability imposed by PLCs.

Schools and districts might also consider ways that they can creatively support teachers. In the cases studied, some principals hustled to write grants, pool money, or reach out to unconventional sources for support. Administrators might collaborate with teachers and with each other to determine new ways by which they can provide teachers with the resources they need within the school's time and budgetary constraints. Administrators from various schools might also communicate more with each other to share ideas and learn how other schools support teachers.

There might also be higher accountability or supervision of administrators in the areas of accountability and support to ensure that administrators carry out practices similar to those outlined in this study, such as clearly communicating focus, collaborating with teachers, showing regard and respect for teachers, and providing teachers opportunities to share in decision-making. Surveys might be given to teachers to measure the extent to which they believe administrators embody these ideals. Finally, these things might become priorities in the hiring standards for administrative positions in schools.

Teachers

The findings of this study also apply to teachers. Since PLCs serve to both challenge teachers to improve and support them in their growth, teachers need to recognize the role of PLCs in their own development and take an active role in that work. In many ways, openness to the concept of a PLC may be necessary for PLCs to be effective; it can certainly expedite the work of PLCs. For example, since PLCs help transform teacher beliefs such as taking responsibility for student learning, then teachers should examine their beliefs about teaching and learning with openness to the idea that some beliefs are more conducive to improving teacher practices and student learning than others. Without this willingness to change practices and philosophies, teachers in PLCs may feel frustrated in the PLC, and the success of the PLC may diminish. Similarly, teachers need to willingly engage in the collaborative work of PLCs with teachers and administrators alike by sharing the details of their own practices and results in the classroom and offering solutions and support for other teachers facing difficulties.

Besides demonstrating openness to the transformative work of PLCs, teachers should also recognize PLCs as support structures. PLCs provide a venue for teachers to communicate their needs to administrators. However, this communication cannot occur if teachers do not have a clear idea of what their needs are. It requires teachers to reflect on the ways in which administration might best support them. Teachers might also consider their own strengths, both in and out of the classroom, and the ways they may use those strengths to support other teachers or to play a leadership role either in the PLC or in the school community. PLCs can significantly develop teacher capacity, but it takes willingness and initiative from teachers in addition to administrators in order for this to be successful.

Recommendations for Future Research

Several researchers outline the role administrators can play in PLCs. However, it would be interesting to study at a deeper level how leadership styles affect the implementation of PLCs in various schools. Is principal leadership style connected to PLC success? Do principals with certain leadership styles tend to implement PLCs in similar ways? Are certain leadership styles more aligned with the idea of PLCs than others? Or, do PLCs need to be set up differently depending on the leadership style of the principal? These kinds of studies might help administrators use their strengths as leaders to most effectively guide PLCs. Furthermore, further study could examine the impact of principal attendance at PLC meetings versus principal absence at PLC meetings. Are PLCs always stronger when administrators facilitate them? Are there certain conditions in which it would be better if administrators did not participate in the PLCs? One final area of future research is the overlap between all three of the overarching groups. This study identified some of the characteristics of the overlap between administration and support, the overlap between administration and accountability, and the overlap between support and accountability. However, it lacks sufficient information to identify characteristics of the overlap between all three groups. Study of the relationships between these three groups—administration, accountability, and support—in PLCs implemented in urban schools may shed further light on what makes these PLCs effective. The effects of principal attendance and leadership style on the success of PLCs as well as the overlap of administration, accountability and support are areas that merit further study.

Conclusion

PLCs are a powerful method of school reform, though they must be implemented carefully, with the understanding that not all PLCs are created equal. The PLCs in the cases analyzed for this study exhibited six common themes: administrative leadership, collaboration, relationships, focus, teacher beliefs, and support. Administrative leadership occurred at both a school and district level. Collaboration involved deprivatization, the roles and strengths of teachers, and collaboration with administrators. Focus generally centered on student learning or instructional improvement, was driven by administration, and was clearly communicated. Relationships were characterized by care between teachers for each other. Teacher beliefs included the responsibility for student learning as well as collective commitment to continuous improvement. These were shaped by the practices of the PLCs and developed over time. Support was varied, administrative support took preeminence, and it also served to balance accountability in some cases. These six themes—administrative leadership, collaboration, relationships, focus, teacher beliefs, and support—and their categories describe the practices and results of effective PLCs. They can be organized into three major groups—administration, accountability, and support—to explain the ways the six themes interact with each other. Administration can take specific actions to be involved in establishing both accountability and support in PLCs. Support can serve to balance the imposing requirements placed on teachers by accountability. And, PLCs can serve as a vehicle for developing relationships between teachers and administrators by providing opportunities for them to communicate with each other. This role of administrators in PLCs should not be underestimated, and administrators must take the lead in interacting with PLCs by establishing and maintaining structures that ensure that a balance of accountability and support is achieved. With all of these things in place, PLCs have the power to transform teachers and schools for the better.

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