IMPROVING A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY AT ONE
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY

By

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Abstract

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The purpose of this action research study was to improve the functioning of one professional learning community (PLC) at Monument Elementary School in the Quincy School District in Washington State. The study was structured according to Stringer’s (2007) action research phases of “look,” “think,” and “act” and was conducted from the fall of 2009 to the winter of 2010-2011. The “look” phase started with a fall 2009 pilot study of all PLCs within the school and continued when the 6th grade math PLC became the primary focus of the study in the spring of 2010. Data collection for the “look” phase included the original pilot study, interviews with team members, and observations of team meetings. The team shifted into the “think” phase during summer and fall of 2010, analyzing together all data collected, and into the “act” phase in the winter of 2010-2011. The “act” phase involved the creation of norms for team functioning, a commitment to better attendance at meetings, and a structured plan to visit and observe each other’s classrooms to collaboratively improve math instruction and learning.
The major outcome of the study was the overall improvement in the functioning of the PLC. Attendance was improved, mutual trust was developed, communication was more consistent, and a new level of collaboration was attained. Conclusions of the study include the importance of the role of the principal in facilitating PLC functioning, the impact of changes in team membership, the critical role of using rubrics as a basis for reflecting on team processes, and the impact of size of team membership.
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Chapter 1

**Introduction**

This is an action research study intended to improve the functioning of a professional learning community (PLC) team at one elementary school. As principal of the school, I am the lead researcher with the members of the PLC team serving as co-researchers.

**Background**

After his historic election as President in 2009, Barack Obama tackled foundational issues from his campaign, including education. President Obama promptly appointed Arne Duncan, previously the Chief Executive Officer of the Chicago Public Schools, as the Secretary of Education. At his confirmation hearing, Duncan listed three goals for his term: “1) improving access to high quality early childhood programs; 2) raising standards for K-12 schools and improving teacher quality; and 3) improving access to and affordability of postsecondary education” (Nolan, 2009, p. 2). After his confirmation, Duncan quickly went to work on the second goal of improving teacher quality. Part of this emphasis was to promote the idea of teachers’ professional learning communities.

In 2009, Duncan spoke at a press conference held to release the report *Professional Learning in the Learning Profession* by the National Staff Development Council. This was a multi year research study funded by the Gates Foundation and carried out by Stanford University’s School Redesign Network under the direction of Linda Darling-Hammond of Stanford University.
The report examined how professional learning communities improve teachers’ practice and student learning. In his comments Duncan endorsed the importance of teacher learning communities. Duncan turned the podium over to Linda Darling-Hammond, who stated “Most states and districts are still not providing the kind of professional learning that research suggests improves teaching practice and student outcomes.” Her written study reads: “the research tells us that teachers need to learn the way other professionals do—continually, collaboratively, and on the job” (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009, p. 1).

Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) document in their report a study of over 1500 schools implementing “active professional learning communities” (p. 11) and other research on the qualities of a PLC, the process that takes place as the PLC begins to function, and the impact PLCs have had on student learning. This research shows that the schools that developed these teacher learning communities effected positive changes such as reduced student absenteeism and dropout rates while increasing achievement in math, science, history, and reading. The research indicates that participants in PLCs are initially reluctant to give up their autonomy and individuality to become interdependent. However, as team members begin the work together, they find meaning in their communal work by accepting responsibility for individual growth, developing a group identity and norms, and using difference and conflict to solve problems. When forming these communities, teachers face difficulty in determining shared purpose for the group, ensuring that members participate and benefit equally, and moving beyond the sharing of superficial classroom experiences. Gradually, the communities shift into a partnership that focuses on growth and learning as they share material, social, and intellectual
resources. Teachers in functioning PLCs learn to “describe, defend, and adjust their practices according to an emerging, collectively held standard of quality teaching” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009, p. 11). When these communities are highly functioning and focused, they have a positive impact as indicated in the numerous studies Darling-Hammond cites.

Other researchers confirm the success of learning communities on impacting student learning. A two year qualitative study (Scribner, 1999) of three rural middle schools showed that school improvement was a direct result of the effectiveness of PLCs in those schools. The two schools that provided time during the day for teachers to collaborate had more success in developing their PLCs and improved student achievement significantly. In a study of one rural elementary school over a four year period (Berry, 2005), the school went from 50% performing above standard to 80% above standard after forming PLCs. Reyes and Fletcher’s (2004) study of four migrant school districts with high test results found the greatest success factors to be in the area of collective efficacy due to an organizational structure that included teacher learning communities. Each of these districts demonstrated at least 70% of their students reaching standard on standardized math tests. Phillips (2003) documents a middle school that, over three years, went from 50% passing reading, writing, science and social studies tests to over 90% passing after the implementation of their PLC. Of the three schools studied by Giles and Hargreaves (2006), only one was able to sustain student success, the one that built effective PLCs. A teacher at one of the three schools summarized what an effective PLC focuses on: “I’d never been in a place where the priority was so much the student; and for me, that’s it ---- all that matters is the student” (p. 153).
Perhaps the most well-known PLC success case would be that of Adlai Stevenson High School, led by Principal Richard DuFour. In 1985 Stevenson did not rank among the top 50 schools in the 13 state Midwest Region. By 1994 it was among the top 20 schools in the world. Almost 80 percent of students at Stevenson took at least one advanced placement class before they graduated (DuFour, 1995). This emerging research on teacher professional learning communities suggests that schools that effectively implement PLCs are more likely to sustain improved student learning.

However, one problem in the literature related to PLCs is that of defining PLCs. DuFour (2006) states “In fact, the term has become so commonplace and has been used so ambiguously to describe virtually any loose coupling of individuals who share a common interest in education that it is in danger of losing all meaning” (DuFour, 2006, p. 3). With this in mind, DuFour attempts to clarify what a professional learning community is: “The very essence of a learning community is a focus on and a commitment to the learning of each student” (DuFour, 2006, p. 3). He goes on to add that “a PLC is composed of collaborative teams whose members work interdependently to achieve common goals linked to the purpose of learning for all” (DuFour, 2006, p. 3).

The idea that student learning comes first revolves around four questions, according to DuFour: “(1) What do we want each student to learn? (2) How will we know when the student has learned it? (3) How will we respond when they have trouble learning it? (4) What will we do if they already know it?” (DuFour, 2004, p. 10). Adler and Heckscher (2008) describe this interdependence around student learning as a shift from hierarchy to community, as participants coordinate improvement efforts based on a set of shared goals, vision, and resources. One teacher, participating in a study of
teachers’ willingness to engage in learning communities (Leite, 2006), described the importance of this interdependence: “Because it is easier to solve problems when we share them with other people” (p. 16). As teacher learning communities problem solve, a collaborative transformation takes place.

Servage (2008) echoes this transformation as the collaborative work that involves inquiry and problem solving in relation to daily teaching practices. In a study of two middle schools trying to implement PLCs (Westheimer, 1999), one school succeeds in building community because of its shared beliefs, interaction and participation, interdependence, concern for individual and minority views, and meaningful relationships. DuFour (2006) describes the effectiveness of a PLC as being built on the four pillars of “mission, vision, values, and goals” (p. 24). It is clear that PLCs vary in the way they function based on these characteristics.

For the purposes of this study, the term PLC will be defined by the “big ideas” suggested by DuFour of assuring that students learn, a culture of collaboration, and a focus on results (DuFour, 2004). It is acknowledged that many groups of teachers that have never heard the term PLC function at a high level in regard to these big ideas and improving student learning. In the literature reviewed, PLCs are synonymous with instructional improvement groups, collaborative learning groups, Practice-Based Professional Education, Communities of Practice (CoP), and Learning Communities (LC).

In summary, the advocacy literature and research, to date, on professional learning communities (PLCs) amply defines the qualities of these collaborative groups, shows the process that takes place as the PLC begins to function, and suggests the
positive impact they have on student learning. There still remains a need for more research on how to sustain teacher learning communities and the impact that organizational structures and trust may have on the functioning of those communities. This action research study explored these issues with the purpose of improving the functioning of one such PLC at an elementary school in Washington State.

**Action Research**

“Members of PLCs are action orientated: They move quickly to turn aspirations into action and visions into reality. They understand that the most powerful learning always occurs in a context of taking action, and they value engagement and experience as the most effective teachers” (DuFour, 2006, p. 4). What better way to study a PLC than through action research? A traditional quantitative dissertation in education might study a school or educational initiative while attempting to control variables and reject a null hypothesis regarding the impact of the treatment being studied. A traditional qualitative study may gather qualitative information to from a picture that tells what might be going on in education. In contrast, an action research dissertation not only serves the researcher and those that may benefit form the research, but also includes those being researched in the process. Educators become co-researchers and participants in the most practical sense, attempting to create change and improvement in schools, districts and classrooms. When implemented as a part of a school’s system of improvement, action research has been found to significantly improve student achievement on standardized tests (Calhoun, 2002).

Action researcher methodologists have agreed upon a set of common characteristics to define the concept. Action research is collaborative, promotes
improvement, and is a reflective and systematic process with a prominent history in education (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Creswell, 2008; Sagor, 2000; Stringer, 2007). Like the definition of a PLC, successful action research hinges on collaborative and reflective work that promotes improvement in the community.

The stakeholders from within an organization, in this case, teachers within a professional learning community, are critical collaborators in action research. Community members shape the inquiry within action research. As Herr and Anderson (2005) state, action research is “inquiry that is done by or with insiders to an organization or community, but never to or on them” (p. 3). In a school community, including key stakeholders in the improvement process empowers teachers to problem solve, therefore making collaboration a key characteristic of action research. Communities within the school identify and study challenges, collectively create solutions, and put those solutions into action. The father of action research, Kurt Lewin, concurred with stakeholder solution finding, as he believed “that knowledge should be created from problem solving in real-life situations” (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 11).

In education, the collaborative nature of action research fits the recent shift in education to a system that encourages community learning. Action research in education traces its roots to John Dewey, who espoused that human experience generates knowledge, therefore “it was a short step to the notion of taking the professional experience of teachers and other practitioners and using it as a source of knowledge about teaching” (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 18). In this sense, educators view action research as a practical academic research that focuses on the day to day problems of students and practitioners. Encouraged by the practical nature of action research, a school’s
stakeholders are more likely to embrace and support this type of research versus a traditional quantitative or qualitative study. “Community based action research seeks to change the social and personal dynamics of the research situation so that the process enhances the lives of all those who participate” (Stringer, 2007, p. 21). Once embraced, action research engages the community in collaborative inquiry.

A community involved in collaborative inquiry within action research focuses on what improvements need to be made. “Action research addresses a specific, practical issue and seeks to obtain solutions to a problem” (Creswell, 2008 p. 597). As action research benefits the practitioner, its value in schools and businesses has been readily observed, becoming a catalyst for improvement. Paulo Friere, an action researcher and author of Pedagogy of the Oppressed, worked with generative themes identified by members of the community, such as literacy, and studied them in a collaborative fashion (as cited in Herr & Anderson 2005). Today in education, such generative themes could include closing the achievement gap, how to address the needs of language learners, and the improvement of student math understanding in American public schools. Schools that discover action research and its value in promoting improvements also understand that without a clear process and system, actions cannot be monitored and checked for desired results.

Sagor (2000) explains the value of action research as “a disciplined process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking action. The primary reason for engaging in action research is to assist the ‘actor’ in improving and/or refining his or her actions” (p. 3). Action research taking place in schools provides a system to improve student learning. Improvements generated by action research are facilitated through a process or
system. Stringer (2007) explains, “Action research is a systematic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to problems they confront in their everyday lives” (p. 1). Education is not without problems, therefore lending itself to systematic action research. Unlike quantitative research and its precise nature, action research “is grounded in a qualitative paradigm whose purpose is to gain greater clarity and understanding of a question, problem, or issue” (Stringer, 2007, p. 19). It attempts to answer how things are happening, “to understand the ways that stakeholders—the different people concerned with the issue—perceive, interpret, and respond to events related to the issue investigated” (Stringer, 2007, p. 19). An action research dissertation seeks to create a win-win situation for the researchers as well as for the participants. The lead researcher includes members of the community as co-researchers in relation to the problem they seek to resolve.

This study embraces strategies developed by two methodologists, Richard Sagor and Ernest T. Stringer. Sagor (2000) recommends the following critical steps for action research: “(a) selecting a focus, (b) clarifying theories, (c) identifying research questions, (d) collecting data, (e) analyzing data, (f) reporting results, and (g) taking informed action” (p. 3). Having had the opportunity to work with Sagor earlier in my career, action research became applicable for me as a classroom teacher on a number of pertinent issues. A school may choose a question to explore, a challenge to study, or a strategy to collect data on. Only the school’s teachers know what most needs the deeper study, or how that research might be designed, or how to collaborate with others struggling with the same issue.
Stringer simplifies the system with his “look, think, and act” process (2007) that is continually looping. The “look” phase focuses on gathering relevant information in the form of data, building a picture, and describing the situation. This phase is qualitative in nature and focuses on gathering “information about participants’ experiences and perspectives” (Stringer, 2007, p. 65), defining the problem or issue that needs to be dealt with, and making sense out of what is going on in terms of the problem/issue. Sagor’s steps of selecting a focus, identifying research questions, and collecting data fall into this phase. Stakeholder groups build a picture that will lead to understanding (what and how events occur), clarity (a detailed picture of the context), and insight (an extended understanding of the issue) (Stringer, 2007). Sources of information in this phase include interviews of key stakeholders, observation of significant events or activities, documents, records, surveys, and research literature. Recording information in the form of notes, audiotapes, videotapes, and photographs is critical as the group creates a picture of what is going on. The group extends its understanding through collaborative descriptive accounts, answering the why, what, how, who, when, and where questions in relation to their reality, and even creating community profiles. The organization of meetings, procedures, decision making, and communication become critical components of action research within this stage (Stringer, 2007). Once the group has “looked,” they are ready to “think.”

The “think” phase includes “exploring and analyzing” and “interpreting and explaining.” Questions that guide the work in this phase include “What is happening here?” and “How/why are things as they are?” (Stringer, 2007, p. 8). Sagor’s (2000) steps of “analyzing data” and “reporting results” are part of this phase. Participants
“think” together to understand more clearly the way the issue affects their lives and activities. In this phase data are categorized and coded, key experiences are analyzed using frameworks for interpretation, reports are written collaboratively, and presentations or performances take place (Stinger, 2007). Interpretation and analyzing results yield a readiness for the third phase of action research: “Act.”

The “act” phase, or “taking informed action” (Sagor, 2000), details the plan, implementation, and evaluation of the desired action in regard to resolving the problem or issue identified by the community (Stringer, 2007). Acting is necessary to resolve the problems identified during the “look” phase and explicated during the “think” phase. This phase focuses on planning and implementing practical solutions to the problem identified and explored. During the planning part of this phase priorities for action are identified. An action plan is developed which may include goals, objectives, tasks, persons, time, and resources. After the action plan is developed, the team or organization implements the plan while paying attention to communicating how the plan is going, nurturing people’s efforts, reflecting on progress, assisting members in overcoming roadblocks, resolving conflicts, and connecting members to supportive networks. Progress is reviewed and the plan with its implementation is reviewed, assessed, and revised, and achievements are celebrated (Stringer, 2007).

Stringer’s “look, think, and act” process is the primary method of action research used in this study. As research is thin in the area of the actual functioning of PLCs, action research seemed the appropriate methodology for this study, which aims to improve the functioning of one PLC. A PLC team at Monument Elementary School was chosen for the purpose of this study. This study aimed to incorporate the principles of
action research, that is, to provide the opportunity for one PLC to “look,” “think,” and “act” in relation to their functioning. This research method lends itself to the purpose of this study to improve the functioning of one PLC at Monument Elementary School.

The Study

The purpose of this action research study is to improve the functioning of one PLC at one elementary school in Washington State. The study seeks to benefit the members of this PLC, to help myself, the administrator of the school, understand better how to support PLCs in their work at the building level, and to provide insights for the assistance of the district in its efforts to institutionalize PLCs. Research questions initially guiding the study were: (a) What journey took place for this team as it became a PLC? (b) What resources were needed to help this PLC improve its’ functioning? (c) What do I, as an administrator, need to know about how to guide the improved functioning of a PLC? (d) How can other PLCs learn from this PLC and its efforts to improve student learning in mathematics at Monument Elementary School? The findings, conclusions and recommendations of this study will support the school and district in their PLC efforts.

This study was conducted in the Quincy School District, located in Central Washington, with a town population of 5,100 people and a school district population of 2,500 students. The district serves a geographic area of approximately 450 square miles. All of the kindergarten and first grade students in the district attend one elementary school, while another serves the second and third graders, leaving the fourth thru sixth graders to Monument Elementary, where this study took place. The district also has one junior high school (grades 7 and 8), a senior high school (grades 9-12), and one small
elementary school (grades K-4) in a neighboring town. With the district’s unique configuration, all grade level teachers are found at one school, allowing for PLC groups that can make unilateral grade level decisions that affect all district students in that grade level.

The configuration of the district also assures that each school’s student population reflects the ethnicity and socio economic diversity of the district. The district ethnicity is split between two groups: Hispanic students (78%) and non-Hispanic white (21%). Other important population demographics include a free and reduced lunch rate of 79%, an English language learner percentage of 34%, and a special education percentage of 11%. District achievement data shows a significant gap between Hispanic and white students. On the state mandated Reading Grade 10 Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) in 2009, 95% of white students passed compared to 81% of Hispanic students. In Math, only 32% of Hispanic 10th graders passed while double the number of white students passed at 63%. In 7th grade only 23% of Hispanic students passed the math WASL in 2009, while 60% of white counterparts passed. Reading in 7th grade was not much better with only 27% of Hispanic students passing the WASL and 51% of white students passing in 2009. The fourth graders, who are at Monument Elementary, had similar success in math, with 60% of white students passing the WASL in 2009 and only 29% of Hispanic students passing. On the Reading test the percentages are higher than 7th grade, but did not match up to 10th grade with 50% of Hispanic students passing and 83% of white students passing the 2009 WASL. The data reveals that the district struggles with a visible achievement gap in both math and reading between Hispanic and white students.
Because of this persistent achievement gap, the district has focused its improvement plan on two goals: “(1) All students will demonstrate proficiency and growth on state and district approved assessments. (2) We will eliminate the gaps in student achievement that are associated with ethnicity, poverty and/or language barriers” (Quincy School District Improvement Plan, 2010). The plan outlines five areas of focus to accomplish these goals including a focus on data, professional development, collaboration, K-12 curriculum alignment, and parent involvement. Under the category of collaboration the district is concerned with building a collaborative culture within the organization through trust, open communication, mutual respect and integrity. In the area of collaboration, as noted on the district website, a major priority is to “provide training/outside expertise to assist in the development of professional learning communities” (Quincy School District Improvement Plan, 2010). Such an explicit mission for PLC collaboration provides for the ideal place to conduct action research around PLCs.

In the Quincy School District, the leadership team (comprised of teachers, classified staff, principals, district office personnel, and parents), the administrative team (comprised of the district cabinet and the principals), the union president, and teacher leaders on various curriculum committees seem to agree that the most important initiative is the development of professional learning communities. PLCs were briefly introduced to district personnel in 2006. For the first three hours of a district professional development day in August, teachers across the district broke up into groups of 15 or so to talk about what “professional,” “learning,” and “community” mean. An administrator was in each room to assure teachers were on task writing down their answers on butcher
paper. DuFour’s work was briefly introduced with a book review. Later that week a list of the adjectives from each group was emailed out to the district staff. Schools were then expected to explore these communities and institute them to improve student learning.

The current feeling in the district is that a better foundation can be built that will enable PLC success. As each school is in a different place with PLCs, an action research study of what is needed to become successful in this endeavor would benefit the district.

For the purpose of this study, Monument Elementary is the research site. Monument Elementary in 2009-2010 had an enrollment of 600 students in grades 4-6. Eighty-five percent of students received free or reduced lunch, 80% were Hispanic, and 33% were English language learners. There are 36 classroom teachers with an average teaching experience of 8.3 years (from two years to 38 years). Seventy-five percent of the teachers have a master’s degree. To illustrate the need for school improvement, for the 2009-2010 sixth grade class, WASL scores had declined over the previous three years. In 2007 on the 3rd grade WASL this group of students had a 56% passing rate in math and a 61% passing rate in reading. On the fourth grade WASL in 2008 45% passed math and 55% passed reading, a slight drop in scores. As fifth graders, these same students had only a 37% pass rate for math and 48% pass rate for reading. Thus, in reading these students have declined from 61% to 48% passing in just three years. In the 6th grade our math scores have been 26%, 32%, and 29% from 2006 to 2009. In response to these issues, Monument Elementary teachers are attempting to implement a number of interventions, align their curriculum to new standards, and improve instruction using strategies for English language learners.
I have been the principal of Monument Elementary since the district introduced PLCs in 2006. In the spring of 2009, I asked the leadership team at Monument this question: “If you could choose to focus on one initiative to get more training and support in, what would it be?” Their answer was “professional learning communities.” I have encouraged the improvement of PLCs at Monument for four years and believe that student learning will improve as we dedicate ourselves to this work. Collecting information about existing communities in the school would help create an understanding of where teams are and possible solutions to the challenges they face. Although the whole school was introduced to PLCs and action research, and many PLCs have taken on various research projects of their own, the purpose of this action research study is to study and improve the functioning of one PLC at Monument.

My first few years at Monument were frustrating. The state was offering money to our school to support improvement efforts. In order to receive the support, we had to have 80% of the staff voting to apply for the grant. The superintendent met with the staff a few times before I even began my job as principal and asked me to visit the school and urge the staff to vote in favor of the grant. Only 50% of the staff voted in favor of the grant despite my long distance efforts to support the superintendent’s wishes for the grant to pass at Monument. After one year as principal at Monument, and the introduction of PLCs, we voted again. Only 70% of the staff supported the grant, and we missed another opportunity to have funded support of our improvement efforts. I felt betrayed and angry that staff members would not recognize that our data necessitated changes in our instruction and that we needed the support from the grant.
After another year of working hard with PLC teams, we finally reached the level of support necessary to apply for the grant and were able to receive funding for our school improvement plan. We formed study teams to take a deeper look at what needed to happen to help our students achieve the state standards. A state audit team spent a week in our school reporting on their findings and making various recommendations. In addition to this data, we conducted a number of surveys. These documents gave us some places to begin as we looked at student learning and the functioning of our school in relation to PLCs.

A language arts committee looked at dilemmas we have had in reading and writing over the past five years. The math committee looked at interventions to improve student learning. We also looked at what needs we had in the area of working with our language learners. These committees considered key research and then developed an action plan to address Monument learning needs. As a staff we agreed to support each other as we embarked in a journey to align our teaching, to craft a professional development plan, and to work on our assessment system. When we looked at research on effective professional development we found that embedded and ongoing initiatives prove to be most successful. As our leadership team looked closer at this idea, it identified the continuing development of professional learning communities as the means to provide a cohesive professional development system.

Money from our grant supported teachers in professional development and extra collaboration time to work on PLC learning projects. Teams have recently developed a new “specialized” configuration within their grade levels and PLCs. This has allowed smaller PLC groups to form. For instance, in the fifth grade a group of three teachers
share 90 students, with one teaching science/social studies, the other teaching math, and the third teaching language arts (called a pod). The smaller groups are more functional than the grade level PLCs of 7-9 people, yet there are still drawbacks to this configuration. Conflict has arisen as teams give up some collective power that the larger group held to the smaller “pods,” “pairs,” and “planning time” PLCs. There is not consensus or even widespread agreement on how to use valuable collaboration time. Some groups want more time as a whole grade level team, while others want to work within their pod or their content area. As developing PLCs experience growing pains, this study will provide in depth exploration of the PLC journey and efforts to improve the functioning of one PLC.

At Monument, conditions are perfect for a study of the journey that PLCs may take in an effort to improve student learning. The five years that Monument has been pushing to “implement” PLCs provides a perspective of the time required to institute PLC practices not only as an initiative, but to work at growing a PLC culture. The varying groups, sizes of groups, and common connections that help teachers at Monument identify themselves with one or more PLCs also provide ample opportunity for action research. Finally, the struggles that some groups have encountered on their journey prompts action research. Teachers acting to overcome those challenges may provide the greater educational community with some critical ideas on persevering to become a PLC. One such group was chosen for this study.

Serving as baseline data for this study, the Monument Elementary Learning Improvement Team (LIT) had staff complete a survey on their PLC experiences up to 2009. Staff identified how PLCs are perceived and the roadblocks they have experienced
while trying to become PLCs, and offered ideas for improving their PLCs. In addition to this survey written by LIT, the Center for Educational Effectiveness (CEE) provided us with perceptual data on the 9 Characteristics of Highly Effective Schools with data on trust, collaboration, and clear and shared vision. This CEE survey was conducted in the 2008-2009 school year and also at the end of the 2010 school year. This important data shows where teachers felt they were on the PLC spectrum, what their fears and challenges were, and whether they attached significant professional weight to these communities.

I also conducted a pilot study at Monument Elementary in the fall of 2009. As a part of this study, two members of each grade level team (including the specialist team) were interviewed about their PLC experiences, expertise, and ideas for improving the functioning of their PLC. The interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed to look for common themes. The major themes were teachers’ perceptions of what PLC means, the influences that impact their PLCs including time, size, and the impact of PLCs on teachers and students. Participants spoke to the changes that had taken place at Monument over the past few years and how learning communities had been a part of those changes. It is apparent that Monument is currently undergoing major changes with its school improvement initiatives. The learning communities have the chief role in facilitating these changes.

With this baseline data secured, I made an effort to find a specific PLC that was facing challenges yet desired to be co-researchers in this action research project. For the purpose of this study, one PLC was chosen: the 6th grade math PLC composed of three male math teachers, each having less than five years teaching experience. During the
course of this study, another core member was added to this team. This team was co-
collaborators in this action research along with the math coach. In addition to their
relative lack of experience, these three teachers did not begin their teaching careers as
math teachers, but became highly qualified through coursework and exams. For the
2010-2011 school year, these teachers were joined by a veteran math teacher, Mike, who
has worked with interventions at Monument over the past few years. The math coach,
Kim, a co-researcher and member of the Learning Improvement Team (LIT), assisted this
group in their action research and helped me collect and analyze data.

During the 2008-2009 school year this PLC began on rocky ground. David (all
teachers agreed their real names would be used in the study), a teacher of three years, had
bounced from the junior high to the high school, and finally ended up at Monument not
by his choice, but because of staff reductions at the high school. Darrell and William,
close friends who attended college together, started teaching three years previously.
David replaced their mentor teacher and grade level leader who had just left the school to
teach in a different community. The sixth grade team had recently made a decision to
move away from the elementary school model of a homeroom based classroom where a
teacher teaches all subjects with one group of students, to a new model, where one
teacher specializes in math all day long.

When they heard that David might get transferred from the high school to our
school, Darrell and William were worried, wondering how a high school teacher would
do at the elementary level. To further complicate the team building process, David was
an active sports coach who would be unavailable to collaborate after school with William
and Darrell. The first year, 2008-2009, they tried a few times to collaborate. David was
against having a substitute cover his class so that the three of them could work together. His reasoning was that scores would not go up if he was away from his students. Darrell and William did their own thing and excluded David by default as they carpooled and collaborated daily. Trust was not high in this PLC. I, as the principal, and the math coach intervened to try and help these teachers get on the same page. Darrell and William were attempting to stay on a pacing calendar while David quickly fell a month behind them. He debated with the math coach that he could not ethically leave behind so many students who didn’t know the content. When compensation was offered to the three to work on alignment for the next school year, they struggled with finding time to do the full alignment. In 2009, math WASL scores came back with only 29% of sixth graders reaching benchmark, a significant drop.

During the 2009-2010 school year these three teachers, humbled, began to collaborate. This study focuses on the journey to become a functioning PLC for this group of math teachers. After a year of working together more collaboratively, they agreed to be the primary focus group for this action research study. They agreed to engage with me in studying and improving their functioning as a PLC. At the same time, they would be using the action research process to focus on unique innovations, interventions, and strategies to improve sixth grade math at Monument. As a benefit to them as co-researchers, they started work on their National Boards in the summer of 2010 and decided to use the action research study as a basis for their work to become Nationally Board Certified. A timeline can be found in Appendix A that details the formation of this PLC in relation to PLC work at Monument Elementary.
This action research study was structured according to Stringer’s three phases of “look, think, and act” which are cyclical in nature. This action research study relied primarily on qualitative methods, including individual interviews, observations of PLC meetings, video footage of PLC reflection sessions, PLC minutes, and reflection rubrics provided by Richard DuFour’s (2007) book, *Learning by Doing*, and Patrick Lencioni’s (2007) *Five Dysfunctions of a Team Survey*.

**Positionality**

It is no secret that I have been a proponent of PLCs since arriving in the Quincy School District in 2006. Having been a member of a highly functioning PLC as a teacher before becoming principal at Monument, I was a strong voice on the district administrative team in planning out the initial district introduction to PLCs. In reflection, this half day crash course on how to form a PLC was inadequate and too hurried. At the school level, I expected my teachers to become functioning PLCs immediately. Who wouldn’t want to collaborate to benefit student learning? Who wouldn’t want to improve instructional practices through a supportive learning community? I quickly discovered that great expectations alone do not yield successful endeavors.

Through no fault of their own, teachers adopted the PLC language, but did little to embrace PLC practices. Grade level meetings became PLCs in name only. Meetings were still focused on the nuts and bolts of school culture and were further made unwieldy by the large number of teachers present. One grade level frustrated my efforts constantly. Nine grade level teachers with varying strong opinions sharing the same collaboration time in an effort to improve student learning often resulted in discord, disagreement, lack of decision making ability and closure, and wasted time. The next year when the bubble
group of students moved up, the next grade level experienced the same challenges in trying to be a PLC as they grew from 7 teachers to 9 teachers. I worked with the grade levels with limited resources to help them get along, but made little impact on them becoming a PLC. Other factors contributed to my lack of success my first year at Monument in establishing PLCs. Being a new principal at a school where trust was not at a premium when I arrived didn’t help. One team exhibited promise, largely due to the amount of time spent with them implementing PLC principles. This was the leadership team. At the end of the year new members were elected and the process started again.

I am passionate about student learning. I believe each student can achieve at high levels despite various challenges that they may face. PLCs that are functioning with this mission have helped students at our school succeed. To me, working together to find solutions to our problems, to reflect together on our practices, to analyze student learning data and evidence, and to keep our focus on the students and their learning are the most critical facets of our job as educators. Since that first year at Monument, I have seen teacher teams embrace this mission and strive to become functioning PLCs around these principles.

It is important to acknowledge that although most teachers have embraced these ideals, I am still the boss and evaluator here at Monument. I have often wondered if PLCs would exist at Monument if the principal hadn’t led the effort to institute these learning communities. Overall, the staff at Monument seems to support PLC development efforts, despite the direction coming from their leader. This is encouraging, as at times initiatives presented to staff coming through me have met opposition just because I am the boss. The teachers at Monument are dedicated individuals, open to
expressing ideas and opinions to me and others, and have developed a desire to make PLCs a focal point in our learning. Some of the teachers which were the heavy resisters to PLCs my first year at Monument, bought PLC books with their own money the second year because they wanted to learn more about becoming better learning communities.

This information is critical to my positionality. Upon my arrival, this study would have been problematic at best. A culture has since developed, that encourages exploration and shuns the fear laden tendencies of traditional evaluation. Still, there are some staff members that benefited, in August of 2009 as I introduced this research project, when I clearly put on my research hat and took off my “boss” or “principal” hat.

At a staff retreat to kick off the 2009-2010 school year I stood in front of the staff wearing my principal hat and shared a few words about the upcoming year, validating the work the staff had done in committees over the summer. I took off that hat, and put on my WSU research hat. I talked to the staff about my summer institute and the great news that I had been approved to move forward, representing WSU as an action researcher of professional learning communities. I told them I would be meeting with individual PLCs to explain more about action research and gauging their desire to be a part of this study.

Throughout that school year I met with individuals and groups, some who I sought out and others who sought me out, to explain how this study would not only benefit me, but also their PLC group. I provided handouts that reviewed basic ideals of community based action research. I talked about my desire as a researcher to be a resource and an ear for teachers as practitioners while they work with the issues that confront their PLCs. I invited them to participate as I explained basic parameters of research consent as explicated by Stinger (2007) on page 55:
People have the right to refuse to participate.

They may withdraw from the study at any time.

Data related to their participation will be returned to them.

Any information (data) will be stored safely so that it cannot be viewed by others.

None of the information that identifies them will be made public or revealed to others without explicit and written consent.

I am aware that my positionality as both the principal and principal researcher could create undue pressure for staff members to participate. I expressed to the staff that I understood that this could be a problem. I assured them that sensitivity to their will and a discerning spirit would be my approach when discussing the possibilities with teams. I knew this would not be enough. I solicited the help of the leadership team to be my feelers. They helped me know when groups or individuals did not desire to participate. The study was narrowed down to one team that desired to be the focal point within the school.

It is very possible that groups say what they think the principal wants to hear. I am aware that this is a tendency for some (although there are many who have no qualms with telling me their mind). My hope is that as teachers have become researchers in this project they have shared with each other their truthful thoughts and reflections. Teachers have shared video study lessons, data, and other pieces that they crafted as part of their communities for the benefit of the research. This will be part of looking, thinking, and acting that Stringer (2007) outlines. The group picked as the focus of this study is the
group most likely to be honest in the process and least effected by my position as principal.

I respected the wishes of staff members without guilt trips or any negative impact that wished to not be a part of the research process. A common line that I used in these situations was, “Thank you so much for being honest and comfortable enough to let me know. I totally respect that.” Some staff members questioned why others may not want to be involved. My response was always along this vein: “this takes courage and I respect that. We have many other sources of data, so let’s focus on those.”

My positionality is also affected by my progressive attitude toward education. Like Dewey, I believe that through real lived experiences, we learn and grow. I have been impacted by the work of Richard Elmore, and have developed my own theory of action. “A theory of action can be thought of as the story line that makes a vision and a strategy concrete. It provides a way of testing assumptions and suppositions of the vision against unfolding realities of the work in an actual organization with actual people” (Elmore, 2009, p. 40). I believe that if teachers are given time to collaborate in a systematic way around student learning, are provided with opportunities to collect data through experiencing each others’ classrooms, and use this evidence to reflect on and reform their teaching practices, student achievement will be increased and the achievement gap will be eliminated. This theory of action shapes my positionality as I believe focused learning communities that function at a high level will help our students succeed.
Research Ethics

Herr and Anderson (2005) refer to action research as the “new kid on the block” and an easy target for Institutional Review Boards and dissertation committees. They suggest that a researcher “pilot” an action research project to try out some research questions in relation to real problems of real people. As the community helps shape the research within action research, it is important to find balance as a researcher between the literature that speaks to the problem and the actions carried out by the participants (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Stinger, 2007). This balance was an ethical focus for the study of this PLC. “Because of the participatory nature of action research, ethical considerations work in a special way” (Stringer, 2007, p. 55). Stakeholders have the same informed consent and safety rights as in other forms of research, but are mutually engaged in the research, making mutual agreement and communication key to ethical considerations (Stringer, 2007). A special effort to keep communication and mutual agreement at the forefront of this action research was critical to this study.

Confidentiality becomes a major issue when dealing with action research dissertations. As the report of the study reveals the identity of the research site and participants, it is possible that the research findings could be used in a critical way by others. For this reason, confidentiality became a major issue in the conduct of this study. I talked to the team of teachers about these confidentiality issues. They had all read studies in which the identity of sites and participants were not disclosed and that outlined the good, bad, and ugly of the study’s findings. We talked about how these qualitative and quantitative studies sought for objective data, whether good or bad, but also incorporated pseudonyms to protect participants from possible backlash, hurt feelings, or
even fear of the results having a negative future impact on their jobs. The team had little concerns in this area and agreed that using their real names wouldn’t be a problem, as action research was an exciting idea to them.

Action research also seeks for accurate data but varies from traditional research in that the participants are not pawns in the process. Rather, the participants are part of the research, helping design it, acting based on the study, and repeating the “look, think, and act” process as necessary to yield improvement. A community approach to research takes place. The information presented in the study is not a surprise to the participants, as they helped craft it and carry it out. At the same time, the rest of the staff at Monument Elementary would have access to the dissertation and anything within it. The study would also be provided to the district to assist in its efforts to encourage functioning PLCs.

It was necessary to explain to the 6th grade math team that everyone would easily know who was involved in the research, even if we changed their names. For that reason, I shared with the team the practice of member checking, or the co-researchers having access to transcripts and chapters to check for accuracy and sensitivity. It was also important to explain to this team that honesty to where they were and where they are now in relation to the improvement of their PLC needed to be candidly shared with one another in order for us to figure out what actions might need to take place. Part of this process might include individual interviews where members share frustrations from the past. Details from these interviews may be shared in a general way within the written dissertation, therefore making member checking something that may become sensitive. I could not assure them confidentiality, as the whole point of action research is to examine
together the problem identified by the learning community. They would have access to my writing as I painted the picture they were creating with the research. They would have access to these drafts to assure that I am painting an accurate picture of the PLC work taking place. This is important to assure that they are not put in a situation that they perceive as threatening to them. The team felt good about member checking and also appreciated the other benefits of the research, including data, transcriptions, and documents that could be used for their National Board Certification.

In addition to using the study for their National Board Certification, the team hoped the work would help them improve student learning enough in math to provide some leadership leverage for them in the school. They desire to have success with students and then in turn give back by supporting 5th and 4th grade teachers in their math efforts. They understood that with significant gains in math scores that may result with the increased functioning of their PLC, teachers in the building would look to them as leaders. The public document that the dissertation becomes could provide concrete evidence that the work their PLC is involved with is making a difference. Thus, an understanding was reached in regard to “confidentiality” for this study.

In addition to addressing confidentiality issues with the group that was finally selected to be the unit of study, other ethical issues were presented in the initial stages of research. The school’s learning improvement team, consisting of teacher leaders from each grade level, helped with the action research in its initial stages, before a specific group had been picked to become the co-researchers. As more PLCs in the school became involved in action research projects, some tension developed. There were parts of PLCs that wanted to participate in action research, but not the whole team. Pressure
was placed on resisting teammates without my knowledge. In May of 2010, Quincy Education Association building representatives met with me and presented me with a copy of the WSU consent form. They wanted to know what it was and how it was connected to some building learning initiatives. They expressed that some members were feeling pressure from other teachers to participate in my dissertation. I explained that the form was not connected to other initiatives and I had met with teams to explain the project and answer their questions. I also offered to meet with individuals and teams at their desire to further explain involvement in this project. These issues were easily resolved once I was aware of the unneeded pressure provided by other staff members. I met with individuals and one team to clarify the process, and some opted out, which was fine, while other groups wanted support in this action research. I shared with groups and individuals that the purpose of the research was not to provide more work for them, but to support them in their efforts to improve student learning through their current PLC labors. I wanted to create a win/win situation. I was up front about being a resource for them that could provide research and ideas for measurement of progress within their community. Any transcriptions or minutes taken by me were provided to individuals and teams for reflective purposes. This reciprocity was appreciated by involved staff members. Even when the study was narrowed to one group, my support and efforts continued with the other PLCs based on their desire to continue working on their projects and action research.

Checks for trustworthiness took place throughout the duration of the study. Lincoln and Guba (as cited in Stringer, 2007) describe this trustworthiness as exhibited in four ways. Credibility speaks to the plausibility of the study. Transferability treats the
possibility of applying the outcomes of the study to other contexts. Dependability means that research procedures are clearly defined and open to scrutiny. Conformability requires evidence that the procedures described actually took place. These four facets of trustworthiness are addressed in the report of the study in chapter 3.

Before trustworthiness is addressed in chapter 3, a review of the literature associated with PLCs will take place in chapter 2. Literature reviewed includes characteristics of PLCs, how PLCs impact professional development and school improvement, the process of developing functional PLCs, and the role of the principal in this work. After the literature has been reviewed, chapter 3 will detail the action research study. It includes a summary of a pilot study on PLCs conducted at Monument Elementary School and the phases of action research that took place within the 6th grade math PLC as they improved their functioning. Chapter 4 outlines the outcomes, conclusions and implications, and reflections of the study.
Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

To provide context for this study, this literature review includes the history of professional learning communities (PLCs); common characteristics of PLCs; and the impact of PLCs on professional development, school improvement, and student learning. Additional topics are the process of becoming a functioning PLC and the role of the principal in establishing these communities.

The Emergence of the Professional Learning Community

PLCs within our schools have developed over the last 20 years and “seem to be everywhere: in village schools, city schools, rural settings, and suburban and urban locales” (Roy & Hord, 2006, p. 490). The history of communities in schools is much older and perhaps developed in its expression through sociological literature. Bryk and Driscoll (1988) explain that communal relationships as explained by Ferdinand Tonnies and elaborated by Max Weber can help us understand the shift that is taking place in education. “Communal relationships (of the community, or Gemeinschaft) are based on subjective understandings—sentiments and traditions which bind people together. Associative relationships of a society, or Gesellschaft), in contrast, are based on rational assessments of common interests or purposes” (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988, p. 3). They argue that community as defined in schools takes from both of these traditions (1988). Adler, Kwon, and Heckscher (2008) describe this mix of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft as “collaborative” (p. 366) and the transformation of schools over the past 20 years as a shift from hierarchy (top down, control, authority) to community (trust, inputs,
interdependent, innovation). “By the 1990s, a new age had begun, that of the collegial professionalism…the sphere of collaboration is broadening, drawing teachers into more active engagement” (Adler et al., 2008, p. 369). It is clear that a reform-instigated transformation in our schools has taken place over the last 20 years in relation to teacher learning communities, while at the same time acknowledging that a community is nothing new to education.

My educational hero, John Dewey, had a particular interest in the effects of a community on learning. Dewey’s research focused on the relation of the individual to a society and learning through experience the necessary knowledge to become a productive member of a democracy (Dewey, 1900). His writings focused on the role of the school’s organizational structure in enabling a community to develop. To Dewey, a school was not just an organization distributing resources and knowledge, as its social organization was central to its mission and purpose, but rather something to be studied for how it shapes the individual (Bryk & Driscoll, 1988). Recent educators who have pushed for the formation of teacher PLCs, such as Anthony Bryk, Karen Seashore Louis, and Judith Warren Little, have embraced the philosophies of Dewey within their research.

Little spoke of a school’s organization and its ability to form groups in an effort to professionalize teaching (1993). Louis, the associate dean of education at the University of Minnesota, has published qualitative and quantitative research on teacher communities since the early 1990s to develop a framework that has since shaped the work and language of proponents of PLCs. This analytical framework brings context to PLCs in relation to school level and organization and teachers’ responsibility for student learning, innovation, respect, and staff development (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996). The
framework was developed based on research, thanks to a clearly elicited definition of professional communities in 1995 by Bryk, Kruse, and Louis, based on five elements for a PLC: “shared values, focus on student learning, collaboration, deprivatization of practice, and reflective dialogue” (Louis et al., 1996, p. 760). These modern learning community pioneers not only helped define PLCs, but they also validated this emergent work as relevant to improving student learning, defining effective professional development, and positively affecting school improvement.

More recently, PLCs have moved from scholarly journals into mainstream education in the form of popular literature and workshops. PLCs are “being hailed as the best idea for continual school improvement since the overhead projector reached classrooms” (Roy & Hord, 2006, p. 490). Having worked within a PLC as a teacher and then as a principal working to establish a PLC in my school, I have relied heavily on popular literature that is easily accessible to teachers to establish a definition. Although the academic community may scoff at Richard DuFour, Becky DuFour, and Bob Eaker, who are self-made millionaires riding the coattails of the PLC movement, their books, articles, and definitions are widely affirmed in the literature reviewed in more scholarly articles. In the most practical sense, teachers and administrators are flocking to their workshops in an effort to establish a PLC. I have had the opportunity to meet the DuFours and to work closely with Bob Eaker, a colleague of the DuFours, over the course of the last four years. Their definition of a PLC has become my own.

A PLC is made up of a group of collaborating teachers who meet regularly with a commitment to improve instruction and the learning of each student. “The very essence of a learning community is a focus on and a commitment to the learning of each student.
A PLC is composed of collaborative teams whose members work interdependently to achieve common goals linked to the purpose of learning for all” (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2006, p. 3). The beliefs and values of these collaborative teams with regard to the imperative task of helping students learn forms the rationale for their existence. With student learning at the core of a PLC, many characteristics define a PLC in its efforts to focus on these critical questions.

**Characteristics of a Professional Learning Community**

To clearly define the characteristics of a PLC, Roy and Hord (2006) have organized the descriptors into a number of convenient categories: “organizational scope, supportive and shared leadership, collective learning and application, shared values and vision, supportive conditions, and shared practice” (p. 492). For the purpose of explicating the characteristics of a PLC, I will be adopting these categories for this portion of the literature review, with the exception of “organizational scope,” which I choose to include later in this review. The categories cover the major components of a PLC as manifested in the extensive literature reviewed for this dissertation.

**Shared Values and Vision**

A PLC is characterized by shared values and vision with a focus on student learning (Arter, 2001, DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Hord, 2004; National Association of Elementary School Principals [NAESP], 2004; Rosenholtz, 1989; Scribner, 2002; Stoll, McMahon, & Thomas, S., 2006). The educators who form the PLC share a belief that student learning are at the core of their mission. “School mission statements that promise ‘learning for all’ have become a cliché. But when a school staff takes that statement literally—who teachers view it as a pledge to
ensure the success of each student rather than a politically correct hyperbole—profound changes begin to take place” (DuFour, 2004, p. 10). Louis (2006) reiterates that the critical role of the PLC is a persistent effort of teachers “to focus on the relationship between their practice and the bottom line—student learning” (p. 479). The ultimate purpose of the PLC is to enhance student learning (Stoll et al., 2006). A shared value placed on student learning results in the development of norms, beliefs, values, and goals.

DuFour et al. (2006) would call the norms, beliefs, values, and goals the “four pillars” of a PLC (p. 5). First and foremost, the team has a belief, even a high expectation, that each student can and will learn (Arter, 2001). Norms are developed around this belief that ensures time together will be spent on behalf of student learning. Values are created informally or formally and often included as a part of the communities’ norms. PLCs may develop value statements such as “At this school, we work with students to do proactive kinds of activities or interventions that show students that there is a better way to solve problems” (Scribner, 2002, p. 64). As the team focuses on student learning, clear goals are outlined that assure outcomes are being tracked and measured for learning initiatives. As learning goals are accomplished, the PLC further emphasizes the team’s vision by celebrating students’ learning successes (Stoll et al., 2006). A clear vision that is reiterated in the daily school life of teachers through established goals, norms, beliefs, and values helps the team make important decisions about learning.

The NAESP advocates the establishment of PLCs as a means to not only establish a clear vision around student learning, but also to use that vision for decision making (2004). Teachers within PLCs need to be given decision-making authority to affect what
they can control: student learning (DuFour et al., Hord, 2004; 2005; NAESP, 2004). A PLC will use its established vision, focused on student learning, to evaluate the effectiveness of its decisions in relation to learning outcomes. One member of a PLC described the purpose of their meetings, where the vision shaped the decision-making and goal-setting aims of the team. “There is a time to share successes and discuss strategies that resulted in student learning, as well as to share difficulties, determine why they arose, and find solutions” (Arter, 2001, p. 56). This team decision-making process toward goals provides a collective efficacy around student learning. “Collective efficacy is a shared belief that group members can execute a course of action that makes a difference (Cameron, McIver, & Goddard, 2008, p. 6). Functioning PLCs can create this collective efficacy.

**Collective Learning and Application**

Collective learning and application are foundational characteristics of PLCs that can be divided into reflective dialogue, inquiry, application, and assessment efforts (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Hord, 2004; Leite, 2006; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Rosenholtz, 1989; Roy & Hord, 2006; Scribner, 2002; Servage, 2008). Reflective dialogue provides team members with the opportunity to think about their practices along with a desire to improve them. Servage (2008) bases this PLC inquiry on the establishment of a community by teachers as they gather to collaboratively plan, study curriculum, and work with assessments with an emphasis on dialogue. A strong sense of community is established with the group taking on a “collective responsibility for student learning” (Servage, 2008, p. 64) through their reflective dialogue, which provides for
intense collaboration, enabling teachers to meet the difficult intellectual and physical challenges posed by teaching (Hord, 2004, Scribner, 2002).

An outcome of reflective dialogue presents an opportunity for group inquiry within the PLC (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Hord, 2004; Rosenholtz, 1989, Servage, 2008). Schools across the country, including my own, have adopted DuFour’s four questions to guide PLC groups and help them align their beliefs into an interdependent focus. These “big ideas” include the following questions: “(1) What do we want each student to learn? (2) How will we know when the student has learned it? (3) How will we respond when they have trouble learning it? (4) What will we do if they already know it?” (DuFour, 2004, p. 10). The purpose of these PLC groups intensely focuses on these four questions, a major shift from the dominant culture of teachers spending the majority of their time planning field trips and talking about student discipline. The PLC constantly investigates the content, context, and enduring tensions of improvement (Roy & Hord, 2006): “When professionals learn together and focus on student results, not only do they learn about their craft, but they also enhance student learning” (p. 500). Collaborative work in a PLC involves inquiry and problem solving in relation to daily teaching practices (Servage, 2008).

The PLC’s inquiry reflects on daily teaching practices and its actions and applications follow in order to improve student learning (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Hord, 2004; Leite, 2006, Scribner, 2002). A focus on learning outcomes allows PLC teachers to adjust instructional practices to improve student learning. An emphasis is placed on learning versus teaching (DuFour et al., 2005): “Rather than ensure that all students are taught well, the PLC is focused on ensuring that all students learn at high
levels” (Roy & Hord, 2006). When it is discovered that students are not learning, PLC members seek solutions to the learning issue, develop a strategy, and take action in order to improve student learning. More experienced educators within the PLC may help beginning teachers improve learning in their classrooms as they share strategies that have worked for them (Leite, 2008). After acting, the PLC meets to assess data and evaluate if their efforts are matching their goals.

The PLC collects data on improvement initiatives to evaluate their progress (Arter, 2001; DuFour et al., Hord, 2004; 2005; NAESP, 2004). A critical aspect and characteristic of the PLC is the need for data to drive their work. Members of the team shift away from making decisions based on intuition, opinion, or what might be easier for the teacher, but instead defer to the data to ascertain if learning initiatives are making a difference. A teacher from a PLC shared the following insight in relation to evaluating the community’s progress: “Because we are small, we look for things outside to evaluate us and make us think. If you are good, you can still get better” (Stoll et al., 2006). Arter (2001) suggests that this work occurs through the development of powerful assessments using four “hooks”: 1) sorting student work to develop criteria for judging its quality; 2) showing how to teach students to self-assess their own work using performance criteria and rubrics; 3) establishing learning criteria for quality classroom assessments; and 4) citing research that improved classroom assessment” (p. 60). A sense of collective responsibility is created by focusing on the data (Stoll et al., 2006). This collective responsibility creates a need for the PLC to focus on shared practices.
Shared Practices

Shared practices are founded within the PLCs on the premise that peers help peers (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Hord, 2004; Leite, 2006; Louis & Kruse, 1995; NAESP, 2004; Rosenholtz, 1989; Scribner, 2002; Stoll, McMahon, & Thomas, 2006). This is consideration extended to veteran teachers who are accustomed to shutting their door and going about their work alone. Furthermore, staff must be open to new ideas and ready to collaborate “and not be inward looking and defensive” (Stoll et al., 2006). A number of human capacities have been identified within studies on PLCs as critical to the success of the team, including openness, trust, feedback, and risk taking (Hord, 2004; Liete, 2006; Louis, 2006; NAESP, 2004; Stoll et al., 2006). A group of PLC teachers studied by Leite (2006) cited open-mindedness as a critical element of PLCs. Subjects talked about how it would be hard to open themselves up to critical sharing and idea exchanging, but ultimately, these qualities would provide better results in student learning by deepening issues through collective thought.

Openness allows the PLC to develop trust, which results in the desire to take risks and provide feedback. Development of these human capacities requires a change in culture that can only take place over time.

Why does it take so long to initiate a PLC? One answer can be found in the increasingly robust research that suggests that trust is an element of organizational culture that is critical and routinely overlooked—probably because administrators do not really want to face the music. (Louis, 2006, p. 482)
Principals build trust with and across staff, while staff builds trust with each other (Roy & Hord, 2006). Until trust is developed in the PLC, risk taking and the possibility for feedback are not possible.

When trust is developed over time within the PLC, teachers engage in risk taking and feedback. One secondary teacher described her PLC in these terms: “You’re encouraged to take risks and be a bit more creative and to work together and develop and share good practices” (Stoll et al., 2006). Louis (2006) would caution that this level of trust does not happen in a year or because a school has decided to implement PLCs. Teams are constantly grappling with these human capacities in an effort to become and stay functional.

Later in this review, we will take a more in-depth look at these characteristics in relation to the functionality of the PLC. It is clear that a critical aspect of the development of human capacities is a supportive and shared leadership within the school associated with the development of PLCs.

**Supportive and Shared Leadership**

“Leadership and management are vitally important to a PLC…creating, developing, and sustaining a PLC is a major strategic leadership task” (Stoll et al., 2006). Studies on PLCs show that the importance of a supportive leader, shared leadership, decision making, and collegially facilitated participation are all keys to the implementation of effective learning teams (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Hord, 2004; Louis & Kruse, 1995; NAESP, 2004; Rosenholtz, 1989; Scribner, 2002; Stoll, McMahon, & Thomas, 2006). Principals are critical in building “a trustworthy, respectful, and collaborative environment” (Roy & Hord, 2006, p. 493). Part of building
this environment rests in the work of sharing authority, helping to facilitate the work of the staff and the ability to participate without dominating (Roy & Hord, 2006). The principal moves beyond a top-down paradigm to become a supportive and encouraging advocate for the work. Participants of the PLC embrace distributed leadership, shared decision making, and an emphasis on dialogue (Servage, 2008; Scribner, 2002).

It is one thing to say you are a PLC and quite another to truly create a culture where PLCs can thrive. Schein (1985; as quoted in Stoll, Bolom, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006) argues “that the only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture” (p. 236). A delicate balance must take place in the development of PLCs.

Gates and Watkins (2010) define this balance as one between autonomy and heteronomy and cite the principal as being the key in allowing learning communities to find this balance. Teachers’ emergent practices are balanced between their own personality and expressive teaching and the communities’ purpose and mission. This concept is illustrated through rich qualitative data gathered from two high-functioning PLC schools (Gates & Watkins, 2010). A fifth-grade team moves from emergent practices to congruent practices and finally to aligned practices toward higher student achievement. Susan Printy’s (2008) quantitative study of the influence of high school principals and department chairs on communities of practice for science and math teachers echoes Gates and Watkins’ qualitative study: “Principals who communicate clear vision, support teachers, and buffer them from outside influences—conditions that encourage teachers toward productive learning—positively affect teachers’ participation
in communities of practice” (p. 211). Principals who influence learning communities in this way must master the development of a PLC culture.

The leadership aspect of developing a culture within a school that supports professional learning communities is perhaps the most challenging aspect of this promising practice. Advocacy literature for the development of PLCs by school leaders suggests that these learning teams are critical for authentic professional development and school improvement.

**PLCs, Professional Development, and School Improvement**

The majority of the literature reviewed in regard to PLCs advocates their implementation as the most effective way to provide professional development for teachers and to improve schools. Judith Little (as cited in Schmoker, 2004, p. 429) affirms that “School improvement is most surely and thoroughly achieved when teachers engage in frequent, continuous, and increasingly concrete and precise talk about teaching practice.” The results of a large-scale empirical study of 1,027 math and science teachers across the United States confirms this premise that “sustained and intensive professional development” (p. 935) has a greater impact on improved teaching than shorter professional development (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001). The results of their study show that professional development that focuses on content, that provides opportunities for hands-on work or active learning for teachers, and that is relevant to the daily life of a school are the most likely to provide “enhanced knowledge and skills” (p. 935).

Mike Schmoker would endorse these activities and say we should dump the ineffective attempt to improve schools and put all of our efforts into building PLCs
(Schmoker, 2004). A case is made for teams of teachers looking at short-term cycles of improvement versus annual school improvement. Teachers through short-term trial and error can find more effective ways to teach math, reading comprehension skills, and elements of writing. This is much more doable work for educators as opposed to the huge time commitment and effort for strategic planning that will inevitably overload teachers and staff (Schmoker, 2004). Riehl’s (1998) study of discourse leading to constructive action in faculty meetings endorses Schmoker’s argument that we often spend too much time on strategic planning and talking about things that do little to change classroom instruction. In fact, most staff participated willingly in faculty and professional development meetings through the partnership, but very few of them used these times to talk about teaching practices and make changes in these practices (Riehl, 1998). Educators who stay on the road to developing PLCs are rewarded with pertinent professional development, improved schools, and increased student learning.

This section reviews the literature with regard to how PLCs affect professional development and improve schools: (1) PLCs start with a collaborative focus on student learning related to daily teaching practices, (2) these teacher teams use dialogue and reflection to drive their professional development, and (3) reflection gives the team data that is used to engage in problem solving and school improvement.

**Collaborative Focus on Student Learning**

Advocates for PLCs attest to their collaborative power to effect change related to daily teaching practices that improve student learning (Bellamy, Crawford, Marshall, & Coulter, 2005; Calhoun, 2002; Ferrara, 2007; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Kazemi & Hubbard, 2008; Lavie, 2006; Lumpe, 2007; Schmoker, 2004; Servage,
Teachers in these learning communities have student learning at their core. Kazemi and Hubbard (2008) contextualize this concept within their study, as one PLC used video recordings to analyze the learning of their students in math. After viewing the videos, the group discussed what learning they saw, evidence for that learning, and then pedagogy, and finally how they might change practices while assuring follow-ups for professional development. Staff professional development is the key to improved student learning. Professional development is most effective when it is collaborative and collegial (Servage, 2008).

Again, principals have been identified as critical to promoting collegial interactions among teachers. According to Lavie (2006), ultimately the principal acts in creating a culture that promotes research, risk taking, and an extension of the leadership capabilities of each teacher. Teachers must share the vision of the work, “roles which transcend the limits of their individual classrooms” (p. 784). Scribner echoes this sentiment, showing through his study of work context and teacher learning (1999) that professional development is most effectively embedded into the day as teachers focus on improving student learning. Schools that adopt the PLC framework and support it with time and resources encourage the improvement of student learning.

As an advocate for this improvement effort, Calhoun focuses on developing school-wide or district-wide action research models that pursue students’ learning goals (2002). This professional development system includes students’ information, their performance information, information about their learning environment, and the learning environment the organization would like to see. Calhoun studied a school where this system was in place. One PLC at this school allowed a kindergarten teacher to receive
training with other teachers to reflect student learning needs and ultimately to adopt a strategy and monitor its effectiveness by tracking data on student learning (Calhoun, 2002). Darling Hammond advocates this type of professional development as the core of a learning community in efficacy in learning. “In many high-achieving nations where teacher collaboration is the norm, teachers have substantial influence on school-based decisions, especially in the development of curriculum and assessment and in the design of their own professional learning” (Darling-Hammond, 2009, p. 2). Professional learning for the educator within the PLC is not only relevant to the situation at hand, but allows for mentoring, development, and nurturing of new teachers while the veterans continue to reflect and learn from each other.

**Dialogue and Reflection**

Dialogue is critical to reflection within the PLC. Kazemi and Hubbard (2008) speak to this not only after professional development endeavors instigated by the PLC, but also during those initiatives. They claim that teachers who reflect and converse in the midst of their professional development are more likely to actually change practices and affect student learning. This reflection and dialogue in the context of the PLC can take on many forms. Garet et al. (2001) describes this professional development as taking place within four dimensions: “(1) observing and being observed; (2) planning classroom implementation; (3) reviewing students’ work; and (4) presenting, leading, and writing” (p. 925-926). The fourth dimension provides the opportunity for post-learning reflection, while the other three allow for ongoing reflection through these teacher learning activities. Servage (2008) makes the connection between transformative learning and these communities: “Both emphasize critical reflection, dialogue in group settings, and
transformative change” (p. 67). This critical reflection and dialogue in the group setting lead to a transformative change that is arguably the most effective professional development.

In relation to the impact that this professional development has on the school and learning, Stoll et al. (2006) cite numerous studies evidencing a positive correlation. “There were widely reported examples of impacts on individual professional learning arising from continuing professional development and work-based or incidental learning opportunities” (p. 615). The dialogues between community members that include the sharing of instructional practices allow individuals within the community to progress and grow. One teacher new to a PLC school explains the importance of this dialogue facilitating a process of improvement: “This school gave me the opportunity to experiment. I was a traditional teacher, I think…, so it’s been a wonderful catalyst for me to grow and learn” (Giles & Hargreaves, 2006, p. 139). Although this teacher paints a rosy picture of PLC life, the real work of a PLC is not intended to provide luxurious learning amenities.

Problem Solving

Problem solving is the real work of a PLC. Education is plentiful with never-ending challenges to occupy the educators’ time. To further complicate matters, teachers often vary in their opinions and ideas as to how these problems should be solved. PLCs attempt to organize educators around student learning to focus on finding relevant solutions (Scribner, 1999). All initiatives are accomplished through collaborative partnering and sharing of solutions. Decision making is driven by continuous cycles of assessment and evaluation (Ferrara, 2007). Servage (2008) argues that without
transformation of learning based on a trust that provides for risk taking, problem solving will not take place. When PLCs engage in tough conversations, the goal should be to “find questions—the sort of questions that, over time, may nudge the professional learning community closer to its potential role as a site of transformative learning for participants” (p. 75). When these questions dig deep, ample opportunity for conflict arises.

Conflict does not hinder the opportunity for professional development in the PLC and instead provides for further dialogue and reflection. Scribner et al. (1999) studies a school that had significant challenges, including structural changes to the sixth-grade team that moved from a traditional elementary model to a specialized model. Constructive conflict was readily available through this process and not ignored, but was embraced as an opportunity to learn. Lima (2001) proposed that conflict is more important in shaping improved student learning than having a community that is friendly and only collegial in nature. “In this paper, I argued that teacher communities that rely entirely or even predominantly on strong interpersonal ties are not necessarily better prepared to initiate and sustain this change” (p. 116). He also said, “Without cognitive conflict, teacher collaboration is dispensable” (p. 116). In this way conflict becomes a prerequisite to commitment, while friendship can hinder true collaboration.

Conflict is created as PLCs struggle to discover the best way to help struggling students. Figuring out how to detect early learning problems and resolve those can be a challenging aspect of PLC work. A student learning problem should be brought to the team for analysis and discussion (Bellamy et al., 2005), acknowledging that helping the specific student is only possible as the teachers work together to find different
instructional approaches. Teachers who meet together often to inquire about students’ learning will find the strategy or technique that gets the best results for a struggling student (Bellamy et al., 2005). Thus, a community is created. “Community, however, is not a remedy for conflict. Conflict, in fact, may be one sign that the community is beginning to address the diverse needs of its members” (Westheimer, 1999, p. 101).

Professional development takes place as the team transverses the conflicts of problem solving and enters into shared decision making (Ferrara, 2007; Servage, 2008). The PLC can be a valuable structure for professional development and school improvement.

Effective professional development and school improvement can be products of the implementation of effective PLCs (Bellamy et al., 2005; Calhoun, 2002; Garet et al., 2001; Kazemi & Hubbard, 2008; Lumpe, 2007; Schmoker, 2004; & Servage, 2008). Important aspects of PLCs and their facilitation of professional development and school improvement include their collaborative nature and connection to daily teaching practices, their intense focus on student learning in relation to academic subjects, authentic group dialogue and reflection, problem solving, and shared decision making. Sergiovanni (2000) claims, “Developing a community of practice may be the single most important way to improve a school” (as cited in Servage, 2008, p. 63). If so, what evidence is there that PLCs actually impact student learning?

**Emergence of Teacher Efficacy in PLCs: A Case for Student Achievement**

The time commitment involved to develop professional learning communities in our schools is justified by the research of Kruse, Louis, Little, Bryk, and Darling-Hammond. The work of these pioneers justifies the formation of PLCs. In a study of 900 teachers from 24 nationally selected restructuring schools, both elementary and
secondary schools, it was discovered that “how teachers interact when they are not in their classrooms may be critical to the future of school restructuring and to the effects of restructuring on students” (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996, p. 758). Results suggest that PLCs affect teachers’ professional development, school improvement, and students’ learning.

Students’ learning is at the core of PLCs, and therefore it is an important measure of the success of these learning communities:

Studies connecting teachers’ sense of responsibility for student learning to improved student achievement are rare in education, but the overall evidence points to a reasonable assumption that teachers’ increased sense of mastery and control over student learning is likely to be either a cause or a consequence of improvements in student performance. (Louis et al., 1996, p. 786)

Organizational structures within schools that enable learning communities to emerge have shown the impact that PLCs can have on student achievement. Those schools where “a professional community is present, social support for achievement is higher in the classroom (.31, p < .01; Table 2)” (Louis & Marks, 1998, p. 548). To assess authentic student achievement, researchers at the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools (CORS) at the University of Wisconsin developed a set of standards for intellectual quality that could be applied across grade levels and disciplines in both practice and research settings (Louis & Marks, 1998). “Similarly, where schools achieved a professional community, the quality of classroom pedagogy is considerably higher (.36, p < .01)” (p. 548). The data analyzed in this study measured “learning community” within the components of shared values, focus on student learning,
collaboration, deprivatization of practice, and reflective dialogue. PLCs clearly affect students’ learning.

**Successful PLCs and Collective Efficacy**

Strahan (2003) cites numerous examples of schools in poverty that increased student achievement after they instituted PLCs for a three-to-five-year period. He cites three important keys to increasing student achievement in these schools. More than 20 years of research verifies that students’ engagement has a direct correlation to their achievement. The next large-scale best practice in the reform effort has to do with teacher quality. A good teacher has a huge impact on student achievement, while a poor teacher can devastate the chances of a student every reaching a benchmark. Finally, collective efficacy enhances the quality of teaching (Strahan, 2003). This collective efficacy is a central goal for PLCs, affecting both student engagement and teacher quality, and ultimately student learning. Collective efficacy, or “a shared belief that group members can execute a course of action that makes a difference” (Cameron, McIver, Goddard, 2008, p. 6), has been found to be a critical element in the improvement of student learning in schools with traditionally challenging demographics.

Reyes and Fletcher’s study (as cited in Strahan, 2003) of four migrant school districts with high test results found the greatest factors to be in the area of collective efficacy due to their organizational structure. Each of these districts demonstrated at least 70% of their students reached the standard on standardized math tests. What teachers collectively believed about students seemed to be a significant factor in these results. In addition to these districts, specific schools have been cited as making significant gains. The staff of Jay Cooke Middle School created small learning communities that included
coaching and instructional support. Within a few years of implementation, they experienced significant gains in achievement (Strahan, 2003). In a study of one rural elementary over a four-year period (Berry, Johnson, & Montgomery, 2005), the school went from 50% performing above standard to 80% above standard after forming PLCs. Phillips (2003) documents a middle school over three years that went from 50% passing reading, writing, science, and social studies tests to over 90% passing after the implementation of their PLCs. The development of collective efficacy within the PLC and school has proven to affect student achievement as opposed to superficially forming groups called PLCs.

Collective teacher efficacy has its roots in social cognitive theory, is an emergent group-level attribute in PLCs, and “the product of the interactive dynamics of the group members” (Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2000, p. 482). The interactive dynamics of teachers in schools fall into two categories: (1) analysis of the teaching task and (2) assessment of teaching competence that draws from the sources of master experience, vicarious experience, social persuasion, and emotional state (Goddard et al., 2000). Teachers analyze what represents good instruction in their school, what barriers exist, what resources are needed to succeed, and form specific opinions about which teachers around them are competent. Schools with PLCs are more likely to create collective efficacy as teachers are able to see a clearer picture. Teachers who are in each others’ classrooms, watching video lessons, and aligning curriculum together are more likely to believe in each other and the difference they can make together. PLCs and schools that have established this collective efficacy show an increase in student achievement as they have
a group orientation: “Teachers in this school can get through to the most difficult students” (Goddard et al., 2000, p. 487).

Multiple school-level studies have shown that high teacher efficacy results in higher parent involvement, improvement of students’ abilities, greater school orderliness, more teacher innovation, and increased teacher knowledge, even as suspensions and dropout rates decrease (Goddard et al., 2000). In the study by Goddard et al. (2000), the dependent variables of student achievement in math and reading were studied against the independent variable of collective teacher efficacy. It was found that collective teacher efficacy explained 53.27% and 69.64% of the variance in mathematics and reading, respectively. In addition to this half to two-thirds variance for this achievement, it was also found that other positive school characteristics were systematically associated (Goddard et al., 2000). In other words, of the 70 elementary schools included in this study, those with the greatest student achievement were associated with the schools that had the highest collective efficacy scores. The study concludes by suggesting that administrators should encourage staff to engage in common PLC activities such as video studies and visits to other classrooms and even schools with similar demographics (vicarious learning experiences and social persuasion) to build collective efficacy (Goddard et al., 2000). Such learning and collective efficacy is not found just in elementary schools.

**Secondary School PLC Success**

High schools, famous for their resistance to collaborating, show a correlation between the formation of PLCs and increased student achievement. Richard DuFour, the principal of Adlai Stevenson High School, instituted PLCs upon his arrival. He
eliminated the tracking of students based on ninth-grade achievement data and organized the teachers into learning communities. In 1985, Stevenson did not rank among the top 50 schools in the 13-state Midwest region. By 1994, it was among the top 20 schools in the world. Almost 80% of its students take at least one advanced placement (AP) class before they graduate. In 1994, the school broke records in every traditional aspect of student achievement, including grade distributions, failure rates, average ACT and SAT scores, percentage of honor grades on AP exams, and average scores in each of the five state achievement areas (DuFour, 1995). Stevenson’s data affirms the study of Louis and Marks (1998): change at high schools is slow, but with established PLCs, improvement in student achievement is eminent.

Other studies have confirmed that learning communities make a difference at the secondary level. Langer (2000) studied 44 middle and high school teachers in 25 schools. During this five-year study, she found that of the 25 schools, 14 were beating the odds despite high percentages of ESL students and high poverty levels.

The effective schools and districts nurtured a climate that (1) orchestrated coordinated efforts to improve student achievement, (2) fostered teacher participation in a variety of learning communities, (3) created structural improvement activities in ways that offered teachers a strong sense of agency, (4) valued commitment to the profession of teaching, (5) engendered a caring attitude to colleagues and students, and (6) fostered a deep respect for lifelong learning.

(Langer, 2000, p. 397)

Interestingly, Langer concludes her study by recognizing teachers with these qualities as exceptional and as “teachers who believe it is within their power to make a difference in
their students’ lives, and who thrive on making this a reality” (p. 437). Again, PLCs that have developed a collective efficacy help students succeed. Schools that build PLCs over time are having success with student achievement, yet it is hard to judge the effectiveness of PLCs without evaluating how the PLC is functioning.

**The Process of Developing a Functional Professional Learning Community**

**Evidence of Dysfunctional PLCs**

For every study that shows the positive impact that PLCs have on student learning, examples can be cited of schools trying to implement learning communities that are failing. PLCs, by title only, do not guarantee an increase in student learning. Scholars agree that implementation alone of these learning communities will often fall well short of increasing student learning for a number of factors (Giles & Hargreaves, 2006; Kruse & Louis, 1997; Langer, 2000; Lavie, 2006; Louis & Marks, 1998; Scribner et al., 1999; Scribner, Hager, & Warne, 2002; Supovitz, 2002; Wells & Feun, 2007; Westheimer, 1999). In a four-year study of a medium-sized urban district, Supovitz (2002) found the following:

The results suggest that although these types of organizational reforms may succeed in improving the culture within which teachers teach, they alone are unlikely to improve instruction and student learning. The communities that develop are often not communities engaged in instructional improvement. Communities need organizational structures, cultures of instructional exploration, and ongoing professional learning opportunities to support sustained inquiries into improving teaching and learning. (p. 591)
This sentiment is repeated throughout the literature: Many learning communities struggle to focus on what truly matters—student learning.

Evidence of ideal practices versus reality can be found in the study of elementary, middle, and high schools trying to establish PLCs. Wells and Feun (2007) studied six high schools that volunteered to be trained in the PLC way. They then studied these schools a year later in relation to the five dimensions of a learning community. The results of this study showed that teachers strongly believe that collaboration is necessary, but at least in the initial stages of PLC they spend little time talking about shared goals, formative data, and assessments. The bottom three scores were in the areas most associated with improving student learning. These were planned interventions for students who are not learning the material, agreement about what should be done with students who are not learning, and examining and comparing student learning results (Mean of 2.35, 2.15, and 2.08, respectively, with 2 signifying “seldom” engaged in this practice). One year may not be enough to establish a culture where PLCs can flourish.

**Sticking With It**

It is clear that PLCs are not formed overnight and must stick with their core principles to sustain success over time (DuFour et al., 2004; Louis, 2006; Lumpe, 2007; Scribner, 1999; Westheimer, 1999, Wood, 2008). This can be summarized by Wood (2008) who studied a district over two years in relation to its effort to establish learning communities. Wood drew five conclusions:

First, although the initiative sought to establish learning communities to mobilize practitioner expertise and build collective responsibility—all for the sake of student learning—most participants did not claim a connection between their
collaborative work and student learning. Second, while the district has made considerable headway institutionalizing structural dimensions of the initiative, efforts to enhance teacher efficacy appeared to be constrained by high-stakes accountability policies requiring compliance. Third, within the groups, more time was devoted to community-building efforts than to critical inquiry aimed at improving practice. Fourth, because the initiative’s practices and principles run counter to entrenched norms of district culture, its sustainability may be in question. Fifth, paradoxically, district leadership, though seeking a promising context for change, may be unwittingly causing conditions that threaten to undermine the initiative. Finally, if an initiative like this is to endure, districts must invest authority and autonomy in participants as well as adequate time and support (p. 701).

In study after study, this sentiment was repeated in respect to the formation of PLCs. It appears that time, dedication to the collective effort, focused organizational structures, and leadership need to be in place for PLCs to succeed.

**From Dysfunctional to Functional, From Name to Practice**

Giles and Hargreaves (2006) studied three schools innovating to form PLCs. Of the three schools studied, two were quick to give up the innovative ghost, while Blue Mountain School, built intentionally under the PLC model, shows the potential to survive. The authors cited six factors that helped build this school into a professional learning community even before it opened in 1994: “These factors include the nature, distribution, and succession of leadership; the school’s vision and goals; the impact on teaching of the personal growth and learning of the teachers; the teachers’ orientation to
curriculum, teaching, and learning; the development of innovative structural and administrative arrangements; and the growth of a caring community” (Giles, 2006, p. 136).

By 1999, this school was having significant success in student achievement compared to its’ low counterparts that had given up on working as PLCs. For Blue Mountain School, PLCs had a profound effect on professional development for its teachers. PLCs “can learn how to halt the evolutionary attrition of change by renewing their teacher cultures, distributing leadership, and planning for leadership succession” (Giles, 2006, p. 152). Teacher cultures within these communities collectively facilitate embedded and ongoing professional development.

Westheimer (1999) emphasizes this collective thought in his ethnographic study of two middle schools trying to implement PLCs by citing the importance of teachers’ individual autonomy, rights, and responsibilities to colleagues as they strive to fulfill a collective mission. To make this mission a reality, key elements are necessary such as shared norms and values, common objectives, a focus on student learning, discussions regarding methods and objectives of learning, group reflective dialogue, deprivatization of practice, and collaboration that builds expertise (Scribner et al., 2002). The challenges of developing this collective efficacy in the PLC group in many cases can discourage participants, resulting in a dysfunctional experience (Leite, 2006).

Understanding where a teacher team might fall short in becoming a PLC provides further insight into what it takes to realize a full transformation. The acronym “PLC” has indeed become popular in our schools. At my school, after a limited understanding of what it takes to develop a PLC, our grade-level teams changed their names to PLC. “Are
we meeting in our PLCs this week?” teachers would ask before our weekly collaboration. Early in this book *Learning by Doing*, Richard DuFour explicates the problem of defining PLCs: “In fact, the term has become so commonplace and has been used so ambiguously to describe virtually any loose coupling of individuals who share a common interest in education that it is in danger of losing all meaning” (DuFour et al., 2006, p. 2). The majority of the literature offered on behalf of PLCs focuses on the importance of changing to this model.

If we look at the practice-based efforts to develop PLCs, many of them reveal an excellent grasp of what must change, expressed in ways that are clearly powerful for teachers and administrators. But the ‘how to get there’ is still elusive and bookish (Louis, 2006, p. 484).

In Leite’s (2006) study of 46 teachers involved in the initial stages of PLC work, 25 said they would participate in PLCs, 12 might if they were organized and functional groups, and 7 said they would not participate (with 2 not answering). Participants cited possible solutions to the challenges of building a PLC, including limiting the number of members so as to avoid undue constraints of a big group, an organized schedule of meeting times, face-to-face meetings, defined objectives of the group being clear, and adoption of methodologies discussed and agreed upon in the community. Scribner et al. (2002) acknowledges the practical drawbacks of forming a PLC as the “micro politics” that must be addressed. He argues that we recast the notion of professional community in terms of heterogeneous individuals in professional relationships instead of a “we-ness” characterized by PLC advocates who espouse the collective identity. Defining a PLC is easy; becoming a PLC presents many challenges.
Building PLCs: The Role of Principals in Building Collective Efficacy

In the literature, three areas seem to be most critical in the development of functioning PLCs: (1) development of collective efficacy, (2) development of trust and belonging, and (3) a principal who is able to provide organizational structures and facilitate a culture that helps the PLC function. Having already sufficiently covered the importance of developing collective efficacy, the rest of this review of literature will focus on the importance of the principal and his/her role of developing a culture that promotes collective efficacy, trust, and belonging.

Teacher collaboration is contingent upon the principal’s ability to build trust, collaborative cultures, and unity in purpose (Kruse & Louis, 1997; Lavie, 2006). Principals play a critical role as cultural managers within the school. Lavie (2006) makes the case that principals are central in developing effectiveness discourse, “leading to a shared ‘vision’ and consensus in practices and expectations” (p. 789), which is a strategy for increasing students’ academic achievement. Along with this teacher discourse, restructuring discourse is affected largely by the principal of the school. This discourse is characterized by “a professional community related to shared norms and values and a collective focus on student learning” (p. 789). A supportive principal allows discourse to develop within teacher learning communities. Collective learning and supportive environments for this discourse allow a substantial amount of trust to be built between teacher and principal and teacher to teacher (Cosner, 2009, Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008).

Trust is built within a team as it organizes to solve problems through discourse. Structures and social dynamics of distributed leadership must be attended to within these PLCs:
Implications include (a) conceptualizing leadership in terms of interaction, (b) needing to help teachers become aware of the conversational dynamics that lead to or subvert effective collaboration, and (c) needing to help principals become more aware of their role in helping to establish clarity of purpose and appropriate levels of autonomy, so that teams may engage in work that leads to effective and innovative problem-finding and problem-solving activities. (Scribner, Sawyer, Watson, & Myers, 2007)

Such a delicate process illustrates why establishing PLCs is not only a challenge for the members of the PLC, but is also a necessary balancing act for the principal. Purpose and autonomy become critical to the effectiveness of collaboration for the PLC. A study of the principal in this process helps us better understand what it takes to establish PLCs.

Wahlstrom and Louis (2008) conducted a quantitative study for the purpose of examining principal-teacher interactions and teacher-teacher relationships and the impact on instructional practices. A stepwise linear regression was used after accessing 4,165 completed surveys from a Learning from Leadership Wallace Foundation database. The study found principal trust to be less significant than shared leadership and teachers’ professional community to have a robust effect (R squared =.065) on instructional practices. What were the qualities of the PLC that made the largest impact? Reflective dialogue, deprivatization of practice, and shared norms (all central to collective efficacy) made the largest impacts on effective instructional practices such as standard contemporary practices, focused instruction, and flexible grouping (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). Teacher-to-teacher trust is a huge part of shared leadership within the PLCs. Wahlstrom and Louis’s study demonstrates the importance of the principal spending less
time on building trust for himself/herself and more time shaping the culture of the school in relation to reflective dialogue, deprivatization of practice, and shared norms.

“Leadership is a complex social phenomenon manifested in many ways and in many contexts” (Scribner et al., 2007). Through the lens of distributed leadership, a school culture can be shaped from “within, and across each level of the organization” (p. 96). Scribner et al.’s (2007) study of two PLCs in one school also found that “in the case of teacher teams, this means that formal leaders and teachers must develop capacities in the areas of facilitation, interaction, and communication” (p. 96). Halverson (2003) postulates “a professional community is a direct result of the design and implementation of facilitating structural networks by instructional leaders in the school” (p. 1). He cites various artifacts that leaders use to create PLCs and the resulting social capital that is developed as leaders implement these structures. How do principals perceive their roles in implementing PLCs?

Cranston’s (2009) qualitative study of 12 principals working on implementing PLCs found themes that verify the qualitative and quantitative research already cited. The transformation of a school is identified by the principals as a journey that is ongoing and must have good leadership. The next theme takes us from the process to structural supports necessary to implement PLCs: time, school plans, interconnected teacher roles, teacher empowerment, and institutional identity. Any time a leader works with these qualities, he/she is also working with trust and relationships—the third theme.

Some principals thought that trust was a prerequisite to PLC, while others characterized it as something to work on all the time. They all acknowledged that trust between staff members makes critical collaborative conversations possible. Certainly
Wahlstrom and Louis’s (2008) study speaks to how principals share leadership formally and informally, either facilitating trust and collaboration, or hindering it. The actions that principals manifest have a critical role in helping teachers develop a sense of belonging and trust within their PLC, resulting in teacher risk taking, discourse, and collective efficacy (Lavie, 2006; Scribner et al., 2007; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008).

Cosner (2009) explores the cultivation of trust in her study of 11 high school principals who were known for their ability toward building capacity in various schools. The suggested knowledge-based model of trust development uses repeated social exchanges to build trust capacity or interaction-based trust. Basic actions such as benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty, and openness serve to strengthen this trust between individuals. At the same time, actions that violate the norms of the group can erode that group trust. As a result of Cosner’s (2009) study, principals are encouraged to engage in three broad actions:

1. To increase interaction time within department meetings, staff meetings, and site-based professional development
2. To increase interaction time by initiating new interaction forums
3. To increase the likelihood of fostering trust between teachers in interactive contexts (p. 263)

Principals must first work on helping staff develop collegial trust before they can be expected to take the risk of opening their classroom and practices to the scrutiny of the team.

Once a transformation of beliefs and relationships takes place, PLCs have a better chance of succeeding as a functional structure to improve student achievement. Leonard
and Leonard (1999) call upon the transformational leader to articulate a shared vision, foster group goals, offer individual support to teachers, provide intellectual stimulation, model appropriate behaviors, and, ultimately, espouse high performance expectations. Although the principal facilitates these processes, transformational leadership “should not be limited to one individual” (Leonard & Leonard, 1999), but through empowered collaboration and shared leadership. Servage (2008) would term the actions of the PLC as “transformative practices,” or an emphasis on distributed leadership, shared decision making, and an emphasis on dialogue. There are dangers to thinking that adopting a distributed leadership model will assure PLC success.

Schools without adequate leadership in the principal position and without key teacher leaders will surely fail at implementing PLCs. Timperley (2005, as cited in Mayrowetz, 2008, p. 430) states that “Distributing leadership is a risky business and may result in the distribution of incompetence.” Before distributing leadership, principals need to have an understanding of their organization and what needs to happen to provide readiness for the establishment of learning communities (Cowan, 2006). To understand distributed leadership and learning communities, it is helpful to use a continuum. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) would put anarchy and assertive distribution on the way-too-hot end and autocracy and traditional delegation on the too-cold side. We want to be in the middle with guided distribution, right between emergent distribution and progressive delegation: “The building of a culture and an accompanying distribution of leadership is always firmly directed by the close watch and guiding hand of the principal” (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).
Principals must build a culture of trust and collaboration, while at the same time building teacher leaders. Mitchell and Sackney (2006), authors of the article “Building Schools, Building People: The School Principal’s Role in Leading a Learning Community,” assert through their investigations of this process in many schools that principals of successful schools serve four functions: center, holder of the vision, builder, and role model. As the center, the principal should be in the midst of learning community work, guiding and facilitating it while continually reiterating the vision. The principal builds trust, community, leaders, and collaborative structures. Finally, the principal serves as a role model:

Although we saw many principals talking about learning communities, those who were most successful in creating a learning community were those who served as role models with respect to good teaching strategies, effective collegial processes, respectful treatment of students, and systemic approaches to practice. (Mitchell & Sackney, 2006, p. 636)

Principals are called on to lead in the development of culture, collective efficacy, and collaborative models and structures.

As principals build, teachers take on the all important work of influencing student learning. The emergence of teacher leaders within the PLC ultimately determines the success of the team in changing instructional practices and increasing student achievement. Principals cannot be with each PLC at each moment to ensure that they function properly. A foundation of collective efficacy must be built along with trust and collegiality. Teacher-leaders must grow from this foundation within each PLC.
The teacher within these emerging educational organizations is increasingly a self-managed professional, moving away from an individual working in a classroom to a collaborative individual—an autonomous self-knowing professional who works with others to achieve a shared purpose (Andrews & Crowther, 2006).

These teacher-leaders emerge with PLCs under the direction of capable school leaders (Moller, 2006). Functional PLCs verify the improvement of student learning. The question remains, what does it take to improve the functioning of one PLC?

Summary

Advocates for PLCs attest to the collaborative power of PLCs to effect change related to daily teaching practices to improve student learning (Bellamy, Crawford, Marshall, & Coulter, 2005; Calhoun, 2002; Ferrara, 2007; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Kazemi & Hubbard, 2008; Lavie, 2006; Lumpe, 2007; Schmoker, 2004; Servage, 2008). Many qualitative studies show the benefits of functioning PLCs and document a common trend for these teacher teams to lose their vision or succumb to a change in leadership or dysfunctional leadership. Studies on PLCs show that the importance of a supportive leader, shared leadership, and decision making, and collegially facilitated participation are all keys to the implementation of effective learning teams (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Hord, 2004; Louis & Kruse, 1995; NAESP, 2004; Rosenholtz, 1989; Scribner, 2002; Stoll, McMahon, & Thomas, 2006). The principal has a critical role in shaping the culture of a school to support the development of PLCs, which, in turn, can positively impact professional development, school improvement, and, ultimately, student learning. For these processes to take place,
PLCs progress on journey of vision development, conflict, dialogue, and shared practices (Arter, 2001, DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Hord, 2004; National Association of Elementary School Principals [NAESP], 2004; Rosenholtz, 1989; Scribner, 2002; Stoll, McMahon, & Thomas, S., 2006;). It appears that a change process to help a school implement PLC principles is not just a fading fad, but a justified venture that leads to improvement in instructional practices, as realized in student achievement.

The variance of PLC functioning not only changes greatly from school to school, but also within the individual learning communities in a school. The literature speaks qualitatively about the dysfunctional and functional characteristics of the PLCs being studied in relation to their schools. Most of these studies focus on the school as the unit of study in comparison to other schools. Case studies exist that develop a clear definition of a PLC in relation to the perceptions of teachers within a school. The literature falls short in providing the exploration of individual PLCs and the eminent battle that exists in progressing to functionality. The research does not address the dynamic nature of our schools and the impact that new members or changes in personnel may have on the momentum or functionality of a PLC.

If PLCs truly do increase student achievement as advocates proclaim, research and literature need to be provided that explore the inherent conflict that must occur as a PLC strives to become functional and its perseverance to remain functional amid an ever-changing landscape. It seems that such research should be practical in nature and benefit the unit that matters most: the PLC. An opportunity exists for action research pertaining to the functioning of the PLC.
Chapter 3

REPORT OF THE STUDY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to improve the functioning of one PLC at Monument Elementary School. To briefly review, this study was structured according to the phases of action research described by Stringer (2007). The “look” phase involves gathering relevant data, building a picture, and describing the situation. The “think” stage includes exploring, analyzing, interpreting, and explaining. The “act” phase details the action plan and its implementation and evaluation.

This chapter describes in detail the “look” and “think” phases of the action research study and the action plan adopted by the PLC to improve its functioning. In the fall of 2009, I conducted a pilot study—the first part of the “look” phase of the action research study—focusing on PLCs at Monument Elementary. In the spring of 2010, the action research study was narrowed to one PLC that began its “look” phase with the aid of published rubrics on the functioning of a PLC, a review of literature associated with PLC functioning, and a thorough reflective dialogue within the team. In the fall of 2010, the “look” phase expanded as the team added a member and continued to reflect using published rubrics, additional interviews, and collected data for review.

The “think” phase emerged as the team explored the data pertinent to its functions and thought about how, as a team, they could make sense of this data in relation to their desired improvements. Finally, during the winter of 2011, this “thinking” resulted in the beginnings of a plan of action to improve the PLC’s functions.
For the pilot study conducted in the fall of 2009, I selected two members from each grade team for interviews (4th, 5th, 6th grade, and specialists). The purpose of these interviews was to study the functioning of each PLC. A diverse sample was selected with regard to gender, ethnic backgrounds (as much as can be represented among our predominantly Caucasian staff members), years of experience teaching, and teacher expertise. Both silent individuals and dominant individuals from teams were selected to solicit various ideas about the functioning of the PLCs. All teachers selected had worked in the school for at least two years, which ensured that they understood the culture and that they had ample experience in their learning community.

Eight individual interviews were conducted, recorded digitally, and transcribed (see Appendix B, Interview Guide). A transcribed copy of the interviews was provided as a courtesy to the participants, who were asked to review the transcriptions for accuracy (Creswell, 2008). If requested, a brief follow-up interview was arranged with some members so they could further explain or revise their comments.

Analysis of the interview data resulted in the identification of three major themes, which are discussed in the following sections:

1. **What are PLCs and what do they do?** Sub themes included definitions of PLCs, their activities, and team members’ frustrations.

2. **What influences the functions of the PLCs?** Sub themes were the PLCs’ structure, size, schedules, facilitation, as well as trust and relationships.

3. **What is the impact of the PLCs on teachers and students?**
What Are PLCs and What Do They Do?

Participants spoke of what PLCs meant to them, their definition, and their purposes. They listed a number of their group’s activities. They also mentioned their progress and frustrations.

PLCs defined.

All of the participants had a similar definition for a PLC. One participant was reluctant to be interviewed because he thought his lack of knowledge of PLCs might ruin the research project. After much explanation that this was the purpose of the research (i.e., to explore where people are and what they think, not to hear a canned answer), he agreed to an interview. His definition of a PLC resembled that of the other participants:

A PLC is a big concept. I think it is an important thing for teachers, for communities, and for schools, especially for student learning. I think it needs to be there for student learning, but a PLC is something that is continuous. You continue, you grow, and you learn new things. You get better. You learn to be a better team member and that builds a better team.

All participants in this study defined what a PLC is and provided statements of purpose. As one teacher stated, “[A PLC] is a group of people, professionals, working together for a common cause and, in our case, obviously we are going to use common assessments to improve student learning.” Another participant defined PLCs as “helping kids improve their learning. They are directed at helping kids improve their learning and I’m not sure that we always get down to that level in our PLC groups.”
Activities within professional learning communities.

With a clearly defined purpose for the PLC groups, the participants outlined numerous activities they were involved in within these groups:

We talked about the kids that were really a focus…. We had our data in front of us, but there were other pieces that we needed to fill in and then we got right on the phone and contacted those parents. We have met with those parents, all positive. We made a plan and went forward with it and we accomplished what we had talked about in our meeting. So, we were very excited. We are already planning our next PLC, as far as conferencing and how that is going to look.

When teachers have something that is not working or maybe is working, it is a great time to share ideas and build.

PLCs at Monument meet to plan for learning, make assessments, create interventions for struggling students, work on effective instructional strategies like differentiated instruction, and attempt to visit other classrooms to learn from colleagues. All three grade levels and specialists endorsed these themes while defining their PLC work. Participants shared that they are involved in a number of initiatives, including regular data analysis, problem solving, and planning around learning and managerial issues, goal setting, standards-based grading, pacing, alignment, communication, decision making, curricular projects, and sharing of practices.

Frustrations of PLCs.

“It is so simple, but why is it so difficult?” While defining the purpose and the various activities of their PLCs, the participants also expressed that this was a work in progress and not without frustrations:
What you want the students to learn is our power standard. That is where we start. How do we do that? Common assessments that we do not have a great handle on yet. We are getting there, but it is difficult. What do we do with students who are not there? The RTIs. We are starting that as well. What do we do with students who are already there? Differentiated instruction… so everything is beginning, and nothing is established yet.

This teacher endorses a number of activities that PLCs at Monument are currently doing and, at the same time, she expressed that PLCs are a work in progress. Most participants expressed that, although they understand the ideal purpose of PLCs, “we are just dipping our toes in the water right now.” Still other groups expressed a PLC ideal that has not yet been achieved:

I think I would like to see some really delving into the information, delving into the data, delving into learning strategies—almost like going back to college in some ways when you had small study groups, a good study group that really is getting into the information and then having something exciting to take back and to do and then come back and share. If that type of PLC would be going on, then I could see a lot of excitement going on in the school.

The process of establishing PLCs was referred to as “like getting a train going,” “spinning our wheels,” and “slow getting the ball rolling.” Frustration was evident in the difficulties caused as teachers move away from isolation toward a collaborative learning model.

The other thing that I would wish for is not so much idea and strategy as tasks, but that is just me. I am more of a task-oriented person, “Here is what we need to do
so let’s do that.” I know that it is necessary to stop sometimes and figure things out, but it seems to be that we have an overabundance of that. So to me, the best thing would be, “Let’s quit talking about all of that stuff and let’s do something.” “We don’t need to talk about what a PLC is anymore. Let’s just do it. Let’s do the things that we know that need to be done, assessments or whatever they are, let’s just do it.” We don’t need to talk about our PLC and what it is, what are going to be our standard practices here…blah, blah, blah…just get the task done.

**What Influences the Functioning of PLCs?**

Teachers outlined a number of influences that affect their work, for example, the structure of the group influences PLCs at Monument. The size of the PLC was explored as an effect of its functions. Schedule and time were mentioned by all of the participants as a major sub-theme. The role of facilitation was identified as an influence on the PLCs. Trust and relationships were hugely influential for participants.

**Structure “keeps you on the road.”**

After three years of building the concept of a PLC, a very concrete influence on teachers within a PLC is structure. Organizational identity and the size of the group are major factors in the realization of a PLC’s effectiveness. Each teacher interviewed cited examples of how these internal and external influences have shaped their respective PLC experience. A late start on Monday every week gives PLC groups an hour and a half to collaborate. In addition to this hour, grade-level teams have a designated 30-minute meeting before school each week. Teachers also talked about meeting informally during planning time, lunchtime, after school, and in their carpools.
Structures have varying influences based on the team, the group, and the individuals involved in the PLC. For instance, the grade-level teams seemed to have a more-defined PLC identity than the specialists. This could be because the standards and curriculum flow through these teams as opposed to the specialists serving as a support to each grade level. Specialists include the Physical Education (PE) teacher, music teacher, librarian, technology teacher, special education teachers, English language learner (ELL) teachers, instructional coaches, Title, and learning assistance teachers. As the teachers work with students from all three grade levels, they are often torn between different learning communities. There are 12 specialists in the building at Monument, while each grade level has seven teachers. In the past, the specialists have tried to meet as a group, but because of their varying job descriptions they have found it difficult to collaborate on meaningful projects that would benefit each member. Most of them try to push into and support the grade-level PLCs. This presents a new problem, as one specialist explained, “It is hard to be 20 different places at 20 different times.”

In addition to the specialists’ lack of identity in the larger PLC groups, a number of other PLC groups were identified by the participants. Some teachers identified their smaller planning time groups, their pods, their content groups, or various academic committees that they served on as their PLC groups. Still, grade-level teams were the most common reference to PLCs at Monument, as identified by the teachers.

**Size of professional learning communities.**

If student learning is the key focus of learning communities, the size of these communities has a profound impact on this goal. Every participant cited how much more effective learning communities are when they are small.
It seems to me that we can get more done, which I think is common sense, when we are dealing with three people or four than we do when we are dealing with seven, eight, or nine. It is just kind of a “law of nature” kind of thing there.

Perhaps this was the strongest finding of the study. Each participant talked about the success his or her smaller learning community had versus the “going around and around the mountain about it” with the larger grade-level teams. Another factor in this success was the formation of the pods and teaching teams. These teachers were able to pick who they would be teaming with and therefore had similar ideas and philosophies and subsequently engendered like goals and aspirations:

We are a very cohesive group, but I believe that it is also because we have the same philosophy about student learning and what student learning is. I believe that is one of the reasons I feel it is so successful so far this year. We are as one. We work as one. We are not all over the place.

The size of the learning community seems to be a huge indicator of the team’s success on influencing students’ learning.

**Schedules and times.**

In addition to the division between grade-level teams and specialists, the master schedule at Monument influences PLCs. Fourth-grade students are with the same homeroom teacher all day, with four of those teachers sharing a common planning time and the other three sharing a different planning time. The planning time allows for a natural learning community as teachers have access to each other for 45 minutes a day.

In the fifth grade, a two-teacher team shares up 60 students, while a “pod” of three
teachers shares 90 students who rotate between them for math, science, and language arts. The remaining two teachers are homeroom-based like in the fourth grade. This provides a structure for three natural PLC groups. The sixth grade has a similar configuration with one pod and two pair teams. In the 5th and 6th grades, teachers will sometimes meet in content groups, in pods or pairs, or as a whole-grade level. As there are so many options, agreeing to a coordinated schedule is often problematic. “I think it is just scheduling, although we do have a time now. Sometimes, it is hard to just make sure that all of us are available.” Once teachers figure out when and with which PLC they will meet, their organizational capacity becomes the next structural test.

Much of this organizational capacity has to do with time. “There is that dirty ‘T’ word again, having time to do everything that we need to do would be really nice.” One participant hand-slapped the table while chanting “We need more time.” They all talked about how time influences their PLC in a number of ways—time to meet at grade levels, content groups, pods, pairs, academic leadership teams, standard grading committees, book groups, with specialists, and as an entire building—were all mentioned as competition for the few formal designated times for collaboration. Some participants spoke to the pull between addressing managerial issues versus student learning issues. They felt the pressure to find time for things like field trips, hallway expectations, and scheduling issues outside of PLC time as those items did not fit with the goal of a PLC.

Managerial issues are still important to address, so Monument has set aside every Friday morning at 7:30 a.m. to address these issues. Teams rarely meet on Fridays as teachers are clamoring for time to tend to individual needs, such as making copies or
preparing for the day. Participants spoke to some of these managerial issues spilling over into PLC time, therefore causing discord and “dissension.”

As all of the initial interviews took place in the first few months of school—in the midst of a major alignment of curriculum and standards with a new standards-based grading system and the formation of a teacher-led intervention block—it was apparent that teachers were feeling the “stress” and “angst” of many learning initiatives paired with the regular energy drain that the beginning of a school year brings. “I think people are open to a lot of the changes. People are getting stressed out by so many possibilities. But I think everybody is open.”

Time to balance these issues within the allotted agenda proved for many teachers to be challenging. “It seems to me that sometimes we need to keep talking about something and get it figured out, but we have to move on.” One teacher suggested that after an August of committee work to prepare for students, another month break after September was needed to reload based on what they knew about their students. Another idea was to have one day for each team at the end of each quarter instead of just at the beginning of the year. Not all participants agreed that there wasn’t ample time to work on learning issues:

In previous years, it used to be time. We did not have time but this year we do have that time. I do feel that we do have that time to meet. I think on a regular basis and really as much time as we want.

So what seems to be the issue with time? Internally, time usage seems to be a sub-theme within individual teams:
Unfortunately a lot of our PLCs are, I don’t want to say “wasted,” but they are not used as effectively as they should be. We are gifted an hour-and-a-half collaboration time and are so lucky to have that. It is just not being used effectively like it should.

Time within the meeting to take care of agenda items seemed to vary from group to group. The smaller groups did not cite time as a negative issue but echoed the sentiment of one participant, “When we do have time together, we rock.” The grade-level teams talked about a lack of time for agenda items: too many people needing to report from their committee work and dominant members of the team leading the group off agenda and taking up valuable time. Another issue with the larger teams seemed to be “air” time. With the larger groups, there is less time for each member to share ideas and opinions. Time could be handled better within the groups with the help of facilitation.

**Facilitation.**

All of the participants shared processes they have in place for the formation of the agenda, roles of members of the PLC, and the norms of their groups. Members of teams often send agenda items by email to a designated person. Groups have established norms for their meetings such as “everyone…being prepared and being professional and listening to others and…getting to the meeting on time, staying on task.” Important roles of team members include note takers, time keepers, agenda organizers, and facilitators. Participants talked about the importance of having a clear agenda ahead of meetings so that members not only come prepared but have had “think time” to process important information. The facilitator’s role emerged as an important issue for participants.
Participants talked about the facilitator’s role in their larger PLC grade-level groups as something that could be improved:

The facilitator, for the most part with us, has not been very impacting, I guess I would say. We probably just don’t have in mind to use that the way it is intended… I think that a lot of us feel that if I am the facilitator that I have to be sort of the “heavy sort of the guy” and, for the most part, our group does not really want to do that. They don’t want somebody being the “dad.”

Some participants felt that the facilitator could be the role that was missing in their grade-level PLC. They talked about arguments, debates, air time, time wasting, and norm enforcement that could be aided by somebody acting as a facilitator. Perhaps these very reasons have prevented the teams from having willing volunteers to fill this position.

Okay we should move on, but maybe sometimes it would be great if we had a leader to say, “Oops, we are not on track; we are not doing what we are supposed to do, let’s go back to it.” This is something that we need to work on.

One teacher suggested that rotating the role of facilitator each month might solve this issue as long as the role was clearly defined for the team. It should be noted that each team has a representative that they have voted to be on the school leadership team. This has not necessarily equated to the fulfillment of the facilitator role for each team.

**Trust and relationships.**

Not only is the size of a learning community directly tied to how effective time becomes for a team, but the personalities and trust of team members act as another variable that influences the effectiveness of time together for teachers in learning communities. With a basic understanding of what a PLC is and with structures in place
that allow PLCs to meet, perhaps trust is the greatest factor that influences learning community success at Monument. For the purpose of this study, trust will include the influences of personality and relationships. This theme emerged loud and clear from the participants in this study. “I think it depends on your personality whether you jump in or not.”

The 2008 retreat for Monument focused on building trust. Teachers participated in a number of trust-building activities, including the high-ropes course. Before each activity, staff members would say, “My name is __________. I am willing to do this activity, are you willing to support me?” Their team would then say, “I will support you.” This was important because one’s life was in the hands of the team as the participant ascended the pole and walked across a cable extended far above the ground. “Support” became a key word at Monument. As a part of that retreat, each teacher filled out a personality profile and then shared it with their team. A state school improvement advisory team visited the school in January 2009 and spent four days evaluating the school. They attended meetings, walked through classrooms, and interviewed teachers. One area that they recommended that the teachers focus on was that of trust.

“Personalities can get in the way because people just, you know how it works, have a little bit of tension with each other and things like that.” To add what another participant called “human nature,” many participants spoke to dominant versus silent personalities in learning communities. Every team has some members who are definitely more vocal than others. “We have a couple of people who aren’t as loud as the rest, we’ve got four of us who I think are pretty loud.” Participants shared freely in acknowledging that, although some are “loud” and some are silent, “we function together
pretty well.” Others talked of frustrations in relation to personality quirks versus acceptable professionalism:

We need to have professionalism and sometimes we do not have it. To me, I am very black and white and, if that is not there, we cannot go forward with anything. It is so hard to move forward and time [is an issue]. If you are talking, just exactly like in the classroom, you are dealing with student management and you can’t get to the lesson…same with the meeting.

Hogging air time was not the only way to make PLCs a challenge. A few participants spoke of experiences they had in the past with the frustration of silence:

Well, silent members, you don’t ever know what they are thinking. You don’t ever know if they are agreeing or disagreeing. They are not saying anything so you don’t have any idea as to what they are thinking. Even if people aren’t trying to be dominant it seems like they are being dominant because some people are not talking or sharing. It might just be trying to probe but it makes it seem like you are dominating or you are running the meeting or you are the only one that matters.

Frustrations with personalities or participation habits were expressed in relation to past years and to the larger PLC groups. When the same participants spoke about working in smaller learning communities, they expressed ideas similar to the following:

The collaboration piece is awesome because we are talking about…you know it is about…student learning, not just the teaching. If one of us, if some of our kids have really got it, so maybe that teacher has a really cool way of teaching it, so we can jump on board with it also. So it is always about supporting each other.
Smaller learning communities created by choice seemed to avoid the energy drain precipitated by larger groups and many varying personalities and philosophies. Regardless of the personality types, one teacher summed up the best ingredient to foster successful learning communities: “I think that sometimes we have to be a little flexible.”

Flexibility becomes important as teachers use their learning communities to solve problems, a common practice described by all participants in this study. Extensive examples were given of decisions that were “fiercely” debated in the grade levels. The nature of learning communities encourages participants to explore and research solutions to educational problems in an effort to enhance student learning. Such practice requires group reflection and brainstorming. This stage of the community process proves to be challenging when the whole team is together. “Then, of course, we have our own ideas. We have each person saying, “We should do this, we should do that, we should do this.” Although one participant spoke of a protocol to guide this process, there were no major findings of any system that the teams had that allowed for ideas to be shared in a way that would assure voice from each team member and organize ideas in an efficient way. “I think the dominant member usually gets their way. I think the silent member usually just agrees just to agree. The dominant member usually just pushes their opinion and that is how they get their way.” The “shrinking violets” keep shrinking, while those with the louder voice keep talking:

I don’t mind giving my opinions, but I am not going to confront people and say, “You are wrong and you guys really need to change that because it is causing problems because of this and such.” As a rule, I will not do that, maybe I should sometimes.
Sharing opinions is not the only challenge that teachers face at Monument when in larger groups. They also may lack trust that a learning community requires when it comes to sharing instructional practices:

Getting shot down. Well, I don’t even remember what the math problem was, but almost all my kids had missed it and I had talked to (the math coach) about it and she gave me some strategies, but I wanted to see if the kids in general all missed that problem that maybe we all taught it wrong and they just didn’t get it all. Nobody would even share their data with me. They wouldn’t even tell me if their kids did well or didn’t do well or what strategies they were using. Same thing with like, sometimes somebody had found something that really worked and no one is willing to share those papers. I don’t know if they don’t want your kids to do as well as their students. I mean I don’t know.

The incident this teacher recounted happened a few years ago and was shared to explain the difference between working in a larger group or meeting in a group with three to four members. Trust seems to come easier to a small group of professionals as opposed to the larger group. To illustrate this, all teams talked about a bubble class that came through Monument requiring nine teachers at each grade level. “I think it was a trust issue and I also think that it was a numbers issue. That was when we were “nine”…you can’t hear nine people’s voices no matter what.”

“Getting shot down” could also have to do with support of initiatives worked on by grade-level representatives. As part of the school improvement process, money was provided over this past summer for teams to work on various initiatives, including alignment of instructional materials with state standards, report cards, the intervention
block, the building discipline plan, the master schedule, and pacing calendars. All staff members were invited to participate as their schedule dictated. The staff agreed in March to support the overall “alignment efforts” by supporting the work that individual members did in committees over the spring and summer months. Groups worked in the summer as communities to craft documents that would help with student learning at Monument. Those documents were then shared along with professional development at the staff retreat in August. The implementation of these initiatives was another opportunity to engender trust at Monument:

“So say the science and social studies and whichever team made a pacing calendar, they take it back and people go, “Okay, I am going to implement that to the best of my ability,” and not the discussion about, “Why would they have done that,” and so…just buy-in and saying “Okay, I respect you that you are the science rep or our math rep or our reading rep and I agree that whatever you decide we will implement.”

Finding a balance between creating buy-in and not wasting a ton of time in the larger grade-level teams seems to be a constant effort at Monument. “It is kind of like, we have to do this and there is no point in going around and around at this point, so let’s just move on. We don’t need to argue this. So that philosophy thing coming in there, people start expressing their opinions.” This is not always the case. One teacher added a different perspective on the larger team:

We work really well together. We don’t spend time having arguments or that type of thing. Everyone respects each other’s opinions and what we need to learn and
the questions that are asked. They are eager to learn and try out new different strategies.

Although trust seems to be more difficult to create within the larger learning communities, none of the participants were hopeless in their belief that it was growing at Monument. “I think right now it is a matter of just us having a time to meet, to talk, to build or relationships, to build support, and eventually 100% trust each other and just go from there.” This seems to be the attitude of Monument teachers in relation to their continued PLC efforts.

**Impact of Professional Learning Communities**

Teachers spoke about the impact that PLCs had on their instructional practices. One teacher summed it up by saying, “I’m developing a higher awareness of what I need to be doing in my class.” Another teacher shared that the PLC is not just about accomplishing the task, but has a professional purpose:

I think that I have learned from the PLCs. I think I gather more information from the PLCs then I actually give. I feel like sometimes I am like a sponge and I just kind of absorb all their knowledge and I don’t give anything back. That is how I look at it.

PLCs at Monument don’t just seem to be about accomplishing tasks or serving the individual efforts, but also about getting teams together for common instructional practices. The same teacher who expressed frustration about the amount of talk and lack of action also acknowledged the need for teachers to collaborate on tough issues:

When we sit down together and talk about it…we have somebody who is calling us on what we are actually doing and that helps. It keeps you on the road. It keeps
you from straying too far to the right or the left of stuff. I think that is a good thing.

When talking about the most gratifying team endeavor of the past, this teacher summed up why a sense of fulfillment takes place when collaboration around student learning is the focus: “We were on the same page and, to me, that was exactly what we needed to do.”

Getting on the same page could be one purpose of a PLC. The participants emphasized that the main goal was to get teachers focused on student learning and working together to change instructional practices. Although the smaller PLCs seemed to really speak to the accomplishment of this purpose and its impact on their instruction, the grade-level PLCs seem to not quite have that effect on instruction. “That is why I can’t really say, “Oh, this has benefited me so much,” because it is not in place yet, nothing like it should be. Those to me would be the parts that we need to continue to work on.”

Acknowledging that PLCs could make a bigger impact on instruction was a theme that was shared among the participants: “I know the goal, it will be fabulous if we could go into each other’s classrooms and see what is going on. If this is working for you, why is it working? Show me what you are doing.”

The ultimate impact of PLCs should be on student learning. Teachers talked about how they bring students’ work to PLC meetings. At these meetings, teachers can look at patterns in the data. All of the participants talked about the “exploratory” block, a designated time daily for interventions. PLCs had varying levels of data discussions in relation to student performance data in order to organize this time for students. Students are placed in exploratory groups based on varying skill needs in math and reading. These
groups change often based on students’ need, so the PLCs had spent a lot of time on these student groups and how their needs might be met.

One smaller PLC in the building has created a data board for reading and math. Each student has a card with pertinent data like WASL, NWEA, and DIBELS scores. Based on where they started the year, each student is color-coded signifying their level of need. The board is divided into four vertical areas: 1) students with intensive needs and 2) students who have strategic needs (still below grade level), 3) students at benchmark, and 4) students at above grade level. Students started the year on a certain spot of the board, with many of them below grade level. As the students take assessments to measure their progress, the teachers move their card to the appropriate category. The goal is to move each student to the benchmark and to the above-grade-level side of their data board. These teachers meet in their PLCs weekly to review student learning data, discuss students’ learning needs, and work toward moving students to a proficient level in the skill being assessed.

Other smaller groups in the building have begun book studies that seem to be affecting professional practice and student learning. The participants did not speak to the bigger grade levels as having a huge impact on changes in student learning. Each grade-level PLC showed evidence that spreadsheets are being used in meetings to track student learning. Participants also spoke to meetings where they had brought student assessments to discuss. They also acknowledged that this “doesn’t happen enough” in their grade-level PLCs. PLCs seem to impact instruction practices and student learning, but not at the level that teachers would like. A functional PLC keeps the emphasis on student learning and influences instruction in the classroom.
The results of the pilot study were useful to the action research team in their “look” phase, as described in the next section.

**The Action Research Study**

After this initial pilot study, interested staff members throughout the school were presented with these themes. The dozen or so PLCs in the school (quantifying PLCs was difficult as some staff members belonged to a grade-level PLC, a content PLC, and possibly a professional development PLC, some ongoing and some of short duration) were invited to develop action research projects related to the functioning of their PLC. Any PLC group interested in developing an action research study not only took part in an action research training session, but were also presented with the themes from the pilot study and had the opportunity to comment on and respond to these themes. By the spring of 2010, seven PLCs had developed action research projects that I was supporting as a researcher and principal. Each member of these PLC teams signed consent forms. One team, the 6th-grade math PLC, was chosen for a more focused action research study. This team discussed the themes presented from the pilot study and found them to be useful as they looked at their functioning.

In the spring of 2010, we defined our research team as the 6th-grade math PLC comprised of three core members, William (Hmong American), David (Caucasian), and Darrell (Caucasian), and two support members, Don and Kimberly (both Caucasian). In the fall of 2010 we added Mike (Caucasian) as a core member and Lisa (Caucasian) as a support member, and brought them into the research process. Lisa was familiar with the action research model and was interviewed in the original pilot study of PLCs. Action researchers on this team agreed to first “look,” then “think,” and finally “act” in relation
to the functioning of their PLC. However, as the team engaged in the action research cycle, it became clear that “looking” and “thinking” were so intertwined that it was not possible to clearly separate these phases. Thus, the following narrative folds together the “look” and “think” phases and is presented chronologically.

**Phase I of the Study: “Looking” and “Thinking”**

**Background planning.**

*February 2010.*

As a principal, my work with the 6th-grade math team began back in 2008 when David was transferred from the high school to join William and Darrell as 6th-grade math teachers. My role as principal allowed me to participate with them in PLC meetings over the three years prior to the formal study. These meetings, especially during the first year, were not the most comfortable meetings for team members. Mistrust and tension were apparent, though unspoken. As trust improved, these teachers began to function at a higher level. On February 8, 2010, this team explored an interest in conducting some sort of action research project. This meeting foreshadowed an area that needed to be researched: the functionality of a PLC.

Monday morning collaborations are supposed to begin at 7:30 a.m. and go until 9:00 a.m.. On my way to the February meeting with the team, I noticed one member of the team in a line at the copy machine. Upon arriving at David’s classroom, I found the room empty, but open. I laid out my action research materials, preparing and organizing so that I could effectively take the 30 minutes on their daily agenda that I had requested. I felt comfortable approaching this team about being a part of an action research dissertation as they seemed to be eager to do anything to help students learn. They had
approached me earlier in the year disappointed with their achievement data and determined to change the way they worked together to improve student learning. I had clearly outlined ahead of time that my visit would be within the role of researcher and not as a principal. I wondered if this was a mistake as the meeting finally started 15 minutes late at 7:45 a.m.

I looked around, wondering who would be leading the meeting and where I might have been placed on their PLC agenda. Finally, as nobody was speaking up, I asked if they wanted me to go first. Darrell, an ex-military special operations soldier, nodded. David, a former Quincy basketball star, tipped back in his chair; and William said “sure.” After presenting and discussing the principles of action research along with a number of handouts, the team expressed interest in this research, especially about student achievement. I thanked them for letting this research be a part of their agenda. Staying to see where the meeting would go next, team members looked at each other, wondering what might be next on the agenda. The team quickly decided that they would like to look at a recent assessment and the student results. William and Darrell left to retrieve materials from their classrooms while David and I stayed in the room. David passionately expressed an interest in learning more about some data the school had on his students. I talked to him about the statistics class I was taking in my doctoral program and some of the WASL data I was exploring. When Darrell and William returned, they joined in our conversation. Before we knew it, we had run up on 9:00 a.m., and the team scattered to prepare for students.

Later that month, Kim, the math coach, met with me to discuss how we could support this team as a PLC. We both agreed that organizationally this team struggled.
We discussed agendas, facilitation, and time management. Gathering qualitative data on this team would not be a problem, but helping them improve in their functioning would be a challenge. Kim agreed to support them in the important math work that we needed to accomplish as a school. We arranged to meet with the team to discuss action research on March 1, 2010, a Monday collaboration day.

**March 2010.**

For the March 1 meeting, Kim and I would take the whole collaboration time, and we arranged an agenda and facilitated the meeting. This would be a chance for the team to begin reflecting and focus on what their specific action research might entail. At the time, this was one of seven groups conducting action research in the school. All three math teachers were excited to share their opinions and ideas. They agreed as co-researchers to focus on the following initiatives (as found in their meeting minutes):

- Development of organization, norms, and facilitation
- Alignment of math curriculum to new standards
- More targeted interventions for students in math
- Planning time for collaboration and alignment work.

David was passionate about developing a schedule that would allow the three of them to meet daily. He felt that waiting until Monday morning to collaborate was too late and that other school commitments often interfered with Monday collaboration time. They were excited about using a new set of materials to better meet the new math standards and wanted to study this process. William expressed his frustration with the current intervention system. The team agreed that it wasn’t working. Kim and I prodded in
regard to organizational issues that might make the team more effective. They agreed to include this on their list, but were most certainly more excited about the other initiatives.

**May 2010**

An April 23, 2010, my meeting with my dissertation committee prompted me to revisit the team and solicit their support as the focal PLC for this action research study. I felt nervous about approaching this team, especially as I flashed back to the previous fall when William expressed angst about being interviewed, thinking he might somehow hinder my doctorate. “Would they be willing to study their own functioning? Would they wonder why they were picked? Would they be offended, thinking they must be the most dysfunctional team?” After the dissertation committee meeting, I wrote these questions in my action research reflection journal. I also reflected on the direction provided by my committee and some helpful hints on the nature of action research and data collection. Over the next few weeks, I put together an agenda to meet and discuss the possibilities with this team.

On May 3, 2010, I had 30 minutes to sell a proposal that these colleagues join me as co-researchers in studying the functioning of their PLC. I entered the meeting with the following bullets to articulate my solicitation:

- Action research benefits the practitioner.
- Their PLC was in a far different place a year ago and would make a great case study to explore their journey and improved functioning.
- This is not without risk. A dissertation could be read by any staff member and it would not be hard to connect the dots.
- We would become co-researchers and explore what that might mean.
• The research would never cross over into the evaluative realm.

• 6th grade math is the ideal PLC for this project because we are placing more resources in this grade level next year and they are excited about studying how they affect student learning.

While I outlined these points, the team readily jumped in with comments, jokes, and excited ideas.

“If we use pseudonyms, can I be Mr. Voodoo?” Mr. Vue commented. David asked if he could be “Mr. Pink.” All of them, when discussing the nature of co-researching this issue, expressed excitement as they would be doing their National Boards next year and wondered if that might benefit them. They were not worried about being evaluated, but focused on their desire to improve student learning, especially with their struggling student intervention system. When we talked about data collection William suggested that we use DuFour’s Learning by Doing to reflect on the team’s functioning. The team also agreed that they would look at past notes (not many existed) and keep better notes when they meet. We discussed using audio recordings, digital recordings, laptop notes, and additional interviews of team members as sources for data. The team was on board and ready to explore.

My journal summarized the meeting: “…went very well. Having a plan going into the meeting was very helpful. It also helped that we had just had a staff meeting where I commended and recognized the 6th grade staff on very good NWEA scores.” Everybody was feeling good. “I am excited about where things are going.” The euphoria of this meeting dissipated during the rest of May as we endured state-mandated testing and end-of-year field trips. We met a few times and agreed to keep our focus on the
specific functioning of the PLC, as the other initiatives fell under the PLC umbrella. We planned our first reflective session for the June 7 collaboration, a chance to video tape. In addition, in May, David and Darrell participated in full interviews that were transcribed and coded and added to our data collection. The purpose of these interviews was to replicate the pilot study in the exploration of the functioning of this math PLC.

**Looking, evaluating, and reflecting.**

*June 2010.*

At our meeting on June 7, after handing out DuFour’s “Professional Learning Community Continuum,” I summarized the agenda the team had agreed to. We would use DuFour’s rubric to reflect on where the team was in 2008 and where it was now. I sensed a few nerves as I turned on the flip camera. I announced that I would place it face down and use it as an audio recorder until we got things going. Darrell and William quickly jumped in with a joke about how it is best not to have a visual on some members of the team. David and I were not offended, and I quickly commented that video taping the top of the desk might work out better for everyone, at least at the beginning. All tension was dispersed through humor, and the team began “looking” at how they had functioned and how they were currently functioning. I acted as a facilitator and asked follow-up questions, but allowed them to explore and “think.”

“This is a discussion where we can be openly engaged in expressing our thoughts. Hopefully, there will be no blood spilled.” A team member again joked, “We have good first-aid kits, so it’s all good.” After turning to page 34 in DuFour’s book, the team began to discuss its functioning in relation to its mission. After opening this topic up for discussion, an awkward silence permeated the room. Counting back on the video
footage, 15 seconds passed before William finally asked, “So you want us to figure out what stage we were in and talk about it?” After this question, the team quickly opened up and honestly tackled each area of the rubric. William offered, “I think we were in the initiation stage.” (David’s chair creaks in the background as he leans back.) “The thing that stands out when I read this is individual teachers. We were just doing our own thing. It was different from one teacher to the other on what we do to help students. It was like a time to vent, a time to plan things, but that was it.” Darrell jokes, “I thought we were in the sustaining phase,” and David laughs. After everyone has had a good laugh, Darrell says, “I agree with Will. I think we were sitting in the initiation stage.” David adds as he leans back in his partially broken chair, “I agree. Especially when we were trying to align the standards to the CMP. I felt like we were not trying to impact instruction, we were just doing something to say we were doing something in PLC.”

When asked about how things look now, David placed the team in the “Developing Stage” and almost to the “Sustaining Stage” by citing their clear objectives for student learning and the assessments that they had created and were monitoring. Darrell agreed adding, “We haven’t yet developed a full system. We are on our way, but not quite there.” At this point in the conversation, the team began a natural dialogue, moving away from a clockwise rotation of comments. William talks about trying to sustain a system and David finishes his sentence pointing out the exploratory blocks and interventions. They have begun to stray slightly from the rubric, but they come back to phrases within it to justify their points.

As a facilitator of this “look” phase of action research, I have learned my lesson and introduced the next section of the rubric, “vision,” by reading each of the descriptors
to remind the team of our focus. Turning to the team, I ask for their thoughts on this area. William again is first up to the plate. “Was that David’s first year here? Yeah, it was. I think we were at the pre-initiation stage. We were still trying to figure each other out. We didn’t even have a vision statement or even a conversation about vision.” David doesn’t argue with Will, but expresses that there was some effort made. “We are currently in the developing stage and you could argue that we have some qualities in the sustaining stage.” Darrell adds, “I don’t know, I think we are in the sustaining stage. We all three share the same vision for all of our students.” He adds, “We are pretty honest on how we assess our students. We keep each other honest on our vision. I think we are honestly assessing our current reality like the sustaining stage says.” David justifies his position wondering if they actually need a formal vision statement to say they are in the sustaining stage. Darrell adds, “We don’t have a formally written vision statement for sixth-grade math, but we have informally talked about our vision many times. We have the same vision for our kids.” The team agrees on this matter and talks about possibly writing a vision statement in the future.

As the team discussed shared values, they again spoke to their first year together and how they didn’t know each other. Darrell commented, “We were a team of nine, and then this year we went down to seven. I think just shear numbers made it hard for us to have shared values. Now we meet mostly as just the math guys. With three, it is a lot easier to have shared values.” William added, “I think the getting to know you period took a little longer than it should have because we always met as a whole sixth grade and it was too big. Plus, we didn’t have common plan time or explore time.” David expressed his thoughts with a religious analogy. “It is kind of like a baptism by fire of
sorts. You expect new people to come in and the expectation to work as a cohesive group. There’s a learning curve, and adjustment period that will happen over time.

The team agreed that they had moved from the pre-initiation stage to the developing stage over the last year. Referring to the rubric, David said “It uses the word ‘confront,’ but I would replace it with ‘discuss.’ When something comes up or something is wrong, we can discuss it openly without worrying about any backlash.” David goes on to add that a year and half ago, “I didn’t feel comfortable. I was new in the building. I wasn’t going to tell anybody how to do their job.” At this point in the conversation, it is important to note the superintendent of the school district had joined the meeting in progress five minutes ago. Video footage shows him studying the rubric as David, William, and Darrell continue to frankly discuss how they felt in 2008 and how they currently feel. Trust is at a high level and the superintendent goes unnoticed.

“I think we share common values. We have similar philosophies about kids and learning and that helps.” The team agrees they are progressing in this area and shifts over to its goals. They discuss how they are assessing their learning goals and how they as professionals are “stretching” to reach their students. In 2008, they were just initiating these efforts but have arrived close to the sustaining stage. The team then tackled “communication,” a critical component of the functioning of a team. This conversation illustrated how far this PLC had come and foreshadowed upcoming changes in the makeup of the PLC.

Regarding communication, William stated “In the past, we just didn’t talk about it if it was an issue. We avoided uncomfortable feelings by not communicating.” The team reflected that in 2008, they were not even in the pre-initiation stage. This changed
through a hot topic that spanned a year’s worth of conversations: standards-based grading. The sixth-grade team was split down the middle on whether or not to leave behind “As” and “Bs” for numbers, rubrics, and standards. David was on the traditional side of the fence, while Darrell and William were all for the new system. David was out-voted, but explained how full exploration of an idea and communication about how a decision would be made and supported makes all the difference. “Once we made a decision, we never turned back. We support it 100%. We are together on this.” Communication also helped them process and commit to a decision even if they were sitting on the other side of the fence.

This meeting ended with a desire to finish exploring other qualities of the functioning PLC using the rubrics, but also with a slight fear being expressed. “One thing we need to be really conscious of, and work really hard at, is integrating the new members of the PLC so we don’t backtrack. We don’t want to say that we have fallen back to the initiation stage or even lower than we were in 2008.” The team discussed ways that they would bring the new PLC members, Lisa and Mike, up to speed. With a good plan in place, the meeting ended.

*Summer 2010.*

On a few occasions over the summer of 2010, there were opportunities for me to meet and talk with individual members of this PLC. Our next meeting as a whole team was on August 25, 2010. This day-long meeting allowed for the team to explore, reflect, and plan out how they would continue to “look” and “think” as a part of action research. The meeting also included team discussions to explore team functioning. We continued using DuFour’s *Learning by Doing* (2007) rubrics to analyze the progress of the PLC in
its functioning over the past two years in relation to clarity about what students are to learn, assessment of PLC efforts, and a focus on results. We also discussed new perspectives of team functioning using Patrick Lencioni’s *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* assessment (2007), a 38-question Likert survey addressing the five dysfunctions a team may experience. We also examined the document “Cultural Shifts in a Professional Learning Community” (DuFour, 2007). In addition to these resources, we spent some time looking at literature that I had reviewed on PLCs to supplement our conversations. A copy of Chapter 2 of this dissertation was presented to each member of the team for their reference. Our discussion sessions were videotaped and transcribed for analysis.

We started our reflections with the DuFour (2007) document titled *Cultural Shifts in a Professional Learning Community*. This document includes descriptors of team functioning on a continuum, with undesired practice on the left and the shift to PLC practices on the right. The team went through the various descriptors in seven categories, discussing each statement and where they were on the continuum. They based their discussions on their current functioning, but many times acknowledged that in previous years they often found themselves on the left. “In 2008, we were all about coverage of content from CMP, but last year we were about the standards and working together to make sure we were covering them with all of our students.”

The first category, “A Shift in Fundamental Purpose,” included descriptors such as “From a focus on teaching” (on the left) “to a focus on learning” (on the right). The other descriptors focused on similar aspects of the mission and vision of a PLC. The team rated its functioning in these areas on the right side of the spectrum. “We have clear objectives. We have developed strategies and are monitoring results. Perhaps we are still
developing our full system, but have come a long way.” The second area of discussion, “A Shift in Use of Assessments,” spoke to changes PLC members experience in their attitude toward assessments from just standardized to common and regular formative assessments, or a system of assessments that teachers use to change instructional practices. The team reflected on the change that had taken place in their PLC over the previous year. “David’s first year, we were still trying to figure each other out. We didn’t have a vision developed as far as our PLC goes. Now we have a very clear idea of where we want to go. This year, we work very well together.” Another member added, “I think we are pretty honest in where we are at. We know what our reality is and keep each other really honest about it.” They were excited about the progress they had made as a team over the past year in developing common assessments. One example they shared was their work with clicker assessments that they had developed to motivate and inform students. They also spoke to their shift in not just monitoring average scores, but in monitoring each student’s proficiency in every essential skill. Over the past year, their greatest improvement in functionality in this area was “from each teacher determining the criteria to be used in assessing student work, to their collaborative PLC clarifying the criteria and ensuring consistency among team members when assessing student work.” This shift over the past year for the team showed the growth in trust and the developing team relationships, increasing their functionality.

The third area of reflection focused on a “shift in the response when students don’t learn.” This area has provided the most conflict at Monument over previous years and promoted good discussion for this team in reflecting on their own practices. “Whether there would have been backlash a year and a half ago, I’m not sure. I wasn’t
comfortable enough to tell them what I think should be happening.” When talking about how the team currently responds to students when they are not learning, one member added, “We were afraid of saying something that would cause uncomfortable feelings. Now we say things how they are, discuss what we want to do, and it runs pretty smoothly.” The team agrees that there is still much work to do to help the “exploratory block” be successful. The exploratory block at Monument is a designated 45-minute intervention block designed to help struggling students and challenge students who are above benchmark. Teams have struggled to agree on the best use of this time. Debates have centered on math interventions versus reading interventions (as many students need support in both areas), to teachers keeping their homeroom kids or shuffling kids out based on their needed skill area. Grade-level teams have been fighting about what this model should look like for four years. The sixth-grade math team proposed a schedule in the spring of 2010 as a result of their reflections that would allow them to have common planning time and to use this intervention time more effectively. In “looking” and “thinking” about their data, they have recently changed their model for interventions to extend the core mathematics time, as they have a large number of students not meeting the required skill sets. The team reflected that their functioning in this area has improved drastically. They now work together to find solutions and to develop a systematic response that ensures support for every student. They have come together regularly to talk about the challenges of their system, to readjust based on student learning data, and to put into action new and improved plans.

The final four descriptors on DuFour’s continuum found the team on the right hand side as far as their functioning was concerned. They have “shifted in the work of
teachers” as they collaborate daily on decisions, are open to sharing of practice, and have adopted the attitude that all 6th grade students are “our” students. The team was the most proud of this shift. They attribute any success they have with students to the mentality that they currently share in this area. “A shift in school culture, professional development, and focus,” the final three areas in this document, followed this pattern with the team assessing their shift as being to the right, with the exception of wanting to have more specific recognition for students on a regular basis.

Although this documenting of shifts was helpful in getting the conversations started, the team agreed that digging deeper to chart the progression of their functioning was necessary. They found “The Professional Learning Community Continuum” in DuFour’s (2007) book to be helpful in taking a deeper look. This rubric shows a PLC’s functioning in regard to mission, vision, shared values, goals, communication, and clarity regarding work, systematic interventions, and a focus on results. The rubric includes specific descriptors for each area on a continuum, including “Pre-Initiation Stage, Initiation Stage, Developing Stage,” and finally the “Sustaining Stage.” In June 2010, the team had used the rubric to rate where they were on the continuum in 2008 and where they were in 2010 for the first five areas. During this August reflection session, they finished the remaining areas.

The final rubric the team looked at was titled “focus on results.” This area was identified as important to the functioning of this team. They rated themselves in the pre-initiation stage two years ago and stepped up to the initiation stage by 2010. This area involves analyzing test data, sharing data with the school and each other, and addressing weaknesses as part of the school’s improvement plan. In order to progress in its
functionality in this area, the team agreed that it would need to decide on what results it wanted to use. The team members wanted to set a time and a protocol to look at results. After deciding what data to use and how to organize discussions around the data, the team would like to document it and share it out in a vertical manner. The team felt that the members will not progress in this area unless they can influence the students in the grades below and above them by being vertical leaders when it comes to analyzing data. They cited trust and relationships as keys in extending this work.

Openness has been essential to the functioning of this team. After looking at rubrics to assess their functioning as a PLC, they were comfortable with looking at Patrick Lencioni’s five dysfunctions of a team: “Absence of Trust, Fear of Conflict, Lack of Commitment, Avoidance of Accountability, and Inattention to Results.” Team members took the 38-question Likert assessment in relation to these five dysfunctions. The lower the team’s score, the higher the dysfunction, with 5 being “Always” functional in that area. With trust espoused by members as high for this PLC, it was no surprise that the highest score for trust was 4.4 and for conflict was 4.5. Not far behind, the team saw its commitment and attention to results with a high score of 4.3. The lowest score on the team was with its accountability, at 3.3, a point below the others.

“When teams don’t commit to a clear plan of action, even the most focused and driven individuals hesitate to call their peers on actions and behaviors that may seem counterproductive to the overall good of the team” (Lencioni, 2007, p. 2). After calculating their results as a team, the team members reflected as a team. They were surprised by the lower score in accountability, especially when reading the above description. They felt like they held each other accountable and were not afraid to call
each other on actions they saw as “counterproductive.” The team agreed that it struggles at times with having a clear plan of action and that perhaps this area could be improved. Still, a score above the 3-mark indicates that the dysfunction is not a fatal flaw, but something to look at more closely.

The team found these reflections on PLC resources to be an ample opportunity to experience the “think” phase of action research. Most of the “thinking” phase took place in the form of these discussion sessions where team members could reflect together on their functioning. This discussion and reflection then culminated in a discussion on improving the functioning of the PLC.

At this August meeting, the additional agenda topic, “improving the functioning of our PLC,” provided an opportunity for the team to explore how it might improve. The first conversation related to attendance at meetings. Ironically, the plan for integrating new team members had already faced a challenge. Although Lisa and Kim attended, Mike did not. The three math teachers the previous year had improved communication and bought into the same mission and vision. Their challenge had been attendance on Mondays. There were many collaboration Mondays where at least one of the three members was not present, which usually resulted in the canceling of the meeting and a trip to the copy machine or computer. As the team sat to discuss this challenge, Mike was not at the table. Still, the team came up with a number of areas it wanted to collect data on including attendance, perceptions of their PLC from other staff members, qualitative data in the form of interviews and surveys, and data on the effectiveness of “lightning round” protocols to set agendas and reflect on the effectiveness of the meeting.
**Fall 2010.**

With some baseline data in the way of reflections before the beginning of the 2010–2011 school year, the team agreed to continue with its data collection plan. First, the members wanted to look at attendance at meetings; perceptions of themselves through some type of survey and follow-up interviews; data from meetings such as agendas and minutes; and using a “lightning round” process to reflect on their functioning at the end of each meeting. A team survey was later developed and completed by the members. On this survey, team members identified their roles, personality types, and personal opinions on the qualities of a functional PLC.

Darrell, David, Lisa, and William identified their role on the team as “team member” or “active participant,” while Don, Kimberly, and Mike identified themselves as in supportive or secondary roles. This is interesting as Mike (“colleague, listener”) is a core member of the PLC that met weekly with the team, while Lisa attended only a few meetings on an as-needed basis, more in a role to get information but not to affect change or make decisions. Lisa has been functioning in this role for three years, while Mike is new to the team.

In interviewing Mike in early December of 2010, he identified himself as “the new kid on the block,” and was tentative and somewhat frustrated. He did not understand his role. As an experienced teacher, he offered some suggestions to the team by email but did not receive the feedback he would like. In the team meetings, he participates, but mostly listens and internally wonders where his ideas might fit in. “It’s been, at times, a little stressful because it will be my first year on the team. It was not really knowing all the time where we should be and what the assessments are. I think that probably there
wasn’t a lot of stuff talked about on how we approach things as a team, how we want to operate as team.” Although Mike mentioned that things are very laid back on this team, he is still trying to find his voice. A challenge within a learning community is to incorporate new members without having to start over in the team’s trust- and norm-building process. In a later meeting with Mike, he expressed how his role had developed and he had been accepted. “I really love my team and would never want to leave this grade level. David and I talk often about data and are considering taking a math concepts class together.”

On the survey, members of the team described their personalities, which further gives us perspective on Mike’s earlier frustrations. As a self-labeled “sequential thinker,” the laid-back “address things as they present themselves” attitude of the other team members could be a challenge for Mike’s personality, while other members describe themselves as “passionate” and “flexible.” David does not define his personality in this survey, but in the interview process he revealed that he is passionate about data, students’ learning, and is not afraid to express his opinion.

Members defined three qualities of a functional PLC on the survey. Trust, honesty, and integrity were similar traits identified by each member of the PLC. Commitment, sense of purpose, and vision were also identified by most members as important traits within a functioning PLC. Other identified traits included accountability, organization, cooperation, a focus on learning and students, ambition, goals, and problem solving. In team meetings where members explored their functions, these traits were emphasized and explored. For each team member, survey results related to personality type and their views of a functioning PLC are displayed in Table 1.
Table 1. Monument 6th Grade Math Professional Learning Community Demographics and Self Perceptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Years Teaching</th>
<th>Personality</th>
<th>Qualities of Functional PLC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Darrell</td>
<td>Team member</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Reserved, passionate, loyal</td>
<td>Honesty, integrity, sense of purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Active participant</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Honesty, vision, ambition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don</td>
<td>Principal, secondary</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Outgoing, passionate</td>
<td>Trust, organization, focus on learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kimberly</td>
<td>Support member</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>quiet, listen then, act, conservative</td>
<td>Commitment to goal, cooperation, respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>Team member</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Reserved, no conflict</td>
<td>Common goal, best interest of student, honesty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>Colleague, listener</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Sequential thinker</td>
<td>Organized, problem solver, data decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William</td>
<td>Team member</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Easy-going, flexible</td>
<td>Trust, accountability, commitment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

November 2010.

Before the November meeting, the team chose to have me code and work through most of the data collected to date, citing a lack of available time for this task and a promise that I would present the data to them after coding. Although individual short
interviews and meetings took place with Will, Mike (long interview), Lisa, and Kim in
the fall (coupled with full interviews of David and Darrell in the spring), the majority of
the data collected in team meetings reflected the same themes as during the individual
interviews. In addition to this qualitative data, analysis of the surveys, DuFour’s (2007)
rubrics, and Lencioni’s (2007) assessment contributed to the available data. Overall
themes that emerged from this analysis included: (a) What influences the functioning of
the sixth-grade math PLC? This area, like the pilot study, included subcategories related
to the size of the PLC, schedule, and time, facilitation, accountability, and trust and
relationships. (b) The impact of the PLC on teacher instruction and students was the next
theme, especially in relation to learning interventions and applied instructional strategies.
(c) The last theme was the impact of new members and support members of a PLC,
especially what changes take place when a new member is added to a PLC. As these
themes were presented at the November 2010 reflection session, the team had the
opportunity to think about what they had been studying. They agreed with the themes
that had been coded out and began to engage in a reflection session.

Members of the team further explored their functions in relation to what they
believed. They created belief statements about their PLC and about parents, students,
staff, and standards in relation to their PLC. All members, both core and support
members, were present at this session. Sitting in a circle around David’s desk, they
started discussing their belief about the purpose of a PLC. David was leaning back in his
new office chair (the other one finally broke), while the other members of the team sat in
students’ desks around David’s desk. I took notes on David’s computer that were
projected on the wall. Group members began a brainstorming session.
A PLC is “a group of teachers working toward student learning.” The team agreed that the focus of a PLC is on student learning. Part of this work involves believing something about the students we work with or, as one teacher put it, “believing that all of our students can learn.” The team believed strongly that, based on this belief, “a group of individuals collaborates and problem solves,” that is, a PLC will make that learning possible. In order to make this a reality, the team created a belief statement around a necessary tool for a PLC: “Use data to drive decisions.” Although this may sound formulaic, this group’s passion about students was obvious. “We have a responsibility toward kids. We sometimes almost take on an aspect of the parent. Some of us get pretty protective of the students.”

The 6th grade math PLC discussed in more detail their belief about parents’ involvement in the learning process:

Parents can make a difference. They are a huge part about what happens for a student (good and bad). Accountability and support at home makes a big difference. Students that don’t have that parental support, they look for staff. We can either make their day or not. Team members expressed the importance of knowing where students come from to help them develop instructional plans and even design homework. “Parents are an important element. When students have two or three defective areas (e.g., low data, unsupportive parents, low motivation), it is tough.” The team members expressed that, although they understand the importance of getting parents involved, “they had very little control over parents.” One teacher put it bluntly, “We’ve got to find a way to get the job done. No excuses. That’s what it boils down to.”
This PLC also spoke about their belief about other staff members, the standards that drive them, and communication. “We believe that communication is important, that we sometimes talk among ourselves, but leave out those who might be affected by the decision.” At this point in the discussion, it was important to have support members, including a specialist, in on the conversation. It was acknowledged that a smaller PLC often can make a sweeping decision, but it needs to inform other staff members who may also work with the same students. This team’s members had a definite opinion about what they have control over and what might frustrate them about other PLCs:

We can control ourselves as a staff and how we respond to students. We can focus on what is best for students. Sometimes, the staff seems to think about other things more than putting the students first.

When it comes to putting the students first, this PLC believes that the standards should be the focus. “The standards are the driving force behind our meetings as a PLC. We want all of our kids to meet these standards. Standards drive our instruction.” With each set of newly created belief statements, team members continually expressed their passion for their students. One teacher summed up the reflective discussion, “They are not my kids, they are our kids. We work together to help them succeed.”

**Phase II: “Acting” to Improve PLC Functioning**

The “look” and “think” phases of the action research study led the 6th grade math team to consider the actions that could improve the functioning of the PLC. We had begun to consider these actions at the August 2010 meeting when members first considered a series of actions to improve the functioning of the team; these included more regular attendance at meetings, development of an agenda ahead of time, recording of
minutes and posting of minutes, and a “lightning round” reflection protocol to end the meeting. The team selected these actions based on their reflections and discussion during this eight-hour meeting. William was assigned to take notes with his laptop and post them to Moodle, a web 2.0 platform that members could access. Although the team discussed having an assigned facilitator for the meetings, they agreed that they would rather collaborate with group facilitation responsibilities.

Instead of sending agenda items to a specific member of the team, they agreed to have some general items on their “to do” list and then to create their agenda with the “lightning round” protocol at the beginning of the meeting. Each member would have one minute to express items he or she felt would be important to cover and the reasons why that would be an important agenda item. An agenda would be created using this technique. At the end of the meeting, each member would have one minute to reflect on how he or she had functioned as a team member during that meeting. At the November 2010 meeting, we continued to evaluate how we were doing with our actions, and we added a few more items, including reflecting on how we are using new instructional materials, bringing data to the table to discuss students’ learning, and getting into one another’s classrooms to peer observe. At a January 2011 meeting William pulled up a document on “shared personal practice” from the Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement (http://www.centerforcsri.org/plc/elements.html):

“Shared personal practice” (Hord, 1997; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1994; Thompson, Gregg, & Niska, 2004). A major focus of PLCs is on professional learning in which teachers work and learn together as they continually evaluate the effectiveness of their practices and the needs, interests, and skills of their students.
(McREL, 2003). Teachers share experiences, observe each other, and discuss teaching. Shared practice and collective inquiry help sustain improvement by strengthening connections among teachers, stimulating discussion about professional practice, and helping teachers build on one another’s expertise (McREL, 2003). Through continuous inquiry and reflective dialogue teachers discover solutions and address student needs (Hord, 1997; Stoll et al., 2006).

The team explored this statement in regard to its shared practices. They agreed the most useful action to improve their functioning would be in relation to experiencing teaching practices together through peer observations and teaching one another mini-lessons in collaboration to reflect and get feedback. In January 2011, the team followed through in this action plan by teaching parts of their lessons to each other during collaboration and observing one another in class.
Chapter 4

OUTCOMES AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to improve the functioning of the 6th grade math PLC. The action research cycle began with a pilot study in the fall of 2009 that explored Monument teachers’ perceptions regarding the functioning of their PLC. A number of important themes emerged in this pilot study that proved to be useful to the 6th grade math PLC as they focused specifically on their functioning starting in February of 2010 and continuing through January of 2011. The team engaged in the “look,” “think” and “act” cycles of action research, as described in chapter 3. This chapter discusses the outcomes and conclusions of this action research study.

Outcomes of the Study

The major outcome of the study was the overall improvement in the functioning of the 6th grade math PLC. Attendance was improved, mutual trust was developed, communication was more consistent, and a new level of collaboration was attained. Through the process of action research, the team improved its functioning in relation to effective communication and trust. With the development of high levels of trust, one outcome was the need for further exploration of facilitation and follow through in the PLC. Other outcomes included the development of action research skills, attendance to new member issues, and discovery of a whole new level of collaboration. The final outcome of this study reveals itself in the lessons learned for the Quincy School District.
Improved Trust and Communication

Through the interview process and team reflection opportunities, core members of this PLC have established a strong level of trust. This team attributed their improved functionality to trust that was built over time. “We get stuff done. We laugh. We have trust.” Collective efficacy, or “a shared belief that group members can execute a course of action that makes a difference” (Cameron, McIver, Goddard, 2008, p. 6), has been created within this PLC. In 2008 this team lacked functionality. Over the course of two years and through this action research study, the sixth grade math PLC was able to address norms, values, beliefs, and accountability in an effort to create collective efficacy, a high level of trust.

An example of a product of this trust was the schedule the team created for the 2010-2011 school year. A mutually created schedule was adopted that allowed for daily collaboration time. This time allowed members to collaborate on important issues and helped them overcome one of their major challenges, a lack of time to work together to improve student learning. The communication that took place to create and propose this schedule showed how far this team had come in its functioning since 2008. The 6th grade math PLC progressed from a team that rarely met together in 2008 because of a lack of trust, to a team that acted so they could meet together daily. As trust developed, attendance at meetings was improved and communication became more consistent.

Facilitation and Follow Through

Other indicators for areas of improvement in functionality may present themselves within the themes of facilitation and accountability, as evidenced by a lower score in functionality in the area of “accountability and follow through” on team rubrics.
The team has brainstormed in relation to these themes but has not come to consensus on a plan that would explicitly address either facilitation or accountability. They decided to co-facilitate meetings with one assigned note taker. They have talked about plans to participate in peer observations, but have not yet written out a detailed plan on how this will look for upcoming years, especially in regard to their desire to observe and reflect on math instruction at other grade levels.

**Action Research at Monument**

This action research study implicates this methodology as extremely valuable in aiding the functioning of the individual PLC. Although this study focused on the 6th grade math team, six other PLC groups took part in various action research projects that benefited the functioning of their PLC. Action research lends itself to reflection, a critical quality of a functional PLC. It is recommended that teacher teams at Monument use the action research process to improve the functioning of their PLCs. Action research will provide for sustainability of the school’s PLCs, especially in helping them move to actions that improve functionality; including taking part in shared practice experiences. The rubrics and resources used in action research by the 6th grade math PLC for reflection resulted in improved functioning.

**Attending to a New Member**

As the team was using rubrics to explore their functioning, they were better able to attend to the needs of a new team member. The addition of new members to a team is often a stressor and tester of team trust. The 6th grade team labeled this as a possible threat. “Adding a new person sometimes could cause the team to stop communicating. Adding people could change everything.” The team is glad to have added Mike,
reiterating that he is great to work with. The PLC had the opportunity to discuss and reflect on beliefs, values, vision, and functioning, providing the opportunity for trust to be built with the new member. PLCs often miss opportunities to tend to the needs of assimilating a new member. This study provided for the opportunity to concretely tend to those needs.

**A New Level of Collaboration**

Team members discovered a new level of collaboration. This discovery took place when team members began the “acting” phase of their research by observing each other while teaching. They expressed that even though they had worked together for years, collaborated together daily, and thought they knew everything about each other, they realized a whole new level of collaboration after watching instruction in action. Reflective conversations about learning during instruction gave team members a deeper level of collaboration. Once a PLC gets to the level where members experience teaching together, they have become functional enough to really change instructional practices.

This new level of collaboration has led the team to discuss other opportunities. They now have a desire to lead and support PLC efforts in not only our school, but in the district. Other grade levels are looking to this PLC as their achievement scores have increased proportionally with the functionality of their PLC. Teachers in the school have sought out this team for the members’ expertise not only in math, but in implementing structures that have allowed them to better function as a PLC. The team desires to not only get into 6th grade math classrooms, but eventually visit and support other grades.
Lessons for the District

As the Quincy School District continues to implement PLCs in its schools, this study provides some important data to improve PLCs across the district. First, the use of this report, including the literature review, themes, and conclusions could be valuable information for school leaders who are supporting the functioning of PLCs in their schools. Second, action research is a valuable tool that individual PLCs can use to not only improve their functioning, but to develop learning initiatives. Lastly, this study could serve as a valuable resource to the District Grade Span Committee that is currently exploring district configuration. The district’s current configuration places seven to nine teachers of the same grade level at one school and ultimately in the same PLC. These teacher teams are too large to function as PLCs for school improvement.

Conclusions and Implications

PLCs are popular in education as a force for school improvement and professional development through a collaborative focus on student learning (Bellamy, Crawford, Marshall, & Coulter, 2005; Calhoun, 2002; Ferrara, 2007; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Kazemi & Hubbard, 2008; Lavie, 2006; Lumpe, 2007; Schmoker, 2004; Servage, 2008), this action research study provides some broader recommendations for the field of education. Conclusions of the study include the impact of changes in team membership, the critical role of using rubrics as a basis for reflecting on team processes, the importance of the role of the principal in facilitating PLC functioning, and the impact of size of team membership.
Addressing Changes in PLC Membership

The first conclusion speaks to trust and relationships. In schools, team composition changes often, with transfers, resignations, new hires, and in-school reassignments. Any time a change in a team takes place, trust and relationships have to be addressed and built. The research on PLCs does little to address this reality in relation to the functioning of PLCs. This action research gave one PLC a chance to reflect on a change in membership and discuss the progression on adjusting, accepting, and trusting a new member. Without Stringer’s (2007) phases of action research including “look,” “think,” and “act,” this team may have struggled through this process, “taking a step back” as one member put it. Districts and principals should look carefully at changes in PLC membership and how those changes could impact the functionality of that particular PLC.

It is recommended that hiring and personnel transfer processes assure that new team members share similar beliefs about student learning and effective instructional practices. With the 6th grade math PLC, the addition of a new member was successful because of discovered shared beliefs through action research reflections. The PLC was able to communicate beliefs and calibrate in regard to team functioning. Often in our public schools, we allow team membership to change without building in expectations and systems that provide norm building, trust building, and reflection processes to address team functioning. This study concludes that these processes need to be addressed to provide for the functioning of PLCs.
Using Rubrics and Reflection

There are many PLC resources available in books, on DVD, and on the internet which would support a system for making processes for team building less abstract and more concrete. The 6th grade math PLC spent part of one meeting looking online at available resources. They chose books and resources they thought would improve their functioning and the school purchased these items. Specifically, the team chose reflection rubrics provided by Richard DuFour’s (2007) book, *Learning by Doing*, and Patrick Lencioni’s (2007) *Five Dysfunctions of a Team Survey*. Many other resources are available; some can be found online at no cost. It is important that something in writing be used by a PLC to evaluate its functioning on a regular basis. Minutes should be kept that outline the reflection sessions and the goals the team sets to improve their functioning. These rubrics are used to evaluate PLC functioning and reflect on improvement resulting from team action.

The Role of Leaders

Why do PLCs often fail in schools and districts? The literature speaks to the importance of the principal sticking with core principles to help these teams function over time (DuFour et al., 2004; Louis, 2006; Lumpe, 2007; Scribner, 1999; Westheimer, 1999, Wood, 2008). In our action research, I realized the critical role of the principal in helping PLCs function for the betterment of student learning.

I wrote in my reflection journal, “I know at my own school that the results are mixed. I have some learning communities that are able to really function and improve student learning through their efforts. Other teams have not had that kind of success.” By participating in this action research study, I have learned that the support a principal
lends to PLCs determines their level of functioning. I would recommend that the principal work with each PLC in a school to assure they are regularly reflecting on the functioning of their team in relation to the school mission of improving student learning. Rubrics and protocols are available to assist in this process. A school that adopts a process to reflect on PLC functioning improves student learning. Adoption of a reflection system starts with the school principal.

**The Impact of Size on a PLC**

There are many influences on the functioning of a PLC. This action research study supports a functional PLC being smaller in size, with three or four core members. The literature reviewed alludes to size affecting a PLC’s functionality, but mostly in relation to shared practices being found within the PLC on the premise that peers help peers (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Hord, 2004; Leite, 2006; Louis & Kruse, 1995; NAESP, 2004; Rosenholtz, 1989; Scribner, 2002; Stoll, McMahon, & Thomas, 2006).

Teachers at Monument expressed that their most dysfunctional PLC experiences were realized in grade-level PLCs when they met as teams of seven to nine core members. Adding support specialists to these PLC meetings created a team too large for peers to help peers improve student learning through shared practices. When grade levels split into collaborative groups that “specialized,” sharing groups of students while focusing on instruction within one or two content areas, the grade-level teams in 5th and 6th grade were able to form smaller PLCs, citing this as a major contribution to better PLC functioning.

Although “specializing” helped teams become more functional by decreasing team size, absenteeism of teachers during 6th grade math collaboration time often left the
team too small to collaborate effectively. The team made it a goal to improve their attendance to those meetings. They found the ideal size for their PLC team to be three to four core members. PLCs that are this ideal size have ample resources through shared experience and are provided with sufficient “air” time during meetings to facilitate instructional changes.

**Reflections**

As I engaged in action research as a support PLC member, and as the school principal, my capacity to effectively support PLCs increased. During a summer leadership course at Washington State University, the class engaged in an impromptu debate regarding the feasibility of PLCs surviving and sustaining. After the session, I wrote in my action research journal: “We were talking about different types of leadership teams and I asked why only four types were mentioned and one wasn’t collaborative. She (the professor) said that in the scholarly literature they don’t use the term collaborative, but that ‘self managed’ teams are the closest to PLCs.” This opened up a passionate discussion where the professor prophesied the death of PLCs in the next decade. Her comments solicited some responses from me, probably her intention, but then also prompted me to reflect.

I wrote later, “It is true that even in the examples of studies where PLCs have had success; there is usually an example of when they didn’t work.” Many studies have focused on two or more schools trying to implement PLCs with at least one failing (Cranston, 2009; DuFour, 1995; Giles and Hargreaves, 2006; Kruse & Louis, 1997; Lavie, 2006; Scribner, 1999; Scribner, 2002; Westheimer, 1999). In a later journal entry, I explored the term PLC in relation to a conversation with a colleague:
One administrator I know mentioned that they had already gone away from the term PLC and started implementing ‘purposeful teams.’ You can call the teams PLCs, communities of practice, or teacher learning teams, but whatever you call them, the most effective way to change instruction and student learning is for teachers to be involved in that process on a real and practical level.

By participating in this action research study, I have learned that the support a principal lends to PLCs determines their level of functioning.

Support comes in many forms:

- A supportive principal creates a vision of teacher teams who believe every student will succeed and who collaborate toward that success.
- A supportive principal ensures that the schedule allows for ongoing and embedded time for teachers to collaborate.
- A supportive principal assures that other structures such as PLC size and membership changes are addressed.
- A supportive principal creates an environment where teachers are allowed to experiment, fail, and grow.
- A supportive principal holds teachers accountable for meeting around student learning and encourages them to observe each other’s teaching practices and reflect on their own practices.

Through this action research study I have learned that a principal can support a PLC in improving its functionality.
References


Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement (2009), *Professional


## Appendix A

### Monument PLC Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>August 2006</td>
<td>Three-hour district introduction of PLCs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006-2007</td>
<td>William, Darrell, Lisa, and Don start at Monument.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leadership team <em>Learning by Doing</em> book study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PLC Staff development several times over the year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ESD facilitated work days on PLC with 12 staff members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-2008</td>
<td>Working with PLCs as they developed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mike arrives at Monument.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008-2009</td>
<td>School Improvement grant begins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>David arrives at Monument.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2009</td>
<td>CEE survey on nine characteristics of highly effective schools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 2009</td>
<td>Introduction of research project at staff retreat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Survey baseline data on PLCs at Monument.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2009</td>
<td>Pilot Qualitative study of PLCs at Monument.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2010</td>
<td>6th grade math team explores action research.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2010</td>
<td>Team establishes norms and structures to improve functionality.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2010</td>
<td>CEE survey on nine characteristics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2010</td>
<td>Research narrows to 6th grade PLC.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>They become co-researchers for the study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2010</td>
<td>Team uses PLC rubrics to gather data on its functioning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Action Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer 2010</td>
<td>Team gathers more data on functionality. Engages in reflection and explores possible actions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2010</td>
<td>Team engages in practices to improve functioning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2010</td>
<td>Team explores emergent themes from data analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2011</td>
<td>Team plans action for exploring functioning in relation to shared practices.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B

Interview Guide

Research Problem

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) have been the recent fad and buzzword of the educational community. In Washington State, teacher and administrative preparation courses preach of the power of PLCs. In a recent superintendent preparation course, nearly one-third of the candidates chose to focus on PLCs for a deep case study analysis, while current principal and superintendent groups across the state have formed their own PLC groups. Teachers across the state are not only familiar with the term “PLC,” but most will tell you they are a part of a PLC group. However, when we ask these educators to talk about their PLC, we not only discover varying definitions of what a PLC is, but perhaps even some resistance to the core principles of a PLC.

In the book Learning by Doing by DuFour, a definition is proposed that is widely accepted by educational leaders. “The very essence of a learning community is a focus on and a commitment to the learning of each student.” Adler (2008) elaborates on this concept by identifying a shift in schools from hierarchy (top down, control, authority) to community (trust, inputs, interdependent, innovation). How many groups that call themselves PLCs are actually PLCs? How can groups find clarity in their work? What skills do teachers need to be successful members of PLCs? What roadblocks and challenges do teachers face in establishing these interdependent groups? This study focuses on teachers individual perceptions of the PLCs they are a part of and how these perceptions may influence the larger PLC.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to explore faculty members’ perceptions of the functioning of professional learning communities (PLCs) in which they participate and the impact of these learning communities on students’ learning in one elementary school.

Research Questions

- How do teachers in one elementary school describe their personal experiences in learning communities?
- Explore best experiences they have had and what has affected them the most. Explore negative experiences. Get concrete stories/examples. Explore how experience has impacted their teaching.
  - According to elementary teachers, what are the influences on how well the PLC functions?
- Explore veteran vs. new teachers in terms of chemistry; explore size of PLCs; ask them to compare how different PLCs that they participate in differ and explain why.
• How do elementary teachers describe the overall functioning of learning communities in their school?
• Explore what works, what doesn’t work; explore roadblocks; explore improvements that could be made.
  o According to teachers, what seems to work in your learning community? Examples?
  o According to teachers, what needs to be fixed? Examples?

Interview Questions:

Description of PLC
1. What can you tell me about your Professional Learning Community (PLC)?
   a. What type of projects does your group focus on?
   b. How is it organized?
   c. What influences the work of your PLC?
2. What seems to work in your learning community?
3. What doesn’t work well?
4. How do people get along?
   a. Collaborate?
   b. Dominate?
   c. Remain silent?

Own experience
5. Looking at your entire experience within your PLC, remember a time when you felt most alive, most fulfilled, or most excited about your involvement in the organization and talk about it.
6. What do you value most about yourself in relation to your PLC?
7. How has the PLC affected your teaching?
   a. Example?
8. What would you wish for to heighten the vitality and health of your PLC?
   a. Of the school’s system?